

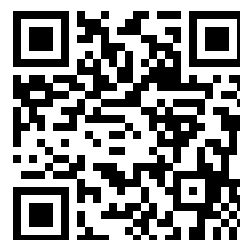
ADVANCING K12

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WE NEED YOU TO
FIGHT RANSOMWARE
IN K12 SCHOOLS

How Much Should ChatGPT
Know About Your District?

The Pathway to
Data Security

Welcome to the spring 2024 edition of Advancing K12.

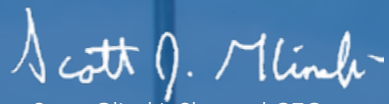
With all the changes that education sees each year, it can be easy and comfortable to stick to the status quo. But it's also much too easy to get stuck in the way it's "always been done." When things start feeling stale or outdated, we need to embrace the fact that change is not only inevitable, but also necessary.

The exciting thing about change is that it doesn't need to happen all at once—it can happen bit by bit, in impactful ways. In this issue of Advancing K12, you can find inspiration for changing the status quo with articles like "The Deep Work in Doing Nothing," "Rethinking the Traditional School Schedule," and our quiz, "Are You an Edtech Innovator?"

If you find that the articles inside resonate with you and your district, I encourage you to discover the latest on culture, leadership, achievement, and more at www.skyward.com/blog. Here, you can find deeper insights into the K12 conversation, and even more ways for your district to find a new status quo.

I hope the rest of your year continues with a renewed sense of excitement for whatever changes may come to your district, along with the confidence to face them head on.

All the best,



Scott Glinski, Skyward CEO



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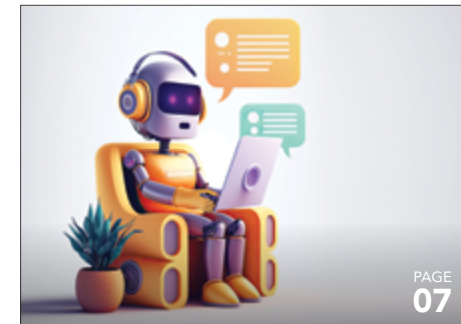
INSIDE THIS ISSUE

FEATURING: Pacelli Catholic Schools

Wisconsin District Upgrades SIS
with Trusted Hometown Provider



Rethinking the Traditional
School Schedule



How Much Should ChatGPT
Know About Your District?



The Deep Work in Doing Nothing



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Authenticity and Your
School Culture

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ABOUT SKYWARD

Since 1980, Skyward's SIS and ERP solutions have helped more than 2,500 school districts save time, connect with families, and empower success. By blending advanced technology guided by actual users with world-class support delivered with a personal touch, Skyward is the clear choice for K-12 leaders who want to spend less time on tasks and more time with students.

Should Districts Ban Apps?	09
The Pathway to Data Security	13
The Argument For K12 Automation	16
Aim Higher for STEM Goals	23
Quiz Time: Are you an Edtech Innovator?	26
Replenishing Empathy 10 Ways	30



Summertime Fraud Watch:
10 Ways to Stay Vigilant



RETHINKING THE TRADITIONAL SCHOOL SCHEDULE

The pressure on schools to be everything to everyone is real. School leaders are only human. Still, thinking outside the nine-month, 8 a.m.–3 p.m., M–F school scheduling prescription can have palpable impact.

School leaders are often looked up to as agents of change.

One big example of polarizing change is the school schedule, whether it's annual, daily, or some combination of the two. After all, what is more cherished than the end of the school year, looking forward to a sizzling summer break over the next three months?

For seasoned educators, those three months signal a future challenge of combating learning loss. Other challenges pop up when creating a daily schedule—is 45 minutes enough to explain, set up, complete, and review a biology experiment? Are kids falling asleep during morning announcements?

School leaders have begun to tackle these challenges in creative ways. But before we dive into their solutions, let's take a look at where the nine-month school year started in the first place.

THE ROOTS OF THE TRADITIONAL SCHOOL YEAR

The myth has been around for decades which describes a vague, agrarian schedule demanding students be free during summer to work on family farms. Of course, anyone from a farming community can tell you right away the fall is the busiest time of year. So why would school start up again in September just as the harvest is beginning?

The actual schedule of the pre-Civil War era sent children to school in the dead of winter and the middle of summer, when farm chores were at their lowest volume. Laborious spring and fall months were spent on the farm away from the classroom. City kids went to school year-round. As the population in urban areas grew, wealthy families escaped the sweltering heat by vacationing in the countryside, leaving classrooms half-populated by poorer families. Eventually something had to change. Given the extreme heat in classrooms, school districts moved to shift the school term to a shorter annual schedule, and the summer vacation was born. This was a relief to all, as the popular belief at the time also hypothesized kids' brains could be overused and injured, similar to muscles and exercise (this has since been proven incredibly false).

Now that the overheated classroom issue was solved, a new one emerged: Students lost knowledge during summer break, particularly those who could not afford summer enrichment such as camps, trips, and tutors.

MAKING ANNUAL SCHEDULE CHANGES

The advent of air conditioning and the immeasurable changes in social, technological, and vocational opportunities have essentially eliminated the need for a summer break. Why are we so devoted to this norm?

The structure is baked into our culture, finances, and livelihoods. It does also benefit kids—and especially teachers—to be able to take a break. Vacations happen when there's no need to worry about chronic absenteeism, families bond with each other, and the weather is right for spending time outside the classroom. There are some downsides—summer learning loss and teacher income among them—but for the most part, if it's not broken, we're not fixing it.

We also tend to think international students are required to attend more days of school than students in the United States, and in a way it's true. China and Japan average about 220 days per school year, compared to the US average of 180. If broken down by hourly requirements, however, the nations are all fairly similar. This could be a stepping stone for exploring more creative methods of getting the various educational hours requirements. In fact, 25 states have at least one district experimenting with

a four-day school week¹, which can attract new teachers and even save a small portion of the school budget.

Some have proposed eliminating summer break completely by adding longer breaks interspersed throughout the year. It sounds reasonable on paper and definitely solves the summer slide issue, but at the same time could place an additional burden on working families. It's a lot harder to find high-quality childcare for a couple weeks at a time than it is for a solid block of three months. Which leaves us with a couple options:

Tack on to the existing school year:

- Go longer into the summer, start earlier in the fall.
- Pro:** We establish a solid momentum for learning.
- Con:** Facilities and family structures may not permit this.

Attending school only in the summer and winter:

- Pro:** Our crops will be well-tended.
- Con:** Okay, all joking aside, opportunity to produce innovative schedules remains.

MAKING DAILY SCHEDULE CHANGES

Here's where a ton of variables are adding up to slowly break traditional classroom schedules. Schools are using a mixture of research and common sense to make decisions about when school should start and end. Leaders may take into consideration the effect of adequate sleep on teens' learning or the traditional workday as more parents enter the workforce.

School leaders are seeing great learning and culture results with flex mod scheduling. They've amped up student agency using arena scheduling. These creative scheduling methods are designed to maximize the courses and enrichment choices students have in school. They allow for free periods for kids to work on passion projects, catch up with homework using school technology, or attend counseling sessions. The breathing room extends to teachers as well. Instead of finding odd pockets of time or staying late, planning and prep periods are built in.

For families who need it, school leaders are also devising ways of providing resources and opportunities. Students who were previously facing chronic absenteeism have been provided accommodations to arrive before school to get to class on time. Other districts now offer a place for students and families to go for help, including drop-in centers with resources for homeless youth, laundry services, food pantries, and after-school care.

THE OUTCOME

The outcome of a thoughtful, not cookie cutter, schedule is an increase in community engagement. The school forms to fit the community's needs, not the other way around, in a symbiotic relationship.

Some tactics, such as flexible arrival or pickup times, free periods during school hours, and community resources including food pantries and laundry, are helpful in building equity among the student population. When students are able to remedy the challenges they face outside the classroom, which more fortunate peers do not, their odds of success despite them increase. ■



STORY BY

Erin Werra

To read more from Erin, visit www.skyward.com/blog

¹Walker, Tim. "After Moving to a Four-Day School Week, There May Be No Going Back." NEA, National Education Association, 2019.

