

Providence has played a part in creating my mission as an educator and particularly the schools wherein I have been chosen to serve and lead. My years in the classroom and as principal have been in Title 1 schools and I have enjoyed making a difference in these schools and communities . My drive to become a digital leader focused on preparing my students for their future and changing how we teach and manage schools, has been the bridge to narrowing the gaps in achievement and design in my schools. Any success or progress I have realized has been the result of being a digital leader committed on making a difference in learning and teaching.

### My Growth as a Digital Leader

I have always focused on using technology as part of my practice as a classroom teacher, instructional coach, and school administrator. Whether it was graphing calculators, math software or utilizing local area networks to share files, from early on, I recognized the value of integrating technology to help my efforts. I have always seized opportunities to experiment and learn and lead technology talks with different groups. This has been a constant in my career and, now, part of my strength as a digital principal. It has also been a unique value-add I have brought to the different administrative teams I've been fortunate to work on.

I accepted the position of assistant principal at West Montgomery High School in Montgomery County, a small, rural district in North Carolina. My superintendent, Dr Donna Peters was an empowering mentor/leader who guided our district down a path of innovative change. This began with a strategic partnership with North Carolina Virtual Public School, NCVPS. Their support plan with partnered school districts included the 'G.O.L.I.V.E.' Initiative which helped districts with effective virtual school practices and also shifting to embrace innovative practices. Dr. Bryan Setser and Don Lourcey were the

forward thinking leaders and supporters at NCVPS at the time who helped with our dive into social media and integrating web 2.0 tools into our instructional practice. All school administrators were given a unique level of exposure, support and challenge that has dramatically altered all of our practices. Personally, it challenged and changed how I think of teaching, learning and education. They were our first exposure to web 2.0 tools - free, web-based programs that enhance functions in areas ranging from communication to sharing to teaching and organization. They introduced us to tools including Diigo, Dropbox, Blogger, Skype in the Classroom, GoogleDocs [Now Drive]. From their exposure, modeling and continuous support over the years, I have continued my use of these tools to a high degree in my practice and have worked hard with the instructional teams at my school to emulate this exposure training model and keep high expectations for their use in our teachers' classroom.

'Failing forward' was an important concept I learned from this NCVPS. Being engaged and challenged to try new innovative instructional practices means that not all attempts will be successful. Our shift involved accepting that undesired outcomes are not failures but opportunities to readjust. I adopted this mindset from my then superintendent and Principal David Cassady and embrace it today. Believing that all students can learn means thinking differently and being a risk taker. This was the standard being set and I made the decision to be that kind of leader.

Without question, the biggest impact to me and district, was bringing social media and the philosophy of 'getting connecting.' They provided masterful guidance in getting us started on Twitter. We learned not only what it is but what it could be! I began to dive into building a professional learning network, PLN, and learning from educators on Twitter. Today, I make a unique reflection that most of the resources and strategies I bring to my

school are from 'friends' I've never met face to face. My PLN has a profound influence on my learning growth and what is happening in my school. That is the power of being a digital leader, the power of a PLN and the power of being connected.

With that support from NCVPS, our district began the good work of creating structures in our district to support innovative design and changing teaching practices. Two years later, I became the Director of Curriculum and Innovation, a support agent in the district. A large part of my duties were to serve as an in-district support for new change initiatives, leading administrative and teaching trainings and spearhead integrating #edtech in our 6-12 initiatives. Our progress was showcased by NCVPS and they encouraged us to share our work. One share session was at the NC ASCD Conference in Pinehurst, the year Dr Peters was selected as the NC Superintendent of the Year. I facilitated the creation and delivery of this joint presentation on leading district wide innovative changes and creating support systems. Our presentation helped make a difference with several other districts in creating transformative practices.

These were three great years. They helped shape my vision and challenged my philosophies. They set me on my path as a digital leader.

### Connected Leader

This is my fourth year as a principal, two years at two schools. My first school was a rural middle school in a very small school district and my current middle school is in an urban setting in one of the largest school districts in the nation. Both schools have a significant number of students receiving free and reduced lunches and both have great students and teachers. My preparation and work with NCVPS and Montgomery County, have prepared me for leading these school populations to envision and work toward teaching students that will prepare them for their future.

Even though I've changed school districts, two things have not changed: making a significant difference in my Title 1 schools and my commitment to being a digital leader. My PLN is a fundamental part of my growth. There are adjectives that can adequately express how much my PLN has changed and is supporting my practice.

Twitter is timely support for any area I need. There are many impact stories over the years of how Twitter has impacted and supported change in my school:

- Having Dr Robert Marzano answer my questions during an #edfocus chat on the release of his new co-authored book, 'Leaders of Learning;
- Creating a parent engagement plan with my #edfocus network with members across several states;
- Connecting with Elizabeth Hubbell, @erhubbell, one of the authors of Classroom Instruction That Works [CITW] and securing her for PD for my school;

My most substantial work comes from co-moderating two chats on Twitter: #edfocus and #ncadmin. As the co-moderator of #edfocus, I've been very fortunate to have had direct conversations and correspondence with some of our fields experts and authorities on a number of topics. We are proud of our mission - connecting authors and experts with educators. Our forum is a difference making endeavor to make changes in classrooms and schools at large. We have hosted experts including Marzano, Whitaker, Pink, Muhammad, Wormeli and Williams. The participants in our regular chats and strategy discussions have personal learning experiences that help make a difference in their learning and teaching landscapes. The good we do in promoting understanding and change on this large scale is immense.

