



Walking the Tightrope

Technology and Innovation Coaches encourage teachers, students to approach learning in a whole new way

At A Glance

- To differentiate and individualize courses for students, the Stillwater district started flipping classes.
- Because teachers dislike boring lectures just as much as students, Stillwater flipped professional development time as well.
- Although it was initially challenging, teachers who flip have said they'd never return to the traditional model because they've experienced such great results.



Stillwater Area Public Schools is made up of 13 schools, with students ranging in age from pre-kindergarten to seniors in high school. Nestled just a few miles outside of St. Paul, Minn., Stillwater Area Public Schools are home to bright students, inspiring teachers and six amazing technology integration specialists helping the entire district keep up with the fast-paced world of education and technology.

Kristin Daniels and Wayne Feller are technology and innovation coaches for the nine elementary schools within the district. Their job is to regularly meet with teachers and support efforts to provide students with the education they need and deserve.

Teaching at the Speed of Light

Malinda Lansfeldt, principal of Anderson Elementary in the Stillwater district, noted that “four-walled classrooms don’t work anymore.” According to Malinda, learning today is 24/7, and it is important that educators provide parameters for students given their constant access to information.

Today’s students are constantly receiving and processing information. Learning takes place long after they’ve left the classroom for the day. What’s more, students don’t like sitting through lectures every day. And teachers don’t always like lecturing either.

Teachers only have so much time with students to answer their questions and make sure that they understand the content. While one student might blaze ahead in a lesson, another might quickly fall behind. But teachers must maintain the pace of the lesson or risk falling behind in the curriculum.

“The pace in the classroom is the same for every student, regardless of the way they learn,” said Wayne. “So, we thought, ‘What would it look like if we really differentiated that pacing?’ What would it look like if the classroom became more of a workshop where a teacher could work with each student?”

In addition to meeting the needs of the students, Kristin and Wayne also needed to figure out the best way to approach professional development for teachers. Similar to the pacing issues teachers faced in the classroom, Kristin and Wayne found that teachers learned at different paces during professional development.

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—Anna Wilcek,
Sixth grade teacher

About Stillwater

- Stillwater is known as the birth place of Minnesota and was home to the state’s first schoolhouse, built in 1848.
- Today the district is home to 13 schools.
- Stillwater Area High School has a 96% graduation rate.



Anna Wilcek leads her class

So Kristin and Wayne set out to find new ways to make the most of their time with teachers.

Flipping It All

Mike Dronen is the district coordinator for educational innovation and technology. His job is to look at the overall needs of the district and insure that the

technologies and tools faculty need to succeed are available.

“Our technology and innovation coaches are all former teachers,” said Mike. “So they understand pedagogy, they understand content—they understand the life and times of a modern teacher looking to find a better way to instruct, a better way to leverage their curriculum to help their kids grow and get ready for the future.”

With Mike’s support, Kristin and Wayne started showing teachers how to provide students with on-demand learning materials outside of class to increase one-on-one time with students during school hours. This method is more commonly referred to as the flipped classroom model.

Kristin and Wayne flipped professional development time as well, making time for each teacher in small groups or individually. Together, they created a library of videos for teachers to watch when they needed a quick refresher on how to use a program.

When it comes time to meet one-on-one with teachers, Kristin and Wayne record quick videos while they show teachers tips or tricks. Teachers now walk away with ideas on how to use technology in their classroom and a short video to watch if they ever needed a refresher.

“What’s neat about Stillwater is that as long as we’re getting kids to the level we expect from them, we’re able to get creative and take new approaches to their learning,” said Anna Wilcek, a sixth grade teacher at Anderson Elementary. “But teachers aren’t that different from sixth graders. We need to learn new things and see new opportunities, but we don’t want to sit through one generic presentation either.”

Results

Both teachers and students have found that the flipped model, while challenging, has completely changed the way they approach learning.

“Teachers in our district have said first, it was the most difficult year they had as a professional,” said Mike. “That is, learning how to flip their classroom, create videos and put them all together. But they also said something very powerful. They said it was the best year they ever had and they wouldn’t go back to any other way of doing their work.”



Elementary students from the Stillwater Area Public Schools

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Though the process of flipping the classroom and professional development takes time and energy, it is a long-term change. Videos and materials a teacher creates one year can be reused the next, fine-tuning parts here and there depending on how the lesson goes over with students.

“Teachers are on a tightrope and we’re the net below them,” said Kristin. “If they don’t know we’re there, they won’t step out on the rope. But once they get going, they forget the net is below them and they keep going.”

As the flipped model continues to grow and develop at Stillwater Area Public Schools, Kristin, Wayne, Mike and all of their colleagues have their work cut out for them. But by flipping one classroom, then six classrooms, then classrooms in all nine of their elementary schools, they are on the forefront of reshaping education as we know it today.

Flipped Professional Development Teacher Survey

Select results of an end-of-the-year survey given to teachers that tried the flipped professional development model are below. Participants were asked to compare flipped professional development with traditional professional development. Neutral responses (no preference for traditional vs. flipped) have been left out of this graph.