How Much Should ChatGPT Know About Your District?



Discussion of the artificial intelligence language model ChatGPT seems impossible to escape these days.

Examples of AI making humans uncomfortable abound, especially considering children and schools. The massively unpopular Snapchat My AI chatbot prompted a barrage of single-star reviews and warnings to parents from local law enforcement. Schools are already plagued by cheating, which seems to be a chief argument against ChatGPT in classrooms (although its touch can be detected). Ultimately, artificial intelligence is the opposite of thought leadership. It's no wonder we feel the temptation to underestimate the impact of AI in school communication.

However, AI exists to be useful, like any other tool. It has the potential to help us do amazing things in school districts and beyond—evidenced by widely trusted edtech pioneer Sal Kahn’s foray into AI as a guide for students. Its insight may even prove useful to district leaders deciding how to handle AI in their schools.

When asked how a business should use ChatGPT, the AI did its job well and responded with thought-provoking answers.

I Am Not Human.

“Firstly, relying solely on a language model for communication can lead to a loss of human touch.”

The human touch the AI is referring to is both easy and hard to describe. The human touch feels like fallibility, humility, design thinking, mistakes, and imperfections. It is the spirit of collaboration. It is teamwork and dreamwork. It’s also the wisdom to understand the nuances of communication: the differences between fact, rhetoric, opinion, and belief. The wherewithal to understand that not everything we read is true, and the education to identify what is research-based, peer-reviewed, and fact-checked vs. what is simply written.

Using AI to detect AI is not flawless either. In fact, even a paid model seems slightly more prone to credit AI even when humans generate the content. (A free model was closer to 60% accurate.)¹

The definition of reality is set by humans. Artificial intelligence is by default derivative of all the knowledge we’ve already discovered. The new horizons of thinking will come from humans adding knowledge, not AI thinking up something new.

The lesson: Think of AI as a tool, nothing more.

I Am Not Secure.

“Secondly, the use of a language model raises concerns about data privacy and security.”

The robot tells on itself. *Listen.*

By design, the AI takes in the data humans provide, keeps it, and creates answers based on what it has learned. It’s not in the business of forgetting confidential information and will build upon what it has been taught.

It will not evaluate its answers for objective accuracy or for security.

The lesson: Never tell an AI confidential information.

I Am Inaccurate.

“Thirdly, while I am capable of generating a large amount of content, the quality and accuracy of that content may vary.”

Logic dictates what the model returns. You may have heard this described in computer science terms as garbage in, garbage out. The AI learns what people teach it, and if people teach it poorly it will produce increasingly twisted results. It can only learn what it’s taught.

Plenty of people can talk a lot and say nothing, and AI can too. It might not be fact, although we’re tempted to think of machines as infallibly accurate.

Except it’s not. Google’s AI chatbot’s inaugural demo inaccurately claimed the James Webb Space Telescope took the first pictures of exoplanets when it was actually the European Southern Observatory in 2004 (confirmed by NASA).² ChatGPT’s limitations may also prevent it from answering prompts accurately to human knowledge unless they’re phrased very specifically—one example inquires how many countries start with the letter V, and the

chatbot doubles down on its answer of zero (turns out Vietnam, Vatican City, and Venezuela don’t fit the definition of “country”—a rather pedantic distinction the average non-geographer would probably not make).

We already know how dangerous and isolating algorithms can be. To clarify, the AI itself is not inherently bad or evil. It is simply providing a culmination of what humans have taught that particular engine. In the hands of trustworthy and ethical experts, the potential is limitless and ostensibly good—but there are no guarantees. An AI is not going to temper bias; on the contrary, AI is already being used to radicalize.

The lesson: Always fact-check with real sources from humans.

I Am Not Going Away.

AI is not going anywhere. The question is, what knowledge are you going to provide it with?

A discerning reader may notice the ChatGPT language model is more human than we’d like to think it is: humans are notoriously inaccurate and pose the biggest threat to data security. So what’s the difference really, between AI and humans, in terms of the danger of concocting and spreading misinformation and mishandling private data? (Training humans can help, for one.)

At least in school districts, the major difference might just be the ability to value the truth, each other, and humanity in general. Tread lightly. ■



STORY BY

Erin Werra

To read more from Erin, visit www.skyward.com/blog

¹Shaikh, Eram. “How to Identify AI Written Content (Tested Methods).” DemandSage. 8 Nov. 2023

²Olson, Emily. “Google Shares Drop \$100 Billion after Its New AI Chatbot Makes a Mistake.” NPR, NPR, 9 Feb. 2023

BAN APPS?

SHOULD DISTRICTS BAN APPS?



Apps like TikTok, Instagram, and ChatGPT are making their way onto district devices, but is app restriction in schools a solution or a challenge? There are pros and cons to each side—which side are you on?

BAN THE APPS!

Enhance Security: Protect against data breaches and cybersecurity risks, ensuring a safe digital environment.

Cultivate Focused Learning: Minimize classroom distractions, empowering students to stay engaged and focused.

Stimulate Critical Thinking: Encourage independent thought and problem-solving beyond technology reliance.

KEEP THE APPS!


Take a Brain Break: Apps can provide short, productive breaks, fostering rejuvenation and boosting overall productivity.

Enable Innovative Learning: Apps offer interactive tools and platforms that enhance creativity and engagement in the learning process.

Adapt to Diverse Learning Styles: Utilize a variety of apps to cater to different learning preferences and abilities, creating a personalized learning experience.

For the full article, visit skyward.com/blog and search “Should School Districts Ban Apps.”

FF ...relying solely on a language model for communication can lead to a loss of human touch.

A large, glowing lightbulb is suspended in the sky, with a person lying in a basket inside it. The lightbulb is the central focus, with a warm glow emanating from its filament. The background is a vast, blue sky with soft, white clouds and a crescent moon on the left. Below the sky is a calm, blue ocean. The overall scene is surreal and dreamlike, symbolizing ideas and innovation.

The Deep Work in Doing Nothing

In the educational sphere, it is vitally important to not settle for good enough. That said, new methods, frameworks, and programs come around every year, and some of those systems promise to combat everything from low test scores, low engagement, and overall school performance. It can be so tempting to adopt them out of the gate in the hope they are everything they claim to be.

Too Much of Too Much

It's counterintuitive to add more and more to the educational plate just to try to move the needle. It's like the difference between having an ice cream cone and trying to eat the whole carton—too much can leave you too overwhelmed to move, let alone to think about having more ice cream.

When we introduce more initiatives to add to the curriculum or implement inside the classroom, it's like adding more scoops to that ice cream cone. Some people might be able to handle the extra, but a lot of people look at that work and see too much being placed in their hands, especially since their hands are already full.

So what's the next best strategy? Do nothing.

The Illusion of "Nothing"

To be fair, "doing nothing" is a misnomer. To borrow a quote from *The Little Prince* by Antoine de St. Exupéry, "What is essential is invisible to the eye," and the deep, essential work happening in the doing-nothing space in education is largely invisible to an outside observer.

FILLING UP THE MENTAL TANK

On the most immediate level, if someone looks like they are doing nothing because they're sitting at their desk and staring off into space, that time is not being wasted. Research shows that when humans daydream, there is a surge in brain activity¹, particularly for creativity and for making unconscious connections between information and ideas that have come up during the day. It gives the brain time to make sense of the day's data input and package it up as recognizable output, making visible work time more productive in the long run.

But if staring off into space can increase creativity and innovation, couldn't that extra boost help the staff meet strategic objectives or to retool weaknesses in the curriculum? Answer: possibly. Odds are, though, that any extra brain power is going to be used for one of the most invisible, yet critically essential parts of education: emotional labor and self-regulation.

THE OPPOSITE OF NOTHING

On a wider scale, if exam scores fluctuate, this does not automatically indicate a stagnation of teaching practices or dedication to learning. It may indicate that there are base-level needs not being met for many children, which staff members are trying to compensate for during the school day (not to mention how many needs the adults are trying to meet for themselves as well.)

