

# Keeping Up With the Fourth Graders

It's almost a cliché in elementary schools: when a computer glitch befuddles the adults, someone jokes that it's time to call in a fourth grader. There are plenty of other vivid reminders that our young people are growing up immersed in technology. Whether it's hardware, software, cell phones, or iPods, technology fluency is what often separates the generation that's in school from the generation that's supposed to be doing the educating.

It's important for principals to realize that technology is a powerful instructional and management tool, and to take the lead in emphasizing this belief to teachers, parents, and the wider community. While it would certainly be easy to feel overwhelmed by technology, this is not an area where educators can settle for simply upgrading basic knowledge. Mastering e-mail is just a beginning. No one can imagine a successful business that isn't constantly slicing and dicing all kinds of data to glean information about the organization's strengths and weaknesses, and to help guide strategic planning. Schools can't afford to be left behind.

While technology promises to make many facets of our work easier to understand and analyze, getting up to speed and staying there presents a steep and formidable learning curve. In our guide, *Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do*, one of the six standards states that effective principals use multiple sources of data as diagnostic tools to assess, identify, and apply instructional improvement. Technology gives us a major tool to accomplish this.

## Upgrading Management Practice

At East Silver Spring Elementary School in Maryland, an openness to technology led the principal to pilot a district initiative in which teachers and administrators use hand-held personal digital assistant (PDA) devices to load classroom performance data into the school's computers, providing new ways of analyzing student performance and school progress. Other schools use PDAs to record and analyze observations during classroom walkthroughs, producing real-time data.

While computers in most schools are seen as high-profile classroom learning tools, more recent applications for



school management continue to grow and impress. Access to the Internet alone offers principals valuable resources to improve practice. For example, the online National Educator Training and Leadership Center ([www.netlc.org](http://www.netlc.org)) puts an array of education issues in perspective and connects topics to the larger idea of thinking about how systems operate.

NAESP was a partner in creating the IBM Reinventing Education Change Toolkit ([www.reinventingeducation.org](http://www.reinventingeducation.org)). This site offers educators a new way to think about how to effect change—and how to bring others along—using practical strategies drawn from change-management expertise. The site also ties together leadership and change management.

Beyond the Internet, a new generation of management software can help with budgeting, staffing, data analysis, and professional development.


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## Opening Avenues to New Learning

We've learned in the years since we started wiring more outlets for computer labs and installing fiber optics or wireless modems that the key to harnessing technology is not acquiring equipment but developing the skills and knowledge to use it effectively. It echoes the way in which education standards have spurred teaching from simply plodding through a textbook to deciding what students should know, finding ways to make learning meaningful, and placing a premium on results.

In classrooms, the potential of technology continues to explode with the growing use of laptops, PowerPoint displays, Smart Boards, voice-recognition programs, desktop publishing, and digital audio and video. For those who want a glimpse of ways technology is changing classroom learning, check out the George Lucas Educational Foundation's Edutopia site ([www.edutopia.org](http://www.edutopia.org)).

Today's principals can't afford to be intimidated by technology. As you preach lifelong learning, you must practice it, too. You must encourage teachers, parents, and children to delve into the many avenues for expanding education that technology offers. You need to support every member of your staff and community in making the most of this new and creative learning frontier.

Talking technology isn't enough, however. You need to model what it means to understand, use, and innovate with technology. Get ahead of the curve. And if you think you've got everything covered when it comes to technology, go to the experts to find out if there're some things you still don't know. Ask your fourth graders. 

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