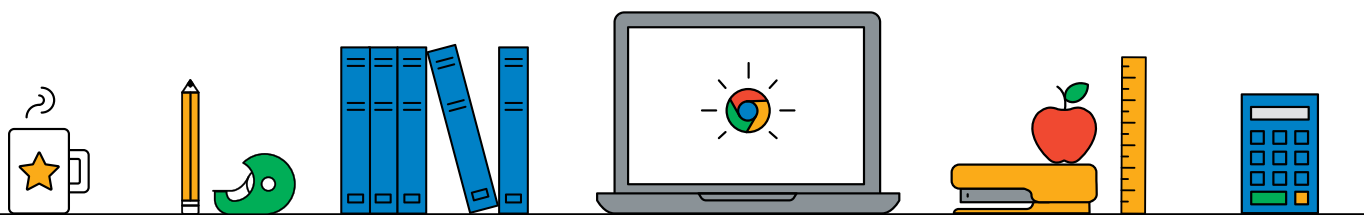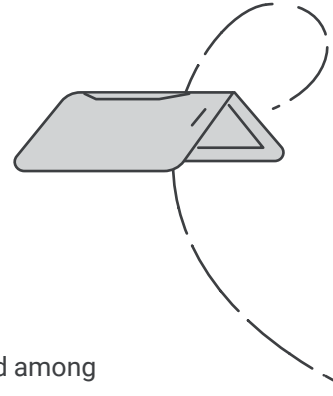# How Atlanta Public Schools created digital learning "boots on the ground" with a Train the Trainer program

About Atlanta Public Schools

Atlanta Public Schools is one of the largest school districts in Georgia, serving about 52,000 students across 89 campuses. The district is organized into nine K-12 clusters with 61 neighborhood schools, five partner schools, 18 charter schools, two citywide single-gender academies, three alternative schools and four alternative programs.

What to do when digital learning resources are spread thin

Natasha Rachell, one of four digital learning specialists (DLSs) for Atlanta Public Schools, works with the district's sixteen educational technology specialists (ETSs) to coach teachers on enhancing teaching and learning through technology.

"They're the boots on the ground," says Rachell of the ETS team members, each of which works with up to seven schools.

But while the ETS team were enthusiastic "go-getters," constantly seeking out apps and innovative lesson ideas to share with teachers, the specialists were spread thin. With 5,500 teachers across the district, there was a good deal of ground to cover in terms of visiting classrooms and running teacher training sessions on tools like G Suite for Education. "The ETS team would each be working in isolation, and kind of doing their own thing," Rachell says.

As a result, teacher training across the district wasn't as consistent as they would've liked to see. "Teachers would pick and choose what worked for their schools, classrooms and students, which meant the technology was varied," Rachell says. Varying technology also meant varying levels of training: some teachers took advantage of training if they were using Google tools in the classroom, while others required more of a helping hand to get started. District-wide, five teachers held Google Educator Level 1 certification, while two had Level 2 training.

In addition, skills training was varied among the instructional technology department; Rachell was a Level 2 Google Certified Trainer, but only 3 ETSs and DLSs were Level 2 Certified Trainers.

To increase the reach of digital learning throughout the district, the Instructional Technology Department needed to provide more training for ed tech staff, and a more systematic and supportive way to train teachers—who could then share their knowledge with their peers. In this way, technology could be infused into the Atlanta Public Schools curriculum by teachers and digital learning specialists who'd undergone the same training and shared the same mission.

"We needed to explain to teachers that training was the way to bring forth 21st-century teaching," explains Dr. Aleigha Henderson-Rosser, the district's executive director of instructional technology. "If they really wanted to be part of this movement, they needed to jump in feet first."
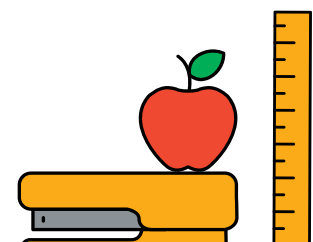
Giving teachers and trainers confidence in digital skills

The time was right for a "train the trainer" program: The district was about to embark on an ambitious "21st Century Classroom" initiative that would seamlessly integrate technology into lessons, and would include new equipment such as touchscreen LED panels in every classroom.