When looking at the framework of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, basic bodily, safety, and emotional needs need to be met in a child in order for them to be academically successful. Millions of children in the US, however, don't have the guarantee of food, shelter, and adequate clothing, let alone a safe and supportive home.

With adverse childhood experiences increasing for students, moving the needle on SEL is the best way to build a learning foundation over the long term.

Speaking of which...

Let the Work do the Work, and Give it Time

Counterintuitive as it may seem, building a learning foundation over the long term can look and feel a lot like nothing is being done. If one initiative can take months or years to see measurable results, leaders cannot cave to impatience two months in and change course. Time and patience are key to letting the work do the work.

At the front, a limited scope of projects or objectives allows the district to see what baseline of achievement the students are starting from, giving the clearest picture of where "square one" truly is. It also allows the faculty to dedicate their energy and focus to one goal, rather than trying to juggle the demands of multiple initiatives (saving a lot of headaches and burnout).

At the back end, if educational changes are implemented and tracked like a scientific longitudinal study, then the end results can be analyzed for a few specific variables which can then be accepted or rejected as effective practices. If too many practices and theories are loaded on, it's only as effective as throwing everything at the wall and seeing what sticks (which is bits and pieces of everything, aka, a giant mess).

Trust isn't Nothing

The best "something" a district can do for their staff and schools is have trust. Lean on their expertise, and extend that trust to the observations and insights they gather on the ground every day. When the time comes for something new to start, they will be the best resource to make it happen and do it well.

Leaders needn't fear losing ground or settling for "good enough." The deep work of doing nothing enriches the business of teaching and learning in ways we can't possibly anticipate, bringing opportunities we can't calculate until they unfold naturally, calmly, while we are "doing nothing." ■



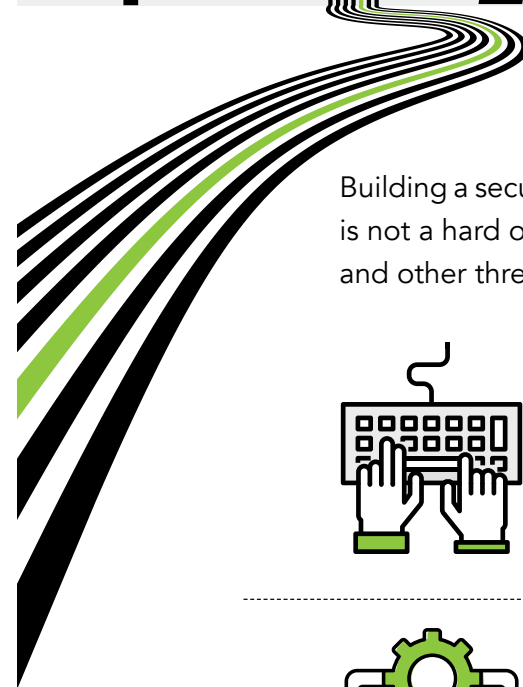
STORY BY

Lindsey Canny

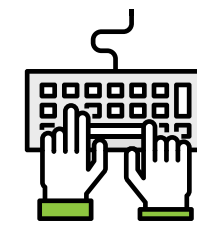
To read more from Lindsey, visit www.skyward.com/blog

¹Caruso, Catherine. "What Happens in the Brain While Daydreaming?" Harvard Medical School, Harvard University. 13 Dec. 2023.

THE PATHWAY TO DATA SECURITY

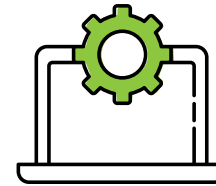


Building a security strategy is crucial to protecting school data, but the path to data security is not a hard one! Take these five simple steps to defend your district against ransomware and other threats:



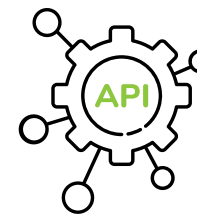
REDUCE MANUAL DATA ENTRY

Manual data entry weakens security. Application programming interfaces (APIs) allow direct system communication, eliminating data breaches common with manual access.



CHOOSE A DATA STANDARD

Data standards—like Ed-Fi—allow systems to communicate in the same digital language, reducing security gaps from inconsistent transfer protocols.



CHOOSE INTEROPERABLE EDTECH

Tech that can connect seamlessly—either on their own or with the help of an API—will require less human intervention, and fewer chances for a ransomware attack.



MAKE WORKLOADS EASIER

When staff doesn't have the burden of data management weighing them down, they can spend more time connecting with students and doing the work that matters most to them.



BUILD A BETTER SECURITY STRATEGY

When it comes to data security, more is better. Have multiple data backups in secure, offsite locations, and invest in all-staff training to be the last line of defense for your district.

We Need You to Fight Ransomware in K12 Schools

No one wants to imagine the headlines and aftermath of a ransomware attack. However, preparing for such an event is crucial to escaping with your data intact and without shelling out ransom to attackers. More than 56% of K12 education organizations suffered ransomware attacks between 2020 and 2021—with an average cost of over \$265,000.¹

To help strategize, break planning into different stages of a hypothetical attack. Here's how to prepare to weather the storm.

BEFORE AN ATTACK HAPPENS

No one ever regretted implementing best practices. If you don't yet have an incident response plan, create one now.

Implement the principle of least privilege. If someone does manage to infiltrate systems, their credentials ideally won't be sufficient to reach valuable data.

Endpoint detection and response (EDR) is way more than simply antivirus software! Monitoring the health and security of each endpoint (read: a device connected to the network) zeroes in on the nooks and crannies criminals hope you neglect.

Keep up with software patches—it makes a difference and protects your network from exposure. In 2022, over 22,500 new common IT vulnerabilities and exposures were discovered—a new record.²

Data backup follows the 3-2-1 rule: 3 copies, 2 different media formats, 1 offsite. Then test it!

82% of breaches in 2021 involved the human element. 35% involved the use of email.¹ You can expect 7–10% of **real phishing emails** to filter through your blocking systems, so practice matters. (Did you know some are authored by your own students?)

Make security training a regular routine of life. Include incentives for completing training, such as digital badges, leaderboards, and certificates for completing training well. With regular practice using KnowBe4 training programs, districts have gone from a 32% fail rate on phishing tests to a 4% fail rate.³ Plus, some cyber insurance programs require proof of training and data backup.

DURING A RANSOMWARE ATTACK

FRONT END USERS:

It's important users know what to do before an attack actually happens.

Number 1: Contact IT immediately.

Most folks' roles will stop after that, but they still need to be told what to do in the meantime and how to communicate with their own stakeholders and students. To that end, make community-facing folks (admin assistants, teachers, etc.) aware of the situation and of the unified messaging from the PR team.

BACK END USERS:

Enact your district's incident response plan.

Disconnect and isolate infected systems but don't turn devices off.

Locate patient zero to identify the source and type of breach.

Contact your cyber insurance, authorities, response teams, and public relations.

Meet with vendors, work together, stay informed, and evaluate options for moving forward.

Record facts and file them for retrospective later.

AFTER A RANSOMWARE ATTACK

The bad guys leave back doors, so never re-use compromised systems. Instead rebuild them after verifying it's safe to do so.

Enlist the help of your vendors (like Skyward). There can be nuances that are critical to getting your systems back on track.

Learn from it: How did attackers get through? Re-evaluate policies and make changes to block copycat and repeat attacks.

Make retrospective questions standard and include vendor notes and feedback. Keep these facts and findings organized and confidential but allow transparency to stakeholder teams. Knowledge is power and data is private.

Be prepared! Create an incident response plan tailored to your district. Share and practice the plan with your stakeholders. By taking the time to prepare, you'll eliminate headaches in the future. While we can't prevent bad actors from targeting school data, we can definitely prepare as well as possible. ■



STORY BY

Mike Bianco

To read more from Mike, visit www.skyward.com/blog

¹"The State of Ransomware 2022." Sophos, Ltd., May 2023.

