Florida District Finds Technology Help from Unlikely Experts: Its Students

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Martin County School District has created the Students Supporting Schools (S3) program, which enhances classroom instruction by offering authentic IT experiences and customer support opportunities for high school juniors and seniors.

It is Monday morning and a teacher is attempting to input grades into the online grade book. However, she has lost connectivity and calls the media specialist to report the issue. In turn, the media specialist contacts Tanner, a technician. Tanner diagnoses the issue and determines it cannot be readily resolved without disrupting instructional time for the students are about to arrive. Tanner decides to get the teacher a laptop and then connect it via WiFi. Tanner states he will return, after the students have departed, to resolve the issue on the teacher's computer.

Although the actual situation just described is common in the life of a technician, it is a new way of optimizing resources in the Martin County School District (Stuart, Fla.) for Tanner is a student employed by the District.

Martin County School District prides itself on nurturing a vision where "learning has no boundaries." With the influx of technology into our lives, the vision takes on an even greater importance. Learning opportunities dreamed of just a few years ago are now a reality in a technology-equipped classroom. However, the negative externality is the additional burden and cost imposed upon a District's Instructional Technology (IT) department to service and maintain over 10,000 devices within a small District. IT departments must implement procedures and programs to support District assets without incurring significant costs.

Through a series of brainstorming sessions, District leadership attempted to develop the optimal plan that balanced the technological needs of the District within budgetary constraints and engaged students who are immersed with technology 24/7. Hence, a program by which students support schools was conceived. Specifically, the Students Supporting Schools (S3) program enhances classroom instruction by offering authentic IT experiences and customer support opportunities for high school juniors and seniors. Students are recruited and trained to augment the District's IT department by performing Level 1 technical support to the individual schools. As a result the District's Desktop Support Technicians (DSTs) are more efficiently employed to perform Level 2 and higher tasks.

Although the program is in its inaugural year, anecdotal feedback has been overwhelmingly positive:

Joan Gibbons, an elementary school principal: "Our student tech is doing a fabulous job--our teachers are appreciative of the quick response with support and our staff is happy. Jared has really fit in; he works very hard and has proven to be an excellent resource for our school!"

Rebecca Curchy, a school media specialist: "We love having Hayley! She is very professional and technically competent."

Katie Preston, Director of Education Technology (ET) for the Martin County School District states: "We are jumpstarting the careers of future IT professionals. Although schools do a good job of providing basic skills, there is no substitute for real-world experiences." With all student-enterprise, however, balancing academic requirements and real-world experiences can be challenging. We believe we have created the process for implementing such a program.

Student Qualifications

Like most employers, we envisioned hiring candidates that display cognitive, interpersonal, and technological skills. As we weighed each skill set, we agreed that although technical skills are important to the job, the ability to problem-solve, interact with staff, and having a sense of dependability would carry more weight; a "whiz kid" who lacked soft skills would be of no value to the program. Chris Gere, a network engineer for Duke Energy and a former Career and Technical Education (CTE) advisory board member, echoed this sentiment: "Students can always be taught the technical skills, if they have the ability to think and problem-solve. Additionally, my experiences have shown that employers value employees who can be counted on to contribute to the team and the corporation's bottom line."

As a result, we sought students who display both soft and technical skills, as well as those who possess a high-degree of integrity. Given students will have limited administrator access to the network, it is paramount highly responsible students are recruited and retained. Additionally, we sought students who displayed interpersonal, personal management, problem solving, and teamwork skills.

Although we have played up the soft skills, there is no doubt technical skills are important because students are expected to accomplish the following tasks as part of their job description:

•   Identify, install, configure, and upgrade computer devices and peripherals, following established basic procedures for system assembly and disassembly of field replaceable components.

•   Diagnose and troubleshoot common problems and system malfunctions of computer software, hardware, peripherals, and other office equipment.

•   Perform end user support and assistance by troubleshooting and diagnosing through telephone, e-mail, Internet, remote access, or direct contact.

•   Review, process, and closeout work order tickets.

Categories of Support

As we brainstormed how students would support schools we identified two categories:

• Entry-level 1 (E1) students are primarily juniors who augment Level 1 technical support at their assigned high schools. These students are enrolled in an executive internship course that is conducive to their schedules.

• Entry-level 2 (E2) students are primarily seniors who augment Level 1 technical support at an assigned elementary school. These students are enrolled in an executive internship course during the first block of the day.

Although both categories of students are recruited and trained in the same manner, E1 students are classified strictly as students. E2 students, on-the-other-hand, are both students and part-time school district employees.