On a local level, Craig Smith @csmithgoblue and I lead a statewide chat in North

Carolina tailored for school leaders. #ncadmin the only statewide chat that is designed to help leaders in our state with best practices and new endeavors specific to North Carolina. One ongoing topic is our new teacher evaluation system which was developed in partnership with McRel, the educational research lab in Colorado. We lead open forum discussions on the topic to enable us all to share tips we think will make a difference to North Carolina schools Even though we get into specifics for the NC evaluation instrument, we are often joined by educators in other states. This is evidence that we all want to do better in our schools and we will seek out connections and resources to make growth happen. We started this chat last year When Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education declared August Connected Educators month. I help make sure that we are serving the needs of school leaders in North Carolina through this endeavor.

Two things happened this year for which I am truly honored. I was selected by #NCED, a sister chat to #ncadmin, for being one of 25 Educators to Follow on Twitter. It is humbling to be selected among this crowd of experts. I was also asked to serve on the board of NC Phi Delta Kappa to help plan this year's learning series on Digital Leadership. The president relied on me to help chose topics and select and secure our presenters and panelist.

As I gain more experience as a digital principal, I can see the growth I make personally as well as more impactful assistance helping other learn and grow.

### Sharing and Presenting

Part of the impact from NCVPS has been to help me realize that we don't help our field by working in silos. We have to be willing to share what is working and what we think will make a difference. My definition of lifelong learner has expanded to include a responsibility to share. I embrace presenting, sharing and leading discussions that will help

make a difference for other leaders.

Below are some of the conferences I have been fortunate to have made presentation:

- Georgia Ed Tech Conference
- Summer Leadership Conference, Asheville, NC
- NC Middle School Conference
- NC ASCD

Sharing is a fundamental part of my practice and as a component of Visionary Leadership and broad Systemic Improvement, a responsibility of all digital leaders. A great impact story on sharing began two years ago after I read a post from Lyn Hilt on doing walk throughs in school using Google Forms. I implemented this practice in West Middle. Using the form is a great system as it aggregates data and allows you to look at and make decisions about areas of strengths and needed improvement. However, providing feedback to teachers was the critical component missing. After some weeks of research, I pieced together a system to do just that from internet research. Now an administrator can perform a walk thru and results be immediately emailed to the teacher.

Blogging is an integral part of my sharing. I made several posts about this process, including posting videos and screenshots on how to create the forms. This sharing made its way into other schools and into school leaders' hand. I was invited to share this at an UnCon developed by Adam Taylor, @2footgiraffe via GooglePlus for administrators in Tennessee. I also led a face-to-face countywide PD in my district on this topic. This a great success story in connecting and sharing - had Lyn not posed the question, I would not have seen the possibility nor investigated and then shared the results. This why digital principals are leading the way.

I have also been fortunate to make a yearly presentation to a local group of teachers in an alternative principal licensure program. This is the 3rd year I have visited the Sandhills Leadership Academy and presented on Getting Connected, Tools for Digital Leadership. This is a great opportunity to share with future leaders and do my part in shifting the thinking of the future leaders in our area schools.

### Change Leadership

It is important to have a good understanding of my journey and where I have come from because as I stated early in this paper, I have to make a difference in my school.

School leaders know how critical it is to develop and communicate a clear vision and know the desired outcomes, provide the resources and support needed to implement our developed plan and finally bring strategic monitoring and planning into place to determine next steps. The school leadership teams I have had the privilege of working with have all fully acknowledged the need for change. At West Middle and Spring Lake Middle, I have been able to paint a picture of where we should go and what the change should look like. These great staffs have embraced the vision of change and we dive deep into refining how we plan, teach, operate and think.

The operations in my school look different today than when I first arrived 1.5 year ago because of this new vision. We have moved all of our planning documents - grade level minutes, content planning, leadership notes, student contact logs to the district's Google cloud. Helping the staff see that this is as much about efficiency as it is flattening our communication has helped with our buy in. I share benefits of these efforts at every opportunity that presents itself.

So much of our efforts and planning goes into how we are changing learning and teaching. I accept the responsibility of being the lead instructional designer of my school. I

have to have a clear vision of where our school needs to go. I draw support and inspiration from my PLN:

- **Communication** - I have created and managed Twitter accounts for both my schools; We connect with text messages and Edmodo; I am inspired from digital leaders such as Eric Sheninger, Patrick Larkin and John Robinson
- **Resourcing** - We aren't a 1:1 but we make significant efforts in increasing our tech resources. We have 3 computer labs, 3 laptop carts, 4-6 Chromebooks per classroom and 3 iPad Collaboration
- **Continuous PD** - These resources and the desired change all require us to support and lead shift discussions for our teachers. I lead many of these discussions.
- **Changing how we teach** - From the resources of my PLN and the design of our support, I use my influence as the digital leader to change how we think and what we do. From policy changes including a BYOD framework to inspired talks such as our recent #edfocus chat with Principal Baruti Kafele, @PrincipalKafele on his new book "Closing the Attitude Gap" on the topic of maintaining high expectations - this is how a digital principal merges connected learning with school practice

### **Forecasting**

My four years as a principal have been a great learning experience for me and proud work I can reflect on knowing that I have made a difference in my schools by committing to my growth as a digital leader. My learnings and experience as a digital principal have been profound - but I don't think they are atypical of other like minded principals committed to making a change in all of our buildings for all of our students. This is a new

**aspect of the principalship that will continue to grow and dramatically change how we lead schools.**

**I'm proud to be a digital principal and leader.**

**Derek I. McCoy**

**Proud Digital Leader, Spring Lake Middle School**