²Petrosyan, Ani. "Number of Common Vulnerabilities and Exposures 2024." Statista, 9 Jan. 2023.

³"Phishing by Industry Benchmarking Report" KnowBe4, Inc. Jun. 2022

WHAT DO I DO IF I SUSPECT A PHISHING EMAIL OR RANSOMWARE

Decide the course of action ahead of time—for almost all users this will be to contact internal IT and follow their instructions.

EMPOWER EVERYONE TO BE A CYBER HERO.



THE ARGUMENT FOR K12 AUTOMATION

When looking at repetitive, resource-heavy tasks in your district, use the checklists below to determine whether process automation might be the right move:

CAN THIS K12 PROCESS BE AUTOMATED?

Go through the checklist below to evaluate whether a process is right for automation. If you circle mostly "yes," you'll be on the right track to streamlining your processes through your SIS or ERP systems:

Is it a recurring process?	YES	NO
Does it recur in essentially the same manner each time?	YES	NO
Is it transactional?	YES	NO
Does it require multiple entries of the same data?	YES	NO
Does it cross departments?	YES	NO
Does it generate significant amounts of paper that have to be collected and filed?	YES	NO
Are you already capturing the data through the ERP platform, the student information system, or some other system?	YES	NO
Is it a drain on resources?	YES	NO

SHOULD THIS K12 PROCESS BE AUTOMATED?

Go through the checklist below to evaluate whether a process should remain hands-on. If you circle mostly "yes" in this section, consider dropping automation for more human involvement to keep your district safe, secure, and more people-centered:

Does automation pose a significant risk of fraud, error, or security breaches?	YES	NO
Does it directly involve kids?	YES	NO
Is it built around creating or fostering personal relationships?	YES	NO
Does it improve organizational culture?	YES	NO
Is it a source of significant pride or accomplishment for the people involved?	YES	NO



From left to right: Kristin Plaski, Jeff Bushman, Duncan Marten.

Pacelli Catholic Schools implements Skyward Qmlativ to further modernize their student data and security.

Despite their size, small districts' needs from their SIS are no different than their larger counterparts. Lower enrollment levels and employee counts don't discredit the need for a reliable, accurate, and modernized system.

For Pacelli Catholic Schools, the need to update their SIS led them no further than their trusted software provider of over 20 years, who happens to be headquartered in the same central Wisconsin town. Between continuous updates to their SIS and thriving partnership that goes beyond the software, Pacelli proves that small districts can do big things.

We sat down with three of Pacelli's staff—Jeff Bushman, director of technology, Duncan Marten, student administrative services assistant, and Kristin Plaski, education technology specialist—who were pivotal in Pacelli's successful migration to Skyward's Qmlativ Education Management system for their SIS.

SPOTLIGHT STORY

Wisconsin District Upgrades SIS with Trusted Hometown Provider

Grounded in history

Pacelli and Skyward's relationship goes back to the turn of the century. They began using Skyward with Point and Click (PAC) in 2005. A few years later, the district migrated to SMS 2.0, and finally migrated to Qmlativ for their SIS in 2023. In case you lost count, this means that the SMS 2.0-to-Qmlativ migration was Pacelli's second major migration with Skyward.

Skyward and Pacelli's tried-and-true history, and the familiarity that comes with sharing the same town, has led to extended collaborations.

"By being in each other's backyards, we have had many opportunities to call each other up for partnerships and sponsorships," said Bushman. "For example, Skyward has helped us with kids' coding events in the past, and helped us get our computer science program up and running."

Many Skyward employees have also attended Pacelli in their formative years and have kids that attend now, adding another level to the connection between the organizations. Most notably, Jim King (Skyward founder, former CEO, and former chairman of the board) and the late Cliff King (former Skyward president and CEO) were awarded with the district's Distinguished Alumni Award in 2022.

This mutual trust and ongoing relationship has served as the backbone for continuous improvements in Pacelli's SIS software.

Time for change

Student information systems are designed to hold a lot of information, so keeping them up to date is essential.

Between Bushman, Marten, and Plaski, the three of them use almost every component of their SIS: Bushman also teaches a class at the high school, Marten plays a hand in scheduling, and Plaski has background in the financial side.

"Though our roles vary, we all agreed that our SIS needed a revamp after being on SMS 2.0 for awhile," said Marten. When looking for an upgrade, Pacelli looked no further than Skyward's latest solution: Qmlativ.

"We loved the modern look, especially with the tiles that Qmlativ offers," said Plaski.

"Easier navigations and report building were big improvements that I saw and excited me," said Marten. "I liked the idea of being able to open up a module and see configuration reports that I regularly need to find quicker than I could with SMS 2.0."

After deciding on Qmlativ, Pacelli was ready to quickly make the migration.

Preparing for success

Pacelli's migration was fast—it only took about six months. The main contributor was that the district opted for a shorter training plan, completing it in approximately four months. Pacelli's success is attributed to following the outlined training plan, garnering buy-in from their staff, and maintaining a positive attitude towards the change.

"We knew that change was inevitable, so we thought 'why wait?'" said Bushman.

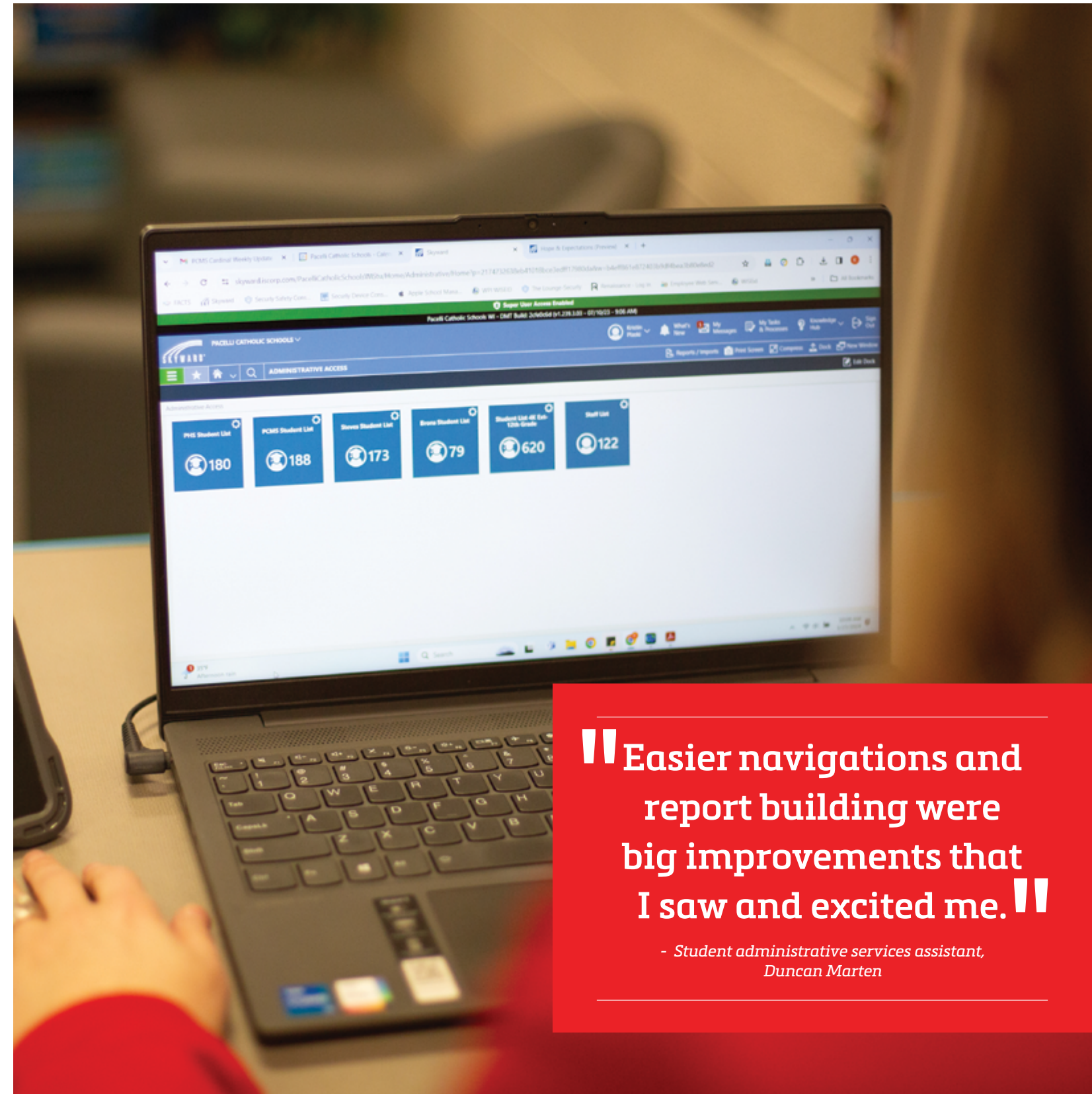
With this quick timeline, Pacelli knew that staff members might be hesitant to embrace the change. To help keep staff involved and invested, Pacelli kept frequent communication on the process and their required tasks.

