



ADMINISTRATORS' CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES: PART ONE

Leveraging Technology to Close the Achievement Gap: A Critical Peer Survey

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A K¹² and Project Tomorrow White Paper

INTRODUCTION

With the continuing fiscal challenges in education budgets, coupled with new demands for increased student success, today's school and district administrators must bring more to the table than expertise in educational pedagogy or instructional delivery. Today's administrators must be astute problem solvers who can implement innovative solutions to solve a plethora of challenges. Additionally, these administrators must be visionary leaders who demonstrate the foresight to take advantage of new technologies that can have a major impact on student learning.

In this special two-part white paper series, we will provide new insights into how innovative education leaders are leveraging technology solutions to increase student achievement and success, while also articulating their vision for the ultimate new school model. This series, entitled "Administrators' Challenges and Opportunities," has been commissioned by K12 Inc., and the findings are based upon extensive analysis of the Speak Up 2010 National Data which includes unfiltered feedback of 3,578 school and district administrators representing over 1,340 districts nationwide. The goal with this series is to share the insights of administrators who are on the front lines, and to provide input and guidance into local and national discussions around the value of technology solutions as a key component in education reform efforts.

In this first white paper, "Leveraging Technology to Close the Achievement Gap: A Critical Peer Survey," we focus on how administrators plan to tap into technology solutions such as online learning to close the achievement gap, increase high school graduation rates, and improve college preparedness. Additionally, the white paper provides a real-world perspective on this topic through selected cases of schools and districts that are leveraging these technology solutions to drive improved student outcomes. As our nation's schools and districts strive to meet this heightened demand for increased school productivity, innovative administrators are providing a new model for educational leadership and a new vision for more effective teaching and learning.

WHAT ARE THE TOP CHALLENGES ADMINISTRATORS FACE TODAY?

To understand the context for valuing a technology solution, it is imperative to first understand the perplexing challenges that our nation's school and district administrators face every day. In the Speak Up 2010 survey, we asked administrators to identify the top five challenges that are most likely to "wake them up in the middle of the night." Securing adequate funding continues to be the #1 priority for all administrators, with student achievement as measured by standardized test scores as the second highest priority. Related specifically to increasing student success, four additional challenges are paramount in the minds of administrators.

Table 1: Administrators "Speak Up" about Education Challenges to Increase Student Success

Administrators' Top Priority Challenges	School Site Administrators	District Office Administration
Closing the achievement gap	41%	26%
Addressing student behavior and attendance issues	34%	11%
Serving diverse student populations	21%	17%
Increasing high school graduation rates	13%	15%

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EDUCATORS ARE TAPPING INTO TECHNOLOGY SOLUTIONS TO INCREASE STUDENT SUCCESS

Over the past two years, our data has revealed a new interest by administrators to more fully tap into the benefits of technology to increase student success. As noted in the Speak Up 2010 National Report, “The New 3 E’s of Education: Enabled, Engaged and Empowered—How Today’s Educators are Advancing a New Vision for Teaching and Learning,” we believe that three factors are driving this recent interest.

1. First, administrators are increasingly becoming technology-enabled themselves, using emerging technologies such as mobile devices, online classes, and digital content to improve their own (as well as employee) productivity. This recent development of a personal and organizational value proposition around technology is propelling education leaders to think creatively about how to leverage the same tools with students.
2. Second, students and parents are demanding a different kind of learning environment and forcing even previously reticent administrators to re-evaluate their perspectives around the value of technology for learning.
3. The third factor, the economy, and its resulting financial pressures on school and district budgets, has created a sense of urgency for administrators to more fully investigate how technology investments can support instructional goals with less expense.

WHAT NEW TECHNOLOGY SOLUTIONS DO ADMINISTRATORS BELIEVE WILL IMPROVE STUDENT OUTCOMES?

Given the challenges that administrators face each day, many are seeking “out of the box” solutions in place of more traditional approaches to education improvement. Speak Up asked district and school administrators to select the initiatives or solutions that they thought held the greatest potential for enhancing student achievement.

While many traditional approaches to improving student outcomes were noted, the leaders also indicated an interest in exploring a range of different technology solutions. Specifically, administrators identified the following six initiatives as having potential to close the achievement gap:

1. Leveraging technology for seamless learning both in and out of school
2. Implementing mobile learning initiatives
3. Setting up a virtual school
4. Providing students with access to more online courses
5. Replacing traditional textbooks with digital textbooks
6. Using data to track student performance



ONLINE LEARNING ADDRESSES EACH OF THE TOP SIX TECHNOLOGY INITIATIVES TO IMPROVE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Online learning in its various forms—from full-time virtual schools to hybrid/blended solutions, credit recovery, and supplemental courses—addresses at least a portion of the top six technology solutions identified in our research. Per the latest Speak Up national findings, 40 percent of administrators indicated that students were their primary audience for online learning (versus teachers or other staff); a growth of 66 percent in just the past two years.

