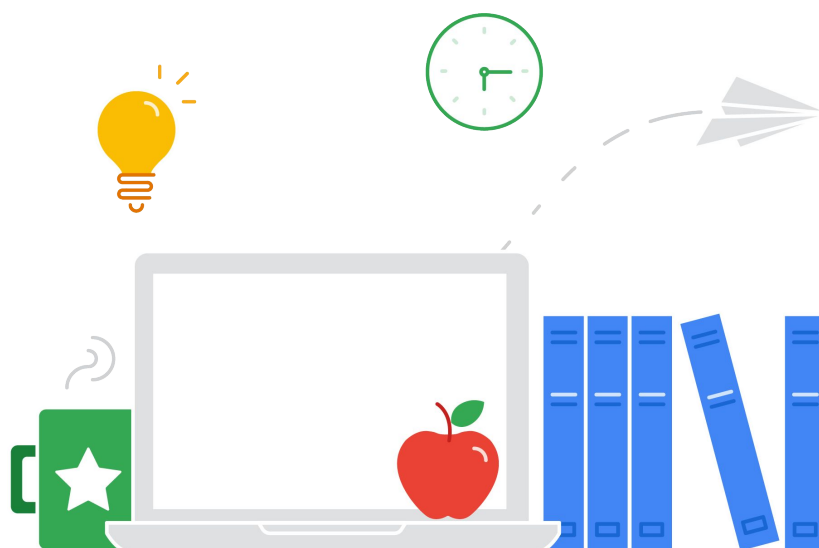


Palm Beach County schools launch “Trailblazer” program, inspiring teachers to sharpen digital skills



About the School District of Palm Beach County

The School District of Palm Beach County, Florida (SDPBC) is the 10th-largest school district in the United States and serves 193,000 students across 180 schools.

Taming the “wild west” tech and training environment

In very large school districts like Palm Beach County, it’s not easy to offer consistent and comprehensive digital skills training for all teachers. “We didn’t have the manpower on our own to do what needed to get done at the school level,” says Kim Culp, Educational Technology Specialist for SDPBC. Without a strategy, the 11-person educational technology staff couldn’t keep up with new tech coming into classrooms.

“It was the wild west,” explains Mike Goldstein, Technology Program Specialist for the District. “We usually deployed technology first, then teachers figured out how to use it later. Some schools did a great job helping teachers learn to use the technology—and in other schools, it would sit on the shelf.”

The IT Department led the district switch from Microsoft Exchange to Google Workspace in 2009, but there hadn’t been much adoption beyond Gmail. “Email was the starting point—we went to Gmail mostly for cost savings and record retention,” Goldstein says. But when it came to using Google Workspace to foster student-teacher collaboration and create flipped classrooms, adoption was very slow’

The Ed Tech Team quickly saw the power of collaborative tools for transforming learning, and the District’s IT team was also

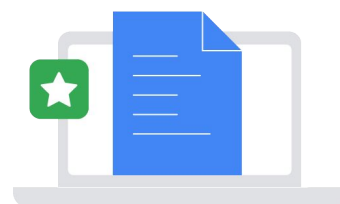
They brought in a technology consultant who made it clear to Michael Sims, IT Applications Team Leader, “If you want utilization by teachers and students to grow, you have to get buy-in from the academic side.”

enthusiastic about Google Workspace’s potential to help teachers engage with students.

This was a tipping point for the project. There was an intentional shift at that time to make this a collaborative project between IT, Ed Tech and Curriculum. This change in mindset, to leverage the Google Workspace ecosystem to improve instruction by the broader group, was a critical step for what was to follow.

Creating “Technology Trailblazers”

As the district prepared to purchase Chromebooks for students in 2015, Ed Tech Specialists couldn’t rely on the ad hoc method of delivering technology without appropriate training. Ed Tech leaders settled on several elements for a district-wide “Train the Trainer” program: A purpose-built course to drive certifications.



Before the training program began, only a few teachers had become Google Certified Educators. Using resources from the Google for Education Teacher Center, the Ed Tech Team created a “Certified Educator Course” tied into its e-learning program. The two-day course was designed to introduce teachers to Google Workspace for Education as well as Google’s certification programs for educators. Teachers received 15 in-service points for attending training, and 5 points for taking the certification exams.

Training for Trailblazers

The Certified Educator Course became part of a larger initiative spearheaded by Mark Howard, the District’s Chief of Performance Accountability: The “Trailblazers” program, launched in 2017 to train teachers who could then build their

To become a Trailblazer, teachers had to:

- Complete the online Certified Educator Course
- Attend the two-day in-person Certified Educator Course
- Pass the Google Certified Educator Level 1 exam

schools’ digital culture by supporting other teachers in their schools.

Only then would teachers receive a set of Chromebooks for their classrooms. It was critical to pair training with device deployment, Culp explains, to help teachers hit the ground running once they got Chromebooks.