"There were certain groups and people who had to do their required tasks earlier than others, so we were sure to give them times, access to training videos, and urge them to use the training database," said Bushman.

"With weekly updates, we first most wanted our staff to know that we were supporting them as much as possible, while also making the migration as user friendly as we could," said Marten.

Pacelli also saw the migration as an opportunity to organize their data, such as deleting old accounts, aiding in their fast migration. Once Qmlativ was ready at Pacelli, the district's support to their staff didn't stop.

"In order to help staff not feel abandoned, Duncan and I held sandbox workshops where they could come in and get help," said Plaski. "Luckily a lot of tabs



“Easier navigations and report building were big improvements that I saw and excited me.”

*- Student administrative services assistant,
Duncan Marten*

from SMS 2.0 are in the same spot as Qmlativ, which I think helped give users a basic familiarity in a world of brand new.”

Apart from communication, data cleanup, and workshops, Pacelli found Skyward’s support essential in their successful Qmlativ implementation.

“We had a fantastic team at Skyward working with us,” said Plaski. “Any time we had something come up, I would reach out to our project manager and hear back from them within the hour. If our designated contact didn’t know the answer to one of our questions, she would look into it and find the answer for us. She never left us hanging, and we appreciate that immensely.”

Ultimately, Pacelli is happy with their decision to migrate and has seen many improvements already.

Bountiful benefits

Since implementing Qmlativ, Pacelli has found some of their favorite new features. Most noteworthy? Enhanced security.

“We noticed that a lot of staff had access to things in the system that they shouldn’t, so it’s nice to have better control of that now,” said Plaski. “I also love the user impersonation feature, which saves me a lot of time going to that employee to see things from their end. Now, I can see exactly what they see and troubleshoot why they are having troubles.”

Although Pacelli has successfully migrated to Qmlativ, they are still continuously making updates as needed with continued support from Skyward.

“I still tweak around with a lot of the reports,” said Plaski. “If I can’t figure it out myself, Skyward is always quick to respond on my support tickets with the answer.”

“For questions that I have, I have found the Professional Development Center (PDC) a great resource to find answers to questions that pop up throughout the year,” said Bushman.

Due to Pacelli’s success, they look forward to continuing to update their system, and help others to do the same.



What’s next?

Pacelli has already had another district reach out, curious about their experience with Qmlativ; the advice they gave that district rings true for others interested in using the latest Skyward solutions:

“The number one thing I would suggest is to have a great team,” said Bushman. “We’re lucky enough to have Duncan, Kristin, and others here that can dedicate themselves to Skyward, because it is such a big transition and there are a lot of components to it. The other thing I would stress is the importance of communication to stakeholders. Students, staff, families...anyone that’s going to be involved in the transition will want and need updates on what is happening.”

In the future, Pacelli is looking forward to diving further into how it can improve processes in the district.

“As we use the system more, we will know more of what we want to implement,” said Bushman. “One thing we look forward to is introducing online forms more, such as for field trips and with returning registration for students who are already enrolled.”

Skyward and Pacelli look forward to many more years of parallel growth and continuing to enrich the Stevens Point community. ■



STORY BY

Cassidy Downs

To read more from Cassidy, visit www.skyward.com/blog

AIM HIGHER FOR STEM GOALS

Elevating your district’s STEM program doesn’t require a budget or curriculum overhaul. Here are four ways to open STEM accessibility and boost interest across the board:

- 1 Demystify STEM to appeal to varied interests**
Paint a more detailed picture of what happens day-to-day in common STEM jobs, and shine a light on little-known career options that fall under the STEM umbrella.
- 2 Foster diversity and inclusion**
Open up access to STEM by challenging any biased mindsets and environments that deter inclusivity. Seek input directly from students and staff, and highlight diverse role models in the STEM community.
- 3 Don’t overengineer STEM education**
Keep costs low and student interest high with STEM lessons and projects that don’t require expensive materials. Districts can also partner with one another to share resources and split costs.
- 4 Bridge the humanities gap**
Not everyone has a natural aptitude or interest in STEM. Balance out the technical nature of STEM by integrating arts skills, creativity, and student choice.

For the full article, visit skyward.com/blog and search “Aim Higher for STEM Goals.”

The Ups and Downs of Girls in STEM

Are girls really underrepresented in STEM?

Yes.

In the US, the workforce is pretty evenly split between men and women, but in STEM fields men make up 73% of the workforce to women's 27%.¹ Why?

It's easy to want to find a well-meaning solution for this disparity, or even to brush it off as unimportant. But achieving a gender parity in STEM fields (particularly computer science, engineering, and programming, among others) isn't just a feel-good social justice crusade. The number of open tech jobs far outpaces the population of traditionally qualified candidates—data projections have pointed to a global shortage of 85 million tech workers by 2030.² It's not a matter of encouraging girls to pursue STEM programs just for the heck of it, to prove they can and earn a good paycheck—it's a matter of graduating enough highly skilled workers to meet economic demand.

Still, the imbalanced statistics for the genders in STEM are damning. What can K12 schools do to play their part in preparing the next generation for a talent-hungry workforce?

Let students lead

Anna Auer, a junior at Pacelli High School in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, is pursuing her own career in STEM (currently eyeing a pre-med, clinical lab science path). She wasn't always on track toward a STEM career—on the contrary, she's a relative newcomer. She described the way a bio teacher's style helped lead her to a love of science.

"We picked the way we learned," she explained. "It was much more our pace, and hands on—I really like learning that way." Auer describes how at the high school level, she and her peers were given the opportunity to choose their classes. She chose science-based classes and loved them.

Ditch the gendered language

One suggestion experts offer companies hiring for STEM roles is to be extra deliberate about the pronouns, descriptions, visuals, and other messages they use in hiring. One of the main objections cited in the theories of why girls are steered away from STEM is the overwhelming male-dominated culture (which recent census statistics happen to back up, as discussed earlier). Not only do recruitment pros run the risk of having applicants self-select out, but they may also give the wrong idea that they prefer male candidates for whatever reason.

It's the same concept in school. Instead, keeping language neutral in the classroom, descriptions of courses, and other communication doesn't ever leave out boys from

the invitation; it simply ensures that girls and nonbinary students are equally welcome.

"I think growing up there's stereotypical girls' jobs and guys' jobs. In elementary school, you see scientists as a boy. It's very stereotypical and it's not true," Auer said of her experience with gender imbalance in STEM fields. "There's a lot of women in STEM. It's powerful."

Challenge implicit biases

Explicit bias is easier to combat, but its insidious sibling implicit bias is much, much more difficult to spot—in fact, it's imperative that the most open-minded of us must realize our own implicit bias steers our decision-making more than we'd care to admit. Since its debut on the scene in 1995, researchers have worked hard to figure out what drives implicit bias (things like our natural instincts for pattern recognition, our penchant for shortcuts, and

societal cues), but one thing is very clear: these biases are solidified at an alarmingly young age and applied to the very young as well.