When asked about the specific advantages of implementing online learning for students, administrators talk about two main benefits. First, online learning allows administrators to address the diverse learning needs of particular student populations. Second, online learning provides a way for administrators to achieve specific desired instructional outcomes, including increasing student engagement in learning and raising their high school graduation rates. As noted in Table 3 and 4 below, the administrators' value proposition for online learning is significantly positioned to drive student success across a diverse student spectrum.

Table 3: Key Needs Addressed by Online Learning

Address needs of specific student populations	Administrators
Remediation	32%
Scheduling	30%
At-risk students	24%
Homebound students	16%
Dual enrollment / college credit	16%
Advanced Placement courses	12%
Gifted students	11%
After school	10%

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While administrators continue to view online learning as a critical tool for helping struggling students, it is important to note that online learning is increasingly seen as an effective achievement tool for all students.

Table 4: Key Outcomes as a Result of Online Learning

Facilitate key instructional outcomes	Administrators
Increase student engagement	39%
Increase graduation rates	34%
Increase personalization	13%
Fill hard-to-staff courses	12%
Provide a consistent curriculum	5%

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In general, administrators are very enthusiastic about the value of technology solutions to increase student engagement. It is noteworthy, however, that administrators are increasingly viewing online learning as an effective tool for meeting the challenge of improving high school graduation rates.

How administrators are providing online learning opportunities for their students is as diverse as their value statements. While a quarter of administrators noted that their preferred approach is a blended learning model, 22 percent are offering their students fully online courses taught either by a teacher from their district or from another district or organization. Signifying the growing interest in virtual schools, 9 percent of administrators now offer that option to their students as well. And most significantly, over one-fifth of administrators say that they are interested in further exploration of online learning.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM TODAY'S SUCCESSFUL ONLINE IMPLEMENTATIONS?

Increasingly, innovative education leaders all across the country are meeting the challenges of closing the achievement gap, increasing graduation rates, and serving diverse student needs by effectively leveraging online learning solutions. These innovative leaders are, in fact, creating new models for learning that look to technology as not just an add-on activity, but as a mission critical solution for improving student outcomes and enhancing overall school productivity. Some examples follow.

Case in Point: Better Assessments, Better Individualization, Better Test Results

Broward Virtual School in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, an elementary program that is part of K¹²'s multi-district Florida Virtual Program, is leveraging data to track student performance and inform teacher practice. According to Dr. Evelyn Nelson-Weaver, Elementary School Instructional Facilitator, "In seeking to serve a very diverse population, our school district has used technology as its premiere tool for closing the achievement gap. The addition of new software to quickly assess a student's achievement level has been an important step in allowing teachers to develop an individual learning plan for each student. The software makes a testing situation easier for teachers as the grading is done for them. However, the most vital information is the performance analysis completed by the software. We have found that using this assessment software does bring about an improvement in student learning as reflected in state assessment ratings." For example, Florida Virtual Program students in grades 3–6 scored, on average, from 12–22 percentage points better on Reading and Math "Proficiency" in 2010–11 FCAT scores, in comparison to all Florida students.

Case in Point: A Solution for Dropouts

The Youth Connection Charter School Virtual High School of Chicago's public schools is designed for young adults aged 18–21 who have dropped out, but completed some credits. The program is conveniently housed at Malcolm X Community College, where these young people can earn a full high school diploma in a flexible way. With online curriculum from K¹² and on-site teachers, students can choose any of three, 3-hour timeframes each day, to flexibly deal with work schedules and family life. They can also earn the right to take a laptop home and do school work anywhere with an Internet connection. Now in its third year, the program had a remarkable 2011 graduation rate of 95%. Head of School Early King notes, "Creative educational approaches ... are critical to re-engage students who have dropped out of school."

Case in Point: Serving Multiple Needs in a Rural District

In 2009, 4,400-student **East Valley School District of Spokane, Washington** launched EV Online Learning, in partnership with Aventa Learning by K¹². It has quickly become a popular option for students who might not otherwise have been able to attend school, complete their education, or take advanced courses. The program serves a wide spectrum: student athletes, the homebound, teen parents, former dropouts, even traditional homeschooled students who need more support as they enter higher grades. EV Online Learning is accessible to students either from their home computer or from two educational centers, each with approximately 20 Internet-enabled computers and a certified teacher onsite. Additionally, brick-and-mortar students have benefited from the flexibility to take advanced online classes or recover credits. "We have been able to educate more than 300 students through our EV Online Learning Program who otherwise might have dropped out," says Superintendent John Glenewinkel.



