



Leadership for Tomorrow

How to cultivate a mindset of innovation.

By Ben Gilpin and Brad Gustafson



This article is a part of a yearlong series on technology and innovation.

“I sure hope this isn’t a session about social media or Twitter,” sighed the principal headed into her next NAESP conference session alongside a colleague. Armed with conference handbags and water bottles, the two continued the exchange until they were out of earshot. Their conversation offers a poignant glimpse into the mindset of many elementary principals who describe themselves as “non-techy.”

Principals must embrace a mindset of innovation to stay current with pedagogical shifts and best practice. It is no longer acceptable to ignore social media or other innovations that are predominant outside the field of education. Principals are among the lead learners on their campuses, and instructional leadership should reflect the 21st century context in which our schools operate.

Modeling digital leadership is every principal’s responsibility. Convincing a teacher to take the social media plunge without experiencing the value of connectivity first-hand is unrealistic. So why is it that so many principals are reluctant to dip their toes into the social media waters?

Incubate Innovation

Leadership and purpose go hand-in-hand. Before you determine how to innovate your leadership, you must ask yourself why. Innovation is more than an app or idea; it’s a mindset that helps propel student learning forward.

The modern-day instructional leader cannot remain relevant without a digital lens. Our kids are counting on us to accelerate the merger between

how school has always been done, and what it needs to be. School leaders need to ask themselves, “Would I want to be a student in my school? Would I want to be a teacher sitting in my staff meetings?” If the answer is not an emphatic “Yes,” then we need to look within.

The Research

Research shows that innovation is strongly linked to a principal’s digital connectivity. Consider, for example, the new leadership characteristic that emerged from a recent study involving elementary principals across the country. Principals who are “connected” invest in relationships using digital tools like Twitter to transform learning, enhance leadership, and bring about levels of innovation and collaboration that were previously unfathomable (See Brad Gustafson’s 2014 dissertation, *A Phenomenological Study of Professional Development in the Digital Age*, for more information.)

Simply having a positive attitude about technology is grossly inadequate. If principals expect their teachers to cultivate growth mindsets in students, then principals must commit to honing their own digital leadership. It is educational malpractice to limit student opportunity based on what we refuse to learn. Teachers would not permit a student to opt out of a lesson by stating he or she is not math-savvy. However, there are still principals who openly share they are not tech-savvy. This reveals a mindset that could ultimately dismiss powerful learning taking place on social media.

A principal and lead learner, Tony Sinanis has underscored the utility of Twitter as a professional development tool. His doctoral research finds that principals who are

self-directed learners can leverage connectivity for professional growth. Transformational learning can occur using technology when educators understand that human connections are a powerful catalyst for growth. Congruously, principals should aspire to cultivate the very same characteristics in students and staff.

“Every one of the jobs our students will walk into has a significant connectivity component. Whether it is through collaboration, marketing, branding, or social sharing...our students need schools that address connectivity more proactively,” said Joe Mazza, who serves as the leadership innovation manager at the Mid-Career Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership at the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education. “Reaching out to others is critical because connectivity is not going away,” he added. Principals must support the process of integrating connected learning experiences into the classroom.

How to Cultivate a Mindset of Innovation

The act of getting connected and modeling digital leadership is an important first step. Principals also should frame failure in positive terms when it comes to fostering innovation. A powerful acronym that effectively does this is FAIL, which stands for first attempt in learning. Henry Ford once stated, “Failure is simply the opportunity to begin again ... this time more intelligently.” Ford is in good company.

Take for example, Jennie Magiera, who is a digital learning coordinator in the Chicago Public Schools.

She’s also taught fourth and fifth grade and served as a math/technology coach. Her best advice for principals is to invest in innovation by creating a culture where it’s safe to try, fail, and iterate. “Great progress comes from taking leaps of faith,” she said. According to Magiera, principals can accomplish this by modeling risk-taking, embracing a culture of failing forward, and de-stigmatizing risk.

Teachers will benefit from additional tangible support as well. The simple act of encouragement goes a long way. “I’m thankful for an administrator who gives us freedom to try new things without fear,” said third-grade teacher Julie Oliver, who has instituted “genius hour” time in her class at Michigan’s Warner Elementary School, added, “When I attend conferences and Edcamps, I often hear the horror stories from others—and that makes me appreciate a supportive principal even more.”

By committing to letting teachers innovate, fail, and reflect, principals create safe spaces conducive to a culture that supports an innovative mindset. School leaders also should be part of the process. Rafranz Davis, executive director of professional and digital learning for Lufkin (Texas) Independent School District, suggests that principals take advantage of opportunities to learn alongside teachers. Start by throwing out titles for a day, sitting down at a table, and talking about problems and ways to address them. Allowing teachers to lead will produce powerful ripple effects that could turn into a tide of innovation. A true leader builds leaders.