The American Association of University Women (AAUW), which originated its research in a paper disproving the myth that college impairs a woman's fertility (seriously) offers an alarming observation that parents and teachers often underestimate girls' math abilities as early as preschool.³ Speaking of math anxiety, AAUW also mentions another implicit bias in math teachers, who assume girls need to work harder to achieve the same level as boys, grade them harder, and pass on the myth of the "math brain": the belief that there is a biological, cognitive difference between males and females.

Auer agreed that shifting into STEM was a little different than other courses in previous grades. "Some material is challenging—different ways of thinking, different labs. Not only the material but the ways of learning." Still, once she understood, she appreciated the challenge.

It's easy to get bogged down in the gloomier, unbalanced side of women in STEM. Really, really easy. Slowly and steadily, women are gaining—from 8% of US STEM workers in 1970 to 27% in 2019 (while the total of women in the workforce went from 38% to 48%).¹ But Anna Auer's experience has only been encouraging, and she recommends STEM to girls anywhere.

"When I got to high school, everyone was taking chemistry, so I did too. I thought it would be so hard and awful. It was hard, but I really liked it!" ■



STORY BY

Erin Werra

To read more from Erin, visit www.skyward.com/blog

¹Martinez, A., & Christnacht, C. (2021, October 8). Women are nearly half of U.S. workforce but only 27% of STEM workers. *Census.gov*.

²Nicolaci Da Costa, P. (2019, March 1). The global competition for technology talent – IMF finance & development magazine: March 2019. IMF.

³"The Stem Gap: Women and Girls in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics." AAUW, American Association of University Women, 29

QUIZ TIME

are you an edtech innovator?

Do you have what it takes to innovate when it comes to edtech in your district?

Do new devices, apps, and programs feel like a galaxy of opportunities, or do they look like alien artifacts?

Take this quiz to find out whether you boldly go through the edtech universe or if you're still stuck on the ground.

A.

The district is looking to purchase new classroom tech to install in each building. How much teacher input goes into this decision?

1. Very little.

There are too many opinions and too many moving parts to edtech acquisition to spend time crowdsourcing each decision.

2. Some.

There may be an initial survey or a call for suggestions, but analyzing choices and selecting the tech is up to admin.

3. A lot.

There's a group of trusted staff we can turn to for help with tech evaluation and decision-making, but it's ultimately up to admin for the final say.

4. As much as possible.

From brainstorming, requesting, and all the way up through implementation, staff members are integral to each step of tech acquisition.

B.

You walk through your district's high school and see both kids and staff inside the classrooms using their phones. Your first reaction is:

1. It's unacceptable.

They have no place in the learning environment and should be put in a locker or desk until the end of the day, or left at home.

2. I don't like it.

They should rarely be used, and only for specific, teacher-guided activities. Otherwise, they should be strictly out of sight.

3. I don't mind.

Personal devices are great for supplementing or supporting lessons, but casual use should be monitored or discouraged.

4. That's a-okay!

Personal devices are excellent tools to help facilitate education and should be leveraged as much as possible as a resource. Plus, a little phone use during free time isn't going to hurt anyone.

C.

AI Chatbots are sweeping the nation (and your school district). Thoughts??

1. No way.

We need to nip this in the bud and block generative AIs on all district devices. These programs are notoriously used for cheating and plagiarism, and they aren't secure.

2. I'm wary of AI bots.

The district should limit its use until there is a well-outlined policy or plan for use in place.

3. AI bots aren't going away.

It's best to get ahead of them and figure out a plan to integrate AI into learning in safe and effective ways.

4. I am 100% on board.

Leveraging AI bots can aid the learning process. The future is now, and security, prompt-writing, researching, and fact-checking are all things the students should learn about AI chats. Let's get chatting!

D.

Edtech always moves at lightning pace, and your district has the opportunity to be part of a pilot program for a virtual reality learning experience. Are you in?

1. No, thank you.

We don't want to get caught up in any flash-in-the-pan pseudoscience that can distract students and staff from already-proven methods of learning.

2. I'll put it under review.

It sounds like it could be a fun technology, but I don't want to jump the gun before getting more information.

3. It sounds exciting.

I can see the value in being on the forefront of edtech innovation, and it would be a good test run for tech like this.

4. Let's go!

I want our district to always be ahead of the game, and if this can put our schools on the leading edge of edtech, I say "sign us up!"

E.

With all of this technology, how confident are you in your staff's, students', and parents' digital citizenship and security knowledge?

1. Is that a big deal?

Everyone knows how to use the internet safely these days, right? Right??

2. Somewhat confident.

We have some proper use guidelines posted and have a few lessons about it in the curriculum.

3. Confident.

We have strong usage policies across the district with parental contact included, and we make it a priority to include tech literacy throughout our curriculum.

4. Extremely confident.

Signed usage agreements, zero-tolerance cyberbullying policies, media literacy curriculum in all subject areas, parent tech training—you name it, we have it!

F.

Finish this sentence: Trying to get all of our programs and software to work seamlessly with one another is...

1. Like pulling teeth.

Everything has its own process and if we want to transfer data or compile it for reporting we usually have to do it manually.

2. Challenging.

There's basic interoperability, but it's clunky and we usually have to fall back on doing things ourselves.

3. Easy enough.

We know the importance of interoperability and keep it in mind when making edtech decisions. Otherwise, we have a few go-to fixes for anything that doesn't immediately transfer.

4. A breeze.

Interoperability is one of the first things we ensure with new district tech, and if there's a program that doesn't fit in with the others, we're wary of adopting it in the first place.

Mostly 1s:

You're a technology comet—it's really rare to get you to come around to anything new, and so you wind up drifting in the cold. Find out what tech is helping other districts thrive, get staff and student input, and just say yes.

Mostly 2s:

You're a technology nebula. You may want to get your district started with edtech innovation, but sometimes it's difficult to get everything to come together long enough to become a star. Keep working to step outside of that comfort zone so your district can shine as bright as possible!

Mostly 3s:

You're a technology superstar! You know how to maintain the right balance of open-mindedness and curiosity when it comes to edtech innovation, but you also know the value of a little caution and care. Keep shining, rockstar!

Mostly 4s:

You're a technology supernova. It's refreshing to see a district so fired up to be on the leading edge of new-and-now edtech, but it's important to keep a critical eye on any brand-new tech development so you don't get burned by being overeager.



Authenticity

and Your School Culture

Quick: Does your team know the real you?

Odds are the answer is a little bit murky. As a school leader, reputation is important—very few jobs lead to as intense personal scrutiny as educators entrusted with teaching children. So it's understandable that the answer to the above icebreaker question is actually no.

And you're not alone.

A quick Google search ("Can you be yourself at work?") yields about four billion results affirming and denying employees' abilities to be themselves, including a slew of how-to articles to help you get used to the idea. Safe to say comfortable authenticity might just be a culture key to teacher retention. Let's explore

how to create psychological safety conducive to helping authentic selves emerge in your teams.

Lead by example

Everyone is responsible for creating a strong culture. However, one of the quickest ways to invest in culture is to allow a trickle-down from leadership. Don't get cold feet if you're not the type that runs for an open spotlight. Authenticity doesn't automatically equal extroversion or showmanship. Rather, the process of showing your authentic self is way more introspective than that.

Authenticity blends honesty and openness with self-esteem. Authenticity is so important to creating a sense of belonging because it encourages people to not only accept others as they truly

are but to gain comfort with their own true selves.

Don't hide your shortcomings

Vulnerability is part of showing up as your authentic self. The phrase "warts and all" springs to mind, but keep in mind we're talking about authenticity in a professional sense. One way to display vulnerability without blurring any lines is to showcase your failures with the same zeal as your success (well—almost the same).

Model real discussions

No one can make everyone happy all the time. Still, investing in communication skill development makes tackling difficult challenges together a little smoother. There will always be a fair number of challenges in K12 day-to-day operations. Embracing everyone's

authentic selves makes it a little easier to work as a unified team. Challenges morph into opportunities when you can work on them together.

