Current Conditions Report

Maureen McHugh

Coastal Carolina University

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Current Conditions Introduction

The research for this analysis was conducted at Rock Hill High School (RHHS) in Rock Hill, South Carolina. RHHS serves approximately 2000 students in grades nine through twelve and employs approximately 150 faculty and staff members. In terms of student technology, RHHS is a one-to-one school, meaning laptops are provided by the district to be issued to each student. All classroom teachers are also issued laptops, and every classroom is provided with an interactive whiteboard or ClearTouch panel for instruction. All classrooms are equipped with a wireless modem for connecting to the school's network. A learning management system, Canvas, is used by teachers at RHHS and district-wide for posting class resources and grades for all elementary through high school learners. Additionally, all students and teachers are provided with Office365 accounts and Google accounts.

Data for this analysis was accrued through a series of email and phone interviews with two district learning specialists in the area of technology, Joanne Clark and Chris Odom. These positions are hybrid positions where they both serve certain schools within the district and also participate as part of the district instructional team. Odom was chosen as he is currently the technology specialist who has served in this capacity the longest, and Clark was chosen as she is the specialist assigned to RHHS. Additionally, an email interview was conducted with Donna McDaniel, one of the computer support specialists for teachers employed by RHHS. Finally, my own anecdotal evidence was contributed as a classroom teacher employed by RHHS for the past 7.5 years. In that amount of time I have witnessed our transition into a full one-to-one environment, the adoption and implementation of our learning management system, and how professional development (PD) and trainings from the district and our relationship with classroom technologies have evolved and changed over time.

Through my analysis of the technology program at RHHS, which I often looked at as a subset of the larger district policies, I have identified some areas of concern and some overarching issues that still persist concerning technology and technology leadership at RHHS. These issues have been distilled into the following list:

- Oversaturation issues: An excess of resources compounded with a lack of training has led to varying levels of digital fatigue with classroom teachers
- Access issues: A lack of ability for some students to access the internet when off school grounds, such as in their homes
- Student focus issues: An emphasis on how technology is used to support student content learning and/or social and emotional learning (SEL)
- Stakeholder communication issues: A lack of transparency about when and how (or if) stakeholders including students, teachers, and parents are brought into the technology planning process

Analysis of Overarching Issues

The first overarching issue identified is one of oversaturation. From a teacher standpoint, I have witnessed numerous programs promoted by the district for use, only for the programs to "fizzle out" and either be removed or replaced with another new product the following year. As just one example, the instructional technology specialist promoted that I, as an advanced placement (AP) teacher, should use the program Shmoop with my students for AP test preparation since it was purchased by the district. However, I had not been asked beforehand if I required such a resource – if so I would have told them that since I already have access to AP Classroom and Khan Academy, which are both very extensive and also free, there is no need to purchase access to Shmoop. Trying to spend time to learn and incorporate a

redundant program was frustrating for me as a teacher and makes me somewhat less willing to put forth effort with future programs. This is not unique to me, but a commonly stated concern among all teachers at RHHS.

I feel these sorts of experiences illustrate a lacking within the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) educational leaders' standard two, visionary planner. Part of this standard is to specifically look at the technology plan to see where plans may be misaligned, implement course corrections, and also encourage staff members to identify areas of concern with instructional plans and technology, all falling under communication with stakeholders (ISTE, 2020). This also ties in with ISTE standard three, empowering leader, as this standard focuses on how technology leaders can support and empower teachers with implementing technology (ISTE, 2020). If given voice and space to explore digital tools, teachers at RHHS can assist with decisions like which programs to adopt and which are redundant, and how to use these programs to truly impact student learning. I asked Joanne Clark about the Shmoop decision, and how it came about. According to her, the decision was led in a top-down effort by the district office looking at overall AP scores, and wondering what technology programs could help boost scores. At that time, AP Classroom had not been released by College Board, and Khan Academy resources did not exist for every AP course, so Shmoop seemed like a needed resource. However, she admits it was probably not necessary for all content areas and did not need to be pushed across the board to all AP teachers (Clark, personal communication, 2020). This one example is representative of numerous experiences I and other RHHS teachers have been through with regards to technology programs foisted upon us for implementation, leading many of my colleagues to feel fatigue and disinterest in implementing more new programs.

The second overarching issue I detected was one of access. ISTE standard one, equity and citizenship advocate, states in indicator two that technology leaders must "ensure all students have access to the technology and connectivity necessary to participate in authentic and engaging learning opportunities" (ISTE, 2020). This issue overlaps with the fourth ISTE standard, systems designer, making sure technology leaders have established sufficient and scalable infrastructure needed to implement the strategic plan (ISTE, 2020). As we transitioned to a one-to-one environment with laptops at RHHS five years ago, the school network was understandably updated to deal with the increased usage. However, home access is still a problem for some students. During the Coronavirus school closure of Spring 2020, eleven percent of my own students did not have home internet access to complete their work, despite having the laptop devices provided by the school. Chris Odom, a district technology specialist, says their best estimate is approximately eighteen percent of district students' households do not have any sort of broadband internet access (Odom, personal communication, 2020). So, roughly one in five students is unable to easily extend their online learning experiences outside of the school grounds. Odom states "Equity remains our number one concern for students. With Covid school closures, internet hub buses could be parked in strategic places for students, but that's like a band-aid on a wound that requires stitches" (Odom, personal communication, 2020). The internet hub busses were also only a response to Coronavirus, so not an option that students had ever had in the previous years. This access issue is further complicated by the local internet company, Comporium, that has exploited legal loopholes to establish a monopoly in Rock Hill. With no other options for establishing internet service, the school district is tied to the existing company and their willingness to expand broadband access to areas where it is lacking.

