Peer-Mentoring Program Helps Build Collaborative School Community

By Heather Ellwood

Milissa Gavel's technology integration tips

- Implement a peer-mentoring model

- Ensure students are the primary users of technology, not the teachers

- Start where you are, and infuse technology into what you are already successfully doing

- Encourage teachers to design lessons in which every student has a task

Three years ago, when Milissa Gavel was teaching sixth-grade at Davison Elementary School, she was allotted space in the school's timetable to help her colleagues use technology more effectively to meet learning outcomes. A big believer in the merits of classroom technology, Gavel jumped at the opportunity to become a peer mentor. But she had no idea the program would revolutionize teaching and, more importantly, learning at the school in Melville, Saskatchewan, Canada.

Now the hallways and classrooms of Davison buzz with technology-enabled activity. Eager students crowd around SMART Board™ interactive whiteboards, which are in constant use. First-grade students log on to in-class computers to update their blogs and read feedback from their parents. With digital cameras in hand, sixth-grade students explore the shared areas of the school, shooting images of symmetrical objects for their upcoming reports. And in every classroom, teachers are troubleshooting, advising and modeling.
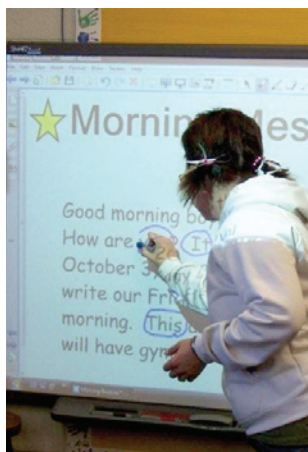
An individualized approach

It wasn't always like this at Davison. Before the launch of the peer-mentoring program, teachers and students viewed technology as a discreet subject, which was covered during set blocks of time in the computer lab. Gavel wanted to help the Davison community to instead think of educational technology as a set of tools to enhance learning. To achieve this goal, she explains, the school "partnered with Marieval Enterprise Center through a federally sponsored grant program to purchase SMART Board interactive whiteboards and other accessory equipment." That gave them some of the products they needed to enhance the learning experience for the students.

By the end of the fourth year of the initiative, Gavel wanted to have all the teachers using technology independently and effectively, in all subject areas. Each teacher was initially given six timeslots to work with Gavel and discover various ways to effectively integrate their classroom technology into instruction.

"I think it really helped that we individualized our starting points, depending on the comfort level of the teacher. I believe that, with a program like this, there's no right or wrong place for a teacher to start," says Gavel, who is now the principal of the 194-student elementary school. "It was really a process of moving the teachers along a continuum, just like we should be doing with students. We started where they were and helped them get as far as possible, depending upon their individual needs at that time. There was never a prescribed list of outcomes – it was very gradual, and everyone moved at their own pace." And, Gavel says, the teachers achieved effective independence by the end of the second year.

Darla Nashiem, a sixth-grade teacher and peer mentor, says the individualized, less-structured approach was one of the factors that made the Davison peer-mentoring program so successful, so quickly. First-grade teacher Laurie Koval adds that putting the peer mentoring block into the weekly timetable gave it additional weight. "Tech time was built right into our day. It wasn't something we were asked to do on our own, in our off-hours," she explains.

Engaging students and fostering collaboration

After the first year of implementation, teachers reported a 40 percent growth in integrating technology into their instruction. A big push came from the students themselves. "Technology allows us to tap into how kids are smart. They want it and they need it, which really played a big role in getting us to shift our thinking," Gavel explains.

For many teachers, response from students was the impetus they needed. They discovered that integrating technology into their lessons engaged many students they had previously found hard to reach. "We realized that teaching a lesson using the SMART Board meant that suddenly these kids were interacting with the material and were being positively affected. And the students were asking us for more. That was a huge shift for us," recalls Nashiem.

One of the key pieces of advice Gavel shares when she works with her own staff, and when she hosts visitors to the SMART Showcase School, is to make sure students, not teachers, are the primary users of the technology.

"Technology is just a tool like any other, like a globe or paper and pencil. It's a tool to help your students achieve a learning outcome." That thinking has meant a change in the way Davison's classrooms are physically structured. Teachers create various pods or stations, and students are placed into small groups, which allows for more discussion and collaboration.

"We know that using the SMART Board and other technology improves student motivation," says Gavel. "Technology improves their ability to pay attention and retain their knowledge of concepts. Using it has fostered collaboration among our students and the amount of student-centered learning has increased."

The peer-mentoring program has not only given students more opportunities for collaboration – it has also enabled teachers to become learning partners who listen and advise, cheerlead and nurture. "Because we felt so supported and encouraged, we're now all very comfortable integrating technology and sharing our ideas around that. It just feels right," says Koval. She and the other Davison teachers have come to believe that strong, interactive teaching practices using technology have positive and long-lasting effects on student outcomes. The technology-enabled learning revolution at this elementary school will continue. **EC**