Make a leadership shift in PD

Ideally, all this preparation has inspired your team to begin showing up authentically. Now it's their turn to walk the walk. There are a million ways an empowered educator can show up authentically. From classroom design to choosing authentic texts for budding readers, giving educators a say in their professional development can help create a place for authentic professionals to shine.

Model boundaries

Authenticity isn't the first instinct for everyone. Some folks really

prefer to craft personas for different settings, and when encouraged to embrace authenticity they might avoid or overcorrect to compensate for this perceived mismatch. One thing about asking for authenticity is you never know what you're gonna get in return. In fact, it pretty much guarantees you'll be surprised, hopefully in a pleasant way.

This advice for employees from Harvard Business Review¹ draws the distinction between true vulnerability and oversharing. "It's possible to 'be yourself' at work even if you don't publicly disclose every single thought or emotion to your team members." Since in school districts our team members often include children, this advice is doubly important. Authentic can be professional, and vice versa.

A great way to ease this tension is to be clear that you're not pushing anyone to act in a way that makes them uncomfortable. Assure your team members that their unique authenticity is welcome however they want to share it, as long as it fits the mission, vision, and codes of professional conduct etched out in your district's plan—and also that authenticity is a practice, not a product. ■



STORY BY

Erin Werra

To read more from Erin, visit www.skyward.com/blog

¹Chaplin, Lan Nguyen. "How to Get Comfortable 'Being Yourself' at Work." Harvard Business Review, Harvard Business Publishing. 27 July 2023.

REPLENISHING EMPATHY 10 WAYS

Empathy isn't an endless resource, but it is a necessity in a caregiving role, like teaching. Here are 10 strategies to enhance your energy and keep your emotional cup full:

01. O² MASK

It's not selfish to put yourself first.

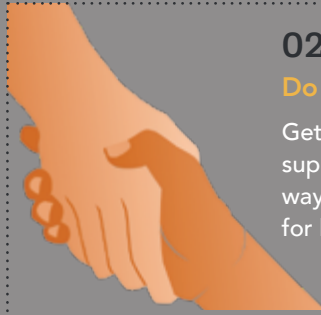
Remember to put your own self-care first when you're used to caring for others. It's motivating to know you'll be able to do more if you are taken care of first.



02. HELP, PLEASE

Do not wait. Ask today.

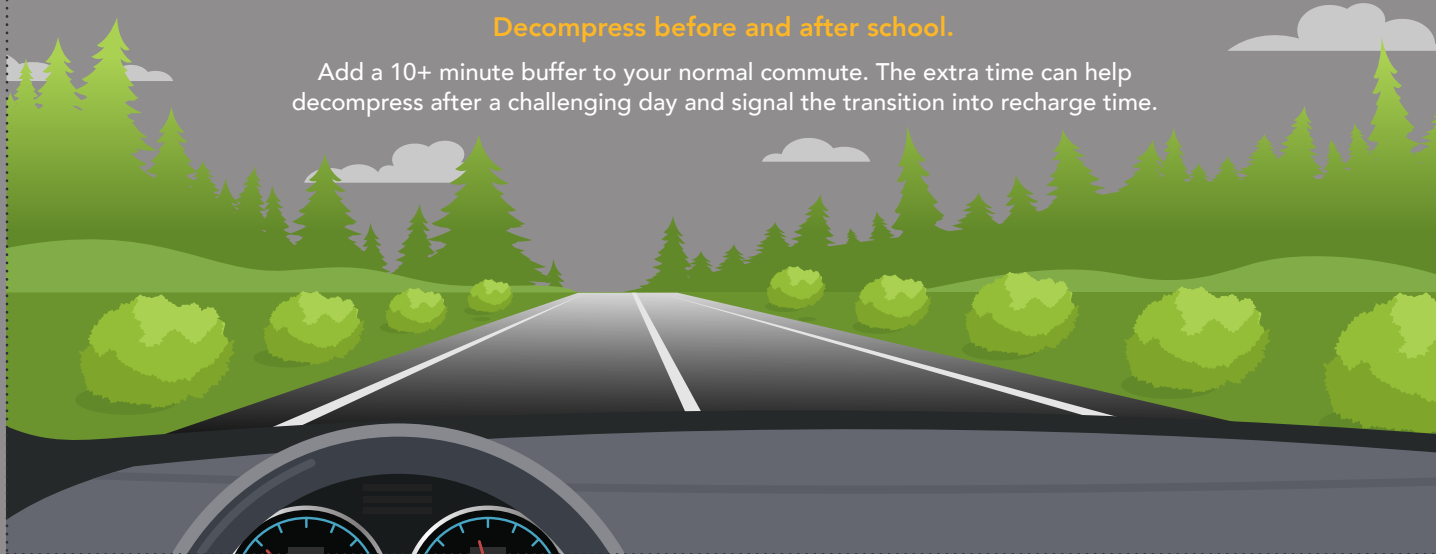
Get in the habit of reaching out for support before you're stuck. That way, it's more comfortable to ask for help in the heat of a challenge.



03. COMMUTE TIME/PADDING

Decompress before and after school.

Add a 10+ minute buffer to your normal commute. The extra time can help decompress after a challenging day and signal the transition into recharge time.



04. BOUNDARIES

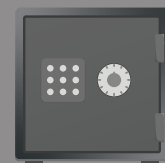
Protect yourself and your peace.

Build healthy timekeeping boundaries to unplug from your work and protect your peace. When you clock out, clock out.



05. CONTAINER METHOD

Where can you put this thought where it's safe and you can come back to it, but it doesn't creep out into your precious time?



Envision a container that can close and lock. Put difficult thoughts in your container and lock it up for the night. Unlock it in the morning with fresh eyes.

06. BE A SQUEAKY WHEEL

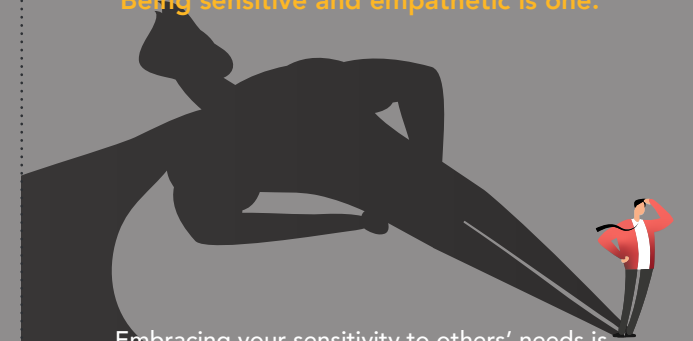
Practice being the one to speak up. Ask. Mention. Over-communicate.

If you can speak up, you might help someone else who needs the same support at the same time. So voice your feedback, send the email, check in, and speak up!



07. EMBRACE YOUR SUPERPOWERS

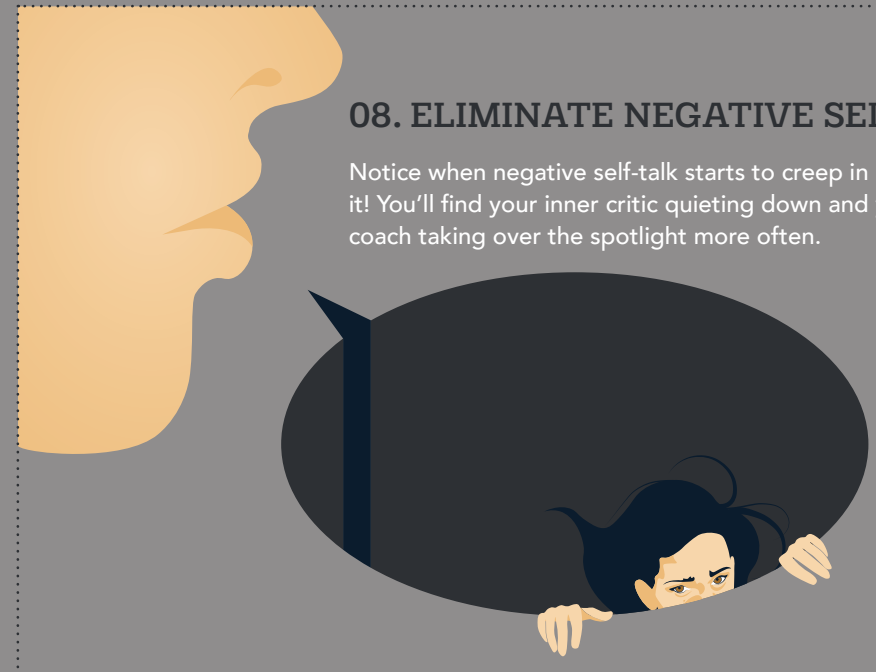
Being sensitive and empathetic is one.