A reality check for training

After the first class of Trailblazer teachers took their Level 1 Google Certification, there was a surprise: about 30 percent of them failed. “Teachers were used to somewhat fluffy professional development classes,” Goldstein says, and weren’t prepared for the in-depth certification exam. “We had to adjust our training model.”

The Ed Tech Team created “Google Study Sessions,” intensive four-hour classes covering all Google Workspace tools. Teachers were asked via survey using Google Forms about their training needs for skills such as how to use Google Classroom and Hangouts.

Using these needs assessments, ed tech specialists customized each session.

When the next group of Trailblazers-in-training took their Level 1 Google Certification exams the results were much better. The feedback from teachers was very positive: as one said to Goldstein, “That was the first time I had training where I went back with everything I needed to implement what I’d learned.”



The study sessions helped remove that scary barrier to taking the certification exams. We had to make training more rigorous.”

Mike Goldstein,
Technology Program Specialist for the District.



Who can become a Trailblazer?

Howard's Ed Tech Team and curriculum department colleagues wanted to create an atmosphere of prestige and rigor around the Trailblazer program to inspire teachers to take part. Toward that end, they established application requirements.



Teachers must be nominated for the program by their principals; the Ed Tech Team encouraged the principals to choose participants across math, science, language arts, and social studies to ensure that Trailblazer coaching could reach across departments. In addition, applicants must take Level 1 certification training and the corresponding exam, attend the two-day summer training course, and undergo follow-up training each school year.

"We don't need the most techy teachers, but we do want the ones who are leaders," Culp says. "On the other hand, we don't want technophobes. We really want the average teacher, because if we can't train those teachers, then we're doing something wrong."

The Ed Tech Team also created a list of "Trailblazer Traits" with the qualities exhibited by the most successful digital leaders:

- Exhibits teacher leader characteristics
- Embraces change
- Confident and not afraid to fail
- Average or better technology user
- Willing to share and train colleagues
- Rapport with students

Standing-room-only training

The district now has 1,750 Trailblazer teachers. More than 1,400 teachers have achieved Google Certified Educator Level 1 or 2. Recent training sessions have been standing room only (one class fielded 80 applications for 25 spots), and teachers who've become certified are proud to show off their Google Certified Educator badges.

Goldstein believes the Trailblazer program has elevated perceptions of digital training across the district. "It used to be that teachers used technology only for specific tasks and then put it away," Culp says. "Now it's driving instruction and changing how teachers interact with students—and not just in Trailblazer classrooms. We see the change in the entire district."

To provide ongoing support to trailblazers, ed tech specialists launched a Google+ community with training resources and conversations about new classroom technology. The Ed Tech Team also visits every Trailblazer classroom to solicit teacher feedback on training. A Trailblazers website introduces teachers to the program.

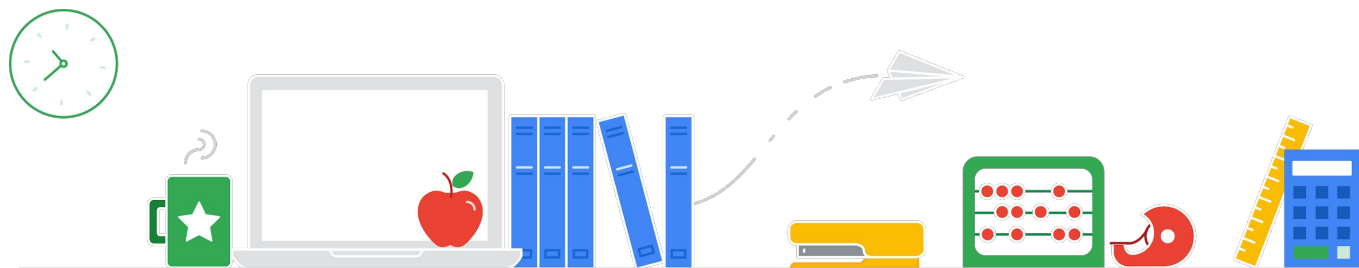


We know that training is more effective when you pull in all stakeholders. We see that sense of community growing, and teachers excited about becoming agents of change in their schools."

Mike Goldstein,
Technology Program Specialist for
the District.



How to build a successful Train the Trainer program



Roll out technology only after training

Before the Train the Trainer program, teachers got classroom tech first, then were often on their own to figure out how to use it. The Palm Beach Ed Tech Team flipped this around: Now teachers who want tech only receive it after thorough training.



Build training resources with rigor

The Palm Beach Ed Tech Team realized that to get teachers certified, training had to go in-depth on specific skills. They added a “Certified Educator Course,” drawing on resources from the Google for Education Teacher Center. The Google Train the Trainer plan offers step-by-step instructions for structuring a Train the Trainer program.



Brand the program to generate teacher excitement

“Trailblazers” gives identity to the Palm Beach program and helps create a sense of community among teachers who join.



Create a model for “dream trainers”

The Ed Tech Team drew up a list of “Trailblazer Traits” to attract their ideal participants—for example, teachers who aren’t afraid to fail, and who are average or better technology users.