Case in Point: Early Intervention

The **Nevada School District in Missouri** was searching for an effective way to help failing students quickly rebuild their academics. The answer: early intervention via an online solution. The district's "Fresh Start" program is for freshmen who fail a core class in their first semester. During the second semester, these students typically come in after school for two hours, four days a week, and take an online credit recovery version of the first semester course. Their e-learning solution is delivered by the highly regarded *A+nyWhere Learning System*. Since the program began, fully 90% of students recover their credits and proceed to graduation. A program leader, Rick Fast, makes a critical point: "We have better success when students enter our programs earlier rather than later in their high school careers."

ENDING THOUGHTS

Technology has long held the promise of being a transformative agent of change, and in many aspects of everyday life, that promise has been fulfilled. We work, communicate, read, shop, play, and even vote in ways that are dramatically different than just 15 years ago. And yet, in the arena of education, the promise of leveraging technology to drive new levels of productivity and achievement is often just a vision rather than a reality in many school districts. However, as noted in this white paper, administrators are increasingly considering and implementing the unique capabilities of a wide range of technology solutions, with online learning most often identified as one of the key solutions to address their most perplexing challenges. As our nation struggles to meet the demands of an increasingly competitive global society and our schools are called upon to create the next generation of innovators, studying the experiences and insights of technology-oriented administrators will be crucial to realizing the long sought promise of technology to transform K–12 education.

The next white paper in this series is titled "Envisioning the Ultimate School," and it will shine a light on key trends in educational technology and report on what education leaders nationwide are planning, thinking, and doing to address challenges and transform the learning experience in the schools of the future.

About the Speak Up National Research Project and Speak Up 2010

Speak Up is a national initiative of Project Tomorrow®, the nation's leading education nonprofit organization dedicated to the empowerment of student voices in education. The Speak Up National Research Project annually polls K–12 students, parents, and educators about the role of technology for learning in and out of school and represents the largest collection of authentic, unfiltered stakeholder voice on digital learning. Since fall 2003, over 2.2 million K–12 students, parents, teachers, librarians, principals, school technology coordinators, and district administrators have shared their views and ideas through Speak Up. K–12 educators, higher education faculty, and business and policy leaders report they regularly use the Speak Up data to inform federal, state, and local education programs.

Demographics of reporting sample

In fall 2010, Project Tomorrow surveyed 294,399 K–12 students, 42,267 parents, 35,525 teachers, 2,125 librarians, 3,578 school/district administrators, and 1,391 technology leaders representing 6,541 public and private schools from 1,340 districts. Schools from urban (34 percent), suburban (29 percent), and rural (37 percent) communities were represented. Over one-half of the schools that participated in Speak Up 2010 were Title I eligible (an indicator of student population poverty), and 34 percent have more than 50 percent minority population attending. The Speak Up 2010 surveys were available online for input between October 18, 2010 and January 21, 2011.

The Speak Up surveys included foundation questions about the use of technology for learning, 21st-century skills, and schools of the future, as well as emerging technologies (online learning, mobile devices, and digital content), science instruction, and STEM career exploration. In addition, educators shared the challenges they encounter integrating technology into their schools and districts.



The data results are a convenience sample; schools and districts self-select to participate and facilitate the survey-taking process for their students, educators, and parents. Any school or school district in the United States is eligible to participate in Speak Up. In preparation for data analysis, the survey results are matched with school-level demographic information, such as Title I, school locale (urban, rural, and suburban), and ethnicity selected from the Core of Common Data compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics (<http://nces.ed.gov/>). The data is analyzed using standard cross-tab analysis and key variables (such as Internet and device access) are tested for statistical significance.

To minimize bias in the survey results, Project Tomorrow conducts significant outreach to ensure adequate regional, socio-economic, and racial/ethnic/cultural distribution. To participate in Speak Up, organizations register to participate, promote the survey to their constituents, and schedule time for their stakeholders to take the 15 to 20 minute online survey. Starting in February 2011, all participating organizations receive free, online access to their data with comparative national benchmarks. Staff from Project Tomorrow summarize, analyze, and verify the national data through a series of focus groups and interviews with representative groups of students, educators, and parents.

About Project Tomorrow

Project Tomorrow® is the nation's leading education nonprofit organization dedicated to the empowerment of students' voices in education. With 15 years of experience in the K–12 education sector, Project Tomorrow regularly provides consulting and research support about key trends in K–12 science, math, and technology education to school districts, government agencies, business, and higher education. For additional information, visit us at tomorrow.org. We can also be found at: twitter.com/SpeakUpEd or [Facebook.com/speakuped](https://facebook.com/speakuped)

About K¹²

For over a decade, K¹² has partnered with districts, schools, and agencies to strengthen the promise of American education. From our complete full-time online programs, to models that blend online curriculum with classroom instruction, to credit recovery and supplemental courses, we're helping schools in all 50 states close the achievement gap every day. Visit us online: K12.com/educators. Email: partnerships@K12.com. To speak with a representative: **866.912.8588**.