Innovation: Dos and Don’ts

Keep the process of cultivating a mindset of innovation simple by following this list of dos and don’ts, which was brainstormed by the NAESP National Panel on Innovation at the July 2015 annual conference in Long Beach, California. Feel free to reach out on Twitter to the following contributors with questions and to share your innovative ideas.



AMY FADEJI

Fourth-Year Principal in Charter School
@MrsFadeji, Penngrove Elementary School, California

DO look for magical moments on your campus every day and share them. Go out of your way to connect your students and teachers with other educators so they can learn, take risks, and grow together. **DON’T** forget to take time to reflect on the things you’re doing and why you are doing them. Don’t worry about having all the answers. Instead, try to model a mindset of innovation by learning out loud.

BEN GILPIN

Sixth-Year Principal in Neighborhood School
@BenjaminGilpin, Warner Elementary School, Michigan

DO remember to make all your decisions based on what is best for kids. Too often budgets, adult needs, time, and space drive decisions. Remember why you are in education and focus squarely on students. **DON’T** view disagreements and pushback as a bad thing. Change your perspective and look at different viewpoints as opportunities to learn. The best learning takes place in moments of adversity.

"If we lead today's schools as we led yesterday's,
we rob them of tomorrow."

—Adapted from John Dewey

A beneficiary of the leaders-supporting-leaders approach is found in Sarah Thomas, an eighth-grade teacher-leader in the Washington, D.C. metro area. Thomas shared that leaders can support educators in their attempts to be innovative by trusting them. She said that her growth as a teacher is accelerated when she gets both support and space. For example, Thomas's principal supported her by inviting her to attend a leadership conference where she learned about "flipped" instruction. She also was given space to implement, experiment, and enhance the new methodology.

A Journey of 1,000 Miles

In the beginning, digital connections can help principals learn. Over time, it can evolve into a mindset that transforms your leadership. Here are several examples of how to innovate your leadership:

- Convert your paper or e-mailed newsletters to podcasts;
- Increase parent engagement by live-streaming concerts and special events via Periscope;
- Start a school hashtag on Twitter (check out the #GWgreats hashtag for ideas);
- Install flat-screen TV monitors to display classroom learning tweets in school hallways;

- Get staff connected by sharing blogs and videos that promote thought and reflection;
- Start a blog (check out the "Colorful Principal" or "Adjusting Course" blogs for ideas);
- Amplify student voice by starting a cafeteria DJ program with students;
- Attend an EdCamp;
- Make the EdCamp model part of your school's approach to professional development; and
- Talk to colleagues who are using social media to connect and grow.

Are you unsure how to start? The first step to bringing new and innovative learning experiences to your students is to start. Attitude follows behavior. Do something different. Our kids are counting on us to keep their schools relevant. Don't be bound by fear of failure or the unknown. The most important question you ask this school year may be, "What's the best thing that could happen?" 

Ben Gilpin is principal of Warner Elementary School in Spring Arbor, Michigan.

Brad Gustafson is principal of Greenwood Elementary School in Plymouth, Minnesota.

BRAD GUSTAFSON

Eighth-Year Principal in Suburban School

@GustafsonBrad, Greenwood Elementary School, Minnesota

DO make innovation a priority. Start by dedicating a portion of your budget to bring a new opportunity to your students. You might select a 3D printer, drones, robotic droids, or MakerSpaces. Prioritize innovation by investing in it.

DON'T think that traditional past practice is automatically the pedagogy that is best for today's kids. The world is changing and schools need to be responsive to the needs of the 21st century student.

JOE MAZZA

Innovation Coach

@Joe_Mazza, University of Pennsylvania,

Graduate School of Education

DO take advantage of every face-to-face opportunity with staff to model innovation.

Test out online tools and new approaches even if you are not an expert. Be the person who breaks the ice and exposes new ideas.

DON'T feel like you have to be perfect or that you need to be an expert. You can be an activator by simply exposing new tools and approaches that others can build upon.

TODD NESLONEY

Second-Year Principal in Rural, Title 1 School

@TechNinjaTodd, Webb Elementary School, Texas

DO make yourself vulnerable by being honest and real about what's happening in your school and profession. Share the successes, failures, and things that are personal through blogging and Twitter.

DON'T get discouraged if anyone disagrees with you, your beliefs, or what you're sharing. Commit to sharing a message of positivity and hope.

THERESA STAGER

Music Teacher Turned Private School Principal

@PrincipalStager, St. Mary Rockwood Elementary & Middle School, Michigan

DO reach out to colleagues who can help you. Start with people you know. These colleagues will be your cheering section when you need encouragement. The silence from the isolation in the principalship can be deafening. Find your song.

DON'T stop. It sounds silly, but as soon as you stop you've given up. Look at failure as an idea that didn't work and that leads you to the one that will.