According to Odom, they are not very invested in expanding their service area at present (Odom, personal communication, 2020).

The third issue I uncovered deals with how student-focused the technology plans truly are. Throughout the ISTE standards, student learning is on the forefront. Standard one calls for "meeting student needs", "authentic and engaging learning opportunities" and "cultivating responsible behavior" while standard two speaks on how to "improve student success" and 'enhance learning"; standard three mentions the need for leaders to "advance learning that meets the diverse learning, cultural, and social-emotional needs of individual students" and standard five speaks to how to "promote a mindset of continuous improvement for how technology can improve learning" (ISTE, 2020). Clearly, student learning is a focus of the ISTE standards and woven throughout their indicators. The issue at RHHS is that this idea of technology as a way to support student learning is assumed as opposed to being clearly articulated. For instance, when I consider SEL, I have never once been offered any sort of PD, training, or even casual conversation as to how technology can help me meet my students' social emotional learning needs at RHHS. Clark mentioned to me that there are some programs at the elementary level, but she acknowledged there is currently no SEL resources at the high school level (Clark, personal communication, 2020). There are also not any published plans anywhere addressing any plans towards incorporating technology and SEL resources for students.

In terms of focusing on student learning regarding content, again there is some evidence that improvement is needed. Of the PD offerings at RHHS in the 2019-2020 school year, seven sessions were created and provided by our school's educational specialist in technology, Joanne Clark. The choices ranged from the workshop model, how to create instructional videos, e-portfolios, student conferencing, and more. I personally attended a session on using technology

creation tools for authentic tasks and another on higher order questioning using technology. Obviously, there is some deliberate planning towards ways technology can support teaching pedagogy. However, an issue for many teachers at RHHS is that the sessions are very generalized and not content specific. It was difficult in my session on authentic tasks, because I was there as a math teacher, along with English teachers, Art teachers, Physical Education teachers, etc. We (the participants) mentioned in the session how different authentic tasks look in our various courses. It was obvious the tools being mentioned may work for some but not all, and it depends on the specific content area. As such, I think more work needs to be done specifically at the high school level to tailor PD towards content areas as much as possible. My colleagues in the math department often ask each other, "but how would this look in a *math* class?" or "but how does this help a student *understand* math?". When asked, Joanne Clark said the current thinking at the district level is "breadth over depth" for PD sessions, hoping exposure in a general sense can then lead to further exploration by the teachers, and individual support as needed (Clark, personal communication, 2020). However, I would push-back on that idea, going back to the oversaturation issue mentioned first, and argue teachers who do not see immediate value in the technology are little motivated to further explore it. Also, the question is how technology supports and enhances student learning. If the PD is too general, it is harder for teachers to see the content specific ways their students can improve, and leads to reduced buy-in. A more fully articulated plan for improving student content knowledge and SEL is lacking.

The fourth and final issue I uncovered is with stakeholder communication and transparency. ISTE standard two states the need for both engaging stakeholders to create a plan and also communicating with stakeholders for input and constant engagement in the process (ISTE, 2020). Further, standard four encourages technology leaders cultivate relationships with

other community stakeholders such as businesses, non-profits, and politicians (ISTE, 2020). From the viewpoint of a teacher stakeholder, I am unaware of any sources of teacher input beyond occasional (every other year or so) surveys about superficial things (ie, do you prefer using a Promethean board or a ClearTouch panel?). There are no technology committees with teacher representation, nor teachers invited to any planning meetings. The same concern can be extended to student and parent stakeholders. I am sure the technology leaders are open to hearing input, but there is no formal process or means for sustained representation. In the Shmoop anecdote referenced earlier, it is clear the district still mainly operates from a top-down perspective when it comes to acquiring and evaluating technology. While the 5-year technology plan is posted online, it ends with the 2019-2020 school year and no new plan has been publicized or mentioned by the district. Clark has assured me there is "a plan in the works" but when asked said the committee creating the plan included only district staff and a couple of school administrators (Clark, personal communication, 2020). The lack of other stakeholders seems egregious for a plan that directly affects them.

Conclusions

There are several long-term repercussions for RHHS if the overarching issues above are not addressed. First, if the district continues to overwhelm teachers with new technology programs every year, teacher motivation and buy-in for these programs will wane. Particularly if teachers voice frustrations, but more resources are just thrown at them, it may even lead to teachers deciding to leave RHHS. In a state with an acute teacher shortage, minimizing frustrations is prudent. Concerning the access issue, the lack of internet access for students outside of the school building only exacerbates inherent inequity issues. If students feel like they cannot perform the research needed or create a product for a class to their or their teacher's

standards, they may instead give up and "check out", further hurting these students' educational prospects. This could also be a contributing factor to the drop-out rate. The third issue of not being more deliberate in using technology to improve student learning, means the district will end up spending more and more money on devices and technology programs without actually doing anything to improve student outcomes. Teachers may decide to ignore implementations of new technologies if they cannot make the connection to how it will improve learning for students. Additionally, by neglecting SEL, all the diverse needs of learners are not being met, which can have lifelong repercussions for the student. Finally, by not having a specified and intentional program set up for stakeholder input, teachers, students, and parents may end up deciding to move out of the district. Focusing too much on top-down initiatives will make people feel undervalued.

In general, RHHS has a robust technology program that has surpassed several "growing pains" from its initial move into the one-to-one atmosphere. When the last five year technology plan was adopted, a focus was on operational concerns like buying devices, upgrading networks, and hiring additional personnel. Now that the big picture has been taken care of, I believe RHHS and the district as a whole can focus more on improving the details. By focusing and evaluating new technology more closely with stakeholder input, and by making sure student learning outcomes are always on the forefront, I believe RHHS can improve and become a model school for technology integration.

References

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