Recruiting

We briefed high school and elementary principals on the program to garner support and briefed guidance counselors on the program requirements. We provided high school administrators with suggested narratives for morning announcements and student bulletins and displayed posters around the high school campuses, and published a brochure and Q&A document.

• Application: Basic demographic information and qualifications were requested. The only difference between the E1 and E2 applicants is the E2 applicant must acknowledge that he/she has reliable transportation to and from the elementary school the student is supporting.

• Reference: Each student submitted a reference from the principal. Although our recruitment, interview, and training process are designed to weed out students who are not the optimal candidates, we recognize some students may not work out after they are hired. For example, academically a student cannot be released from a course after the two-week enrollment window. However, from the job aspect of the program a student that subsequently failed to demonstrate the requisite skill set requires us to have an out. By personally recommending each student, the principal acknowledges that if a student is released from the program, then the principal is responsible for placing the student in another capacity at the high school.

• Job Description: Given the E2 students are part-time employees, the school board had to approve the job description, which was subsequently posted at the human resources employment opportunity web page. The E2 students are classified as PT 80 (regular, part-time) employees and are paid minimum wage ($7.93/hour). Although they are enrolled into the state's retirement system and are eligible for worker's compensation, they do not receive health or bargaining benefits, or reimbursement for mileage.

Interviews

After receiving all the applications, we scheduled the interview process. We realized that it would be timely and tedious, but it was imperative if we were to hire the best candidates. The interview team consisted of the program coordinator, the coordinator of technology, and two media specialists: one from the high school and one from the elementary school.

An interview packet was prepared for each of the interviewers. The packet included the candidate's application, reference, interview questions, and interview rubric.

One of our applicants, Symone, shared why she wanted to be in the program: "I have always had a passion for helping people and for using technology. So I knew I wanted to be part of this program the moment I heard about it. I not only help the teachers, but I help the students as well. Technology is becoming more and more needed in today's society and it is helping the younger generation students learn new material in their classrooms, so I know that when I fix a computer I am helping students get a better education. This really makes me happy."

Once students were interviewed and the packets were reviewed, the team sent a letter welcoming each student into the program. A letter was also sent to those students who were not accepted into the program. Counselors were also notified and required to enroll the students in the executive internship course.

Training

After we hired the candidates that had the needed soft and technological skills, the district planned an initial all-day workshop in the summer realizing ongoing professional development would be required on a monthly basis. The content of the initial workshop consisted of the following areas:

- District IT policies and procedures
- Hardware, software, and networking
- Customer service

Although a number of topics were covered during the workshop, a prevalent theme was: (a) always be professional; (b) realize you need not solve every problem by oneself after approximately 30 minutes without progress or resolution, even though tenacity and perseverance are important (c) document one's work. Additionally, students understood there would be no "second chances." Given students are provided limited administrator access; any student found violating legal or ethical policies shall be removed from the program and shall face disciplinary consequences per the MCSD Code of Conduct. Ongoing professional development is conducted every month to hone knowledge and skills, specifically addressing customer service, documentation, technological enhancements, and diagnosing and troubleshooting procedures. Although the program coordinator and the technology coordinator address issues on a continual basis, the professional development is a student-centric forum where students are asked to research a given topic to present to their peers.

Other resources are available to students including a webpage with administrative and technological information, and a mentor. Each student is assigned a desktop technician with whom he/she works.

The Desktop technician serves as the initial point-of-contact for problem escalation. Since the student is physically separated from senior-level team members, it is important the student has a comfortable channel for escalating issues or asking for assistance.

As previously stated, the schools have appreciated the additional support and ET also appreciates having the added staff. Priscilla McAdams, Desktop Support Technician and S3 Technical Facilitator, states: "I truly enjoy working with the student technicians, and I look forward to the monthly trainings. They are enthusiastic, willing to learn, and are innovative. They also have great customer service and technical skills, which makes them a valuable asset to ET. This is a wonderful program for them and the district. The phenomenal job they do will set the standard for new recruits year after year!"

Evaluation

As with any student enterprise, students still must receive a grade for the class. Therefore, each media specialist serves as the teacher-of-record who completes a weekly grade sheet for the student. Additionally, the media specialist conducts midterm and final exams, which consist of technical and customer service components.

Most important of is the self-reflection students experience for themselves. Tanner states: "Although I am a student at school, I am working and can't be hanging around with friends. There is a time to work and a time to socialize. I am also learning the importance of meeting deadlines and appreciate the real-world experiences. Lastly, I have learned the importance of technology in the business world, for it is not just a tool for playing games!"

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