Embracing your sensitivity to others' needs is both a bit of a curse and a blessing. The difference you make as an empathetic caregiver literally saves lives. There's no hero more super than you.

08. ELIMINATE NEGATIVE SELF-TALK

Notice when negative self-talk starts to creep in and challenge it! You'll find your inner critic quieting down and your inner coach taking over the spotlight more often.



09. ENLIST A FURRY OR FLUFFY FRIEND

Provide yourself some creature comforts.

While it might feel a little too corny, it's okay to indulge your physical senses in order to soothe yourself quicker. Go bother your pet—tell them we said it was okay.



10. NICE FILE

Start keeping a folder to tuck nice notes and feedback into. You'll have a list of nice things to make you smile and remind you what all this hard work is for.

For the full article, visit skyward.com/blog and search "Replenishing Empathy 10 Ways."

10 Ways to Stay Vigilant

Beware these scams and learn what steps can help mitigate fraud in the business office.

INTERNAL THREATS

01

SKIMMING CASH BEFORE OR AFTER RECORDING

Cold hard cash might sound like the way to go, but it presents a golden opportunity for fraudsters to intercept funds before they make it to the bank. Someone accepting cash may choose to give a receipt and then pocket all or some of the money before updating the ledger. They may even skip the receipt entirely. Without an accurate record, it's easy for cash to walk out the door.

What to do: Move toward becoming a cashless school, monitor cash-heavy transactions closely (vending machines, admission to events, school stores), and require receipts.



02

TAMPERING WITH CHECKS

Cashing personal checks out of school cash funds presents another opportunity to skim money. Someone with control of the school ledger may write a personal check for cash, then delay depositing the check and essentially enjoy a loan from the school funds.

What to do: Rely on more secure transactions and forbid cashing personal checks from school cash funds. Request copies of all checks from the bank to track and double-check.

03

FAKE VENDORS

The truth is, what really hurts about internal threats is the trust broken. An ERP system is a vast tool and a huge responsibility, but also a clever way for people to take advantage. Dishonest people add vendors that don't exist, link those accounts to their own, and pay themselves, all while mimicking legit vendor payments.

What to do: Similar to phishing emails, look for names that seem right but are off by a letter or digit.

04

EXCESS PURCHASES

Occasionally people take advantage of their niche knowledge to fly under the radar of the school business office. When buying bulk items, they may add more than what they really need in order to use or pocket the difference for personal gain. Alternatively, they may "accidentally" purchase the wrong size or type of item, conveniently able to put it to use personally.

What to do: Require descriptions as well as part/inventory numbers, add layers of review/inventory, and open visibility to anyone at any time.



05

PAYROLL FRAUD

Examples include paying subs that didn't work, allowing others to work on behalf of an employee, or creating sham roles in the district payroll for family members of school employees who don't actually perform the work.

What to do: Perform a surprise audit, have an air-tight nepotism policy, and use data mining to compare payroll totals with hours worked.

EXTERNAL THREATS

08

PHISHING

Phony emails are designed to trick folks into giving up information. Does your district have a phishing test strategy yet?

What to do: Don't trust your inbox without verification! Know how to spot subtle hints—slightly off grammar, links that don't go where they say they will, extra junk in email addresses. Go to the actual portal/application instead of using email links. NEVER give your credentials to anyone!

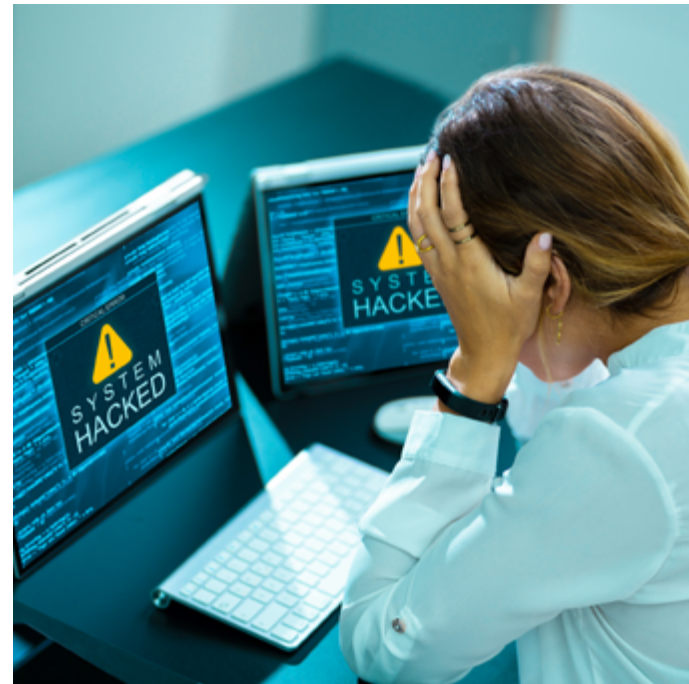


06

RANSOMWARE

Ransomware needs a way to get in, which can be achieved in a multitude of ways: phishing, sketchy websites, and even in-person delivery (more on that later).

What to do: Back up data, train people, and maintain constant vigilance.

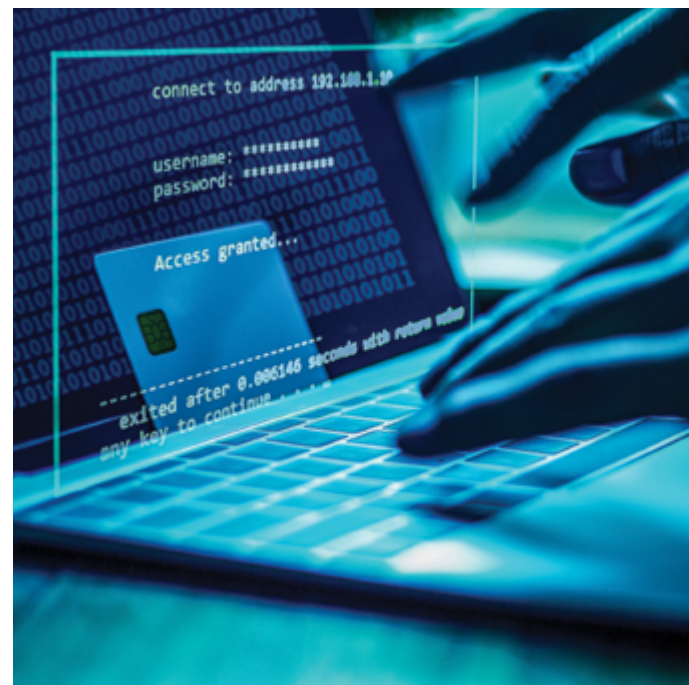


07

PASSWORD STEALING

Did you know even students are interested in cracking your data defenses? Whomever it might be, make it difficult to guess or acquire a password.

What to do: Try a passphrase, consider a password-changing policy, and use a trustworthy SSO.



09

MFA FRAUD

We know, it's exhausting to add additional verification steps. But it's worth it to stay secure!

What to do: Train folks and update your MFA policies to include verification codes to combat MFA fatigue.



10

TAILGATING

With school out for summer, it's true that unfamiliar faces will come and go in the form of temporary employees, repair and maintenance, and other unusual crews. Don't simply be a pal and hold the door open for a potential hacker/criminal.

What to do: Maintain building security and require verification that folks in the building need to be there. Don't slack during the summer! ■



STORY BY

Erin Werra

To read more from Erin, visit www.skyward.com/blog