Within an even greater emphasis on collaborative learning, teachers needed the confidence to engage students in lessons that were integrated with the new technology.

"It's one thing to simply coach teachers in using the panels," Rachell says. "But we also had to teach them to use the technology to support the 4Cs [critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication]. If we were the ones championing these tools, then we needed to be experts in them ourselves."

The first step: upskill all 20 ETS and DLS staffers to the level of Google Certified Trainers. Given their existing knowledge of Google tools, this was accomplished during an accelerated one-day training session. The immediate impact of the Certified Trainer class was that the instructional technology team could operate with shared knowledge of Google tools, as well as tactics for encouraging collaboration and creativity.

"We need to be the cheerleaders for instructional technology, since we are the ones who find valuable tools for teachers to use," Rachell says. "But to do that, we need to live and breathe ed tech. The Certified Trainer certification gave us the confidence to feel comfortable using these tools."

For the teachers, the Department of Instructional Technology established Google Certified Teacher Level 1 and Level 2 training cohorts; the classes were scheduled during planning periods and after school so teachers had time to attend. Trainers eventually added online classes so more teachers could attend. The ETS staff shared checklists from Control Alt Achieve (a blog run by Eric Curts) with teachers to ensure the sessions allowed participants to master the skills needed to become Google Level 1 and/or Google Level 2 certified.

How to best deliver training to teachers
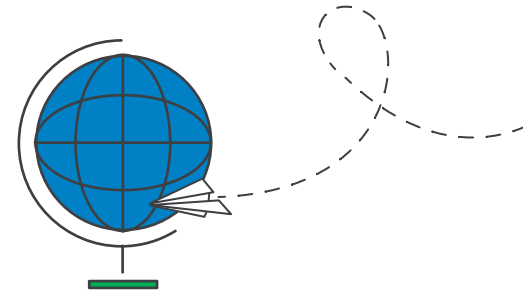
During their Certified Trainer training, the Instructional Technology Team discussed tactics to best deliver the training to teachers throughout the district—such as in-depth training, and recognition for those who'd undergone training.

Post-training, the ed tech team wanted to recognize teacher accomplishments, and continually share ideas with teachers. To highlight teachers' new roles as coaches for their colleagues, the ed tech team created classroom door decorations featuring a "21st Century Classroom" banner. "Those teachers became the go-to people in their schools if other teachers needed support," Rachell says.

"Even though we're adults, we all love a badge or a banner," Henderson-Rosser says. "We wanted teachers to put the Google Certified badges in their emails so people could see what they accomplished."

During professional learning days, ed tech staff offered in person-trainings, such as classes on digital citizenship based on lessons from Common Sense Education. For a PD workshop on working around bad-weather days, the Department of Instructional Technology taught teachers to set up Google Classroom with pre-planned lessons. That way, if bad weather occurred, students could complete their assignments while they were at home. Instruction never stops.

"We've made it clear to teachers that at every opportunity, we're going to give them instruction on using on best practices for integrating technology into the curriculum, using tools like the Google Suite to enhance instructional practices," Rachell says.

The ed tech staff also refresh their own skills through monthly team meetings. They invite specialists from other departments, such as media services, to talk about new technology and its application in classrooms. In addition, staffers use Twitter and email to share ideas for creative lessons using technology, or to simply give a pat on the back to teachers who've achieved certification.

"Twitter is huge for us," Rachell says. She and her ed tech colleagues try to tweet daily so teachers get in the habit of checking Twitter for news about upcoming training, or to see fellow teachers get a shout-out. Other ETS or DLS staff send out either "Tech Tip Tuesday" or "Feel-good Friday" newsletters to share digital learning ideas and best practices.

To streamline coaching services, the ed tech staff created "request" and "feedback" forms using Google Forms. Teachers complete the request form with information including the lesson or standard that they are requesting services for, the date, and what type of service they are requesting: co-teaching a lesson, lesson planning, modeling a lesson, etc. After the service is delivered, trainers share the feedback from to collect feedback on their coaching skills and effectiveness of the training delivered.

In this way, trainers can track the type of coaching commonly requested, which helps them plan future training sessions.

Creating a sharing culture around digital learning

The Instructional Technology Team measures the success of the "train the trainer" program by the numbers, as well as feedback from teachers and within their own team. By the numbers, 15 teachers have now achieved Level 2 certification, while over 100 have Level 1 Certification.

In addition, in 2018 teachers created 32,000 Google Classrooms to manage teaching and learning, a big increase over the 6,400 Classrooms created in 2017—another sign that teachers are putting their training into practice.

Now that teachers and the Instructional Technology Team are more confident in their skills, they are more likely to trade best practices with colleagues.

"The sharing culture has changed, even among the technology educators," Rachell says. "Before the training and before we rolled out Google, many of the ETS team were working in silos. Now everyone pulls from a shared library of ideas in Google Drive that we created and curated as a team."

The training has also changed how teachers employ technology to engage students. More teachers have adopted the flipped-classroom model, where students can work at their own pace and use a blend of online tools to complete lessons.

"Instead of worksheets, teachers are giving their students the resources to problem-solve on their own," Rachell says.

The "train the trainer" program has also helped build senior-level support for the district's 21st Century Classroom initiatives. Kevin Maxwell, principal of Inman Middle School, has Google Certified Educator Level 1 and 2 Certifications, and now requires teachers to complete at least Level 1 Certified Educator training.

"Had we not had our Train the Trainer program, the impact of the 21st Century Classroom initiative would not have been as huge," Rachell says. "We've taken teachers who might have been fearful of new technology, and made them comfortable with it. And once they have that comfort and confidence, you can do so much more."

Says Henderson-Rosser, "It's the way that training should happen—with a groundswell of support."
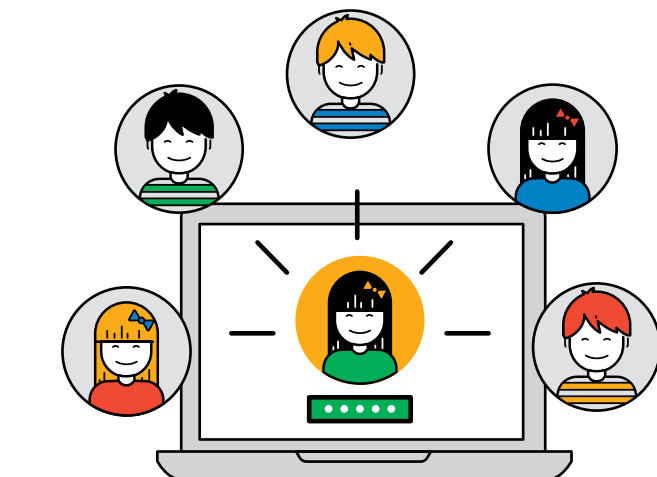
How to build a successful Train the Trainer program

Bring your educational technology team up to speed

As a first step, the Atlanta Public School's education technology and digital learning specialists became Google Certified Trainers, giving them the skills and confidence to train teachers in depth.

Set up easy-to-attend training for teachers

The trainers scheduled Google Certified Teacher Level 1 and Level 2 classes during planning periods, online, or after school; trainers used a checklist to ensure classes covered key skills in Google certification exams. The Google Train the Trainer plan offers step-by-step instructions for structuring the program; the Google Teacher Center includes links to specific skills training.

Refresh trainers' skills

Monthly team meetings helped the Department of Instructional Technology keep skills current.

Create feedback loops

Teachers fill out "request and feedback" forms to ask for training help and submit feedback. Trainers use responses to plan future training sessions.

Share ideas through social media

The Instructional Technology Department uses Twitter (follow them at @apsinstructtech) and emails to offer creative lessons using technology, or to congratulate teachers who've achieved certification.

Identify skilled teachers as go-to sources for peers

The Instructional Technology Department created "Fathead" classroom door decorations featuring teacher photos and a "21st Century Educator" banner.