# Innovation Through Cooperation

## The New Jersey Department of Education Takes a Strategic Approach to Digital Implementation

The New Jersey Department of Education serves over one million students and oversees close to a hundred thousand teachers. Developing the strategy to roll out digital curriculum to all of them is a large undertaking, but as Director of Innovation, Takecia Saylor is up to the task. She heads up innovateNJ, an initiative designed to bring access to all of New Jersey's students.

### InnovateNJ: iZone implementation, Jersey Style

Innovation zones, or iZones, are rolling out across the country. Innovation zones are established on a state or city level to create autonomous school districts that can explore new educational strategies. The idea started with a handful of states in the late 1990s, and the last couple years have seen a surge of states adopting the idea. Now in its second year, innovateNJ is New Jersey's take on the idea. Their strategy is based on three core concepts:

- **Community:** There are a lot of good ideas out there, and Saylor wants everyone to have access to them. Schools are asked to share their successes with other schools, including posting videos on a central website.
- **Clearinghouse:** Educators get to see what's being done in other locations so they can implement them in their districts. This component also includes providing a list of resources to educators such as funding opportunities or qualified education vendors.
- **Initiatives:** Educators have access to a wide variety of education initiatives, and not just digital ones. This section includes a wide variety of programs for educators to innovate their curriculum.

The New Jersey State Education system is very localized, and innovateNJ integrates this factor into their strategic planning. Innovation happens a school district level, since local educators are the ones who know what's happening with their kids. Instead of a centralized authority that hands down curriculum, innovateNJ and the Department of Innovation act like a mentor, empowering districts, educators, and communities.

### Reaching All of the Students

It's vitally important to Saylor that all students have access to digital curriculum, and innovateNJ is designed to expand access on several levels. One of these programs is to expand community integration. Modern communities have a wide variety of WiFi access points, including libraries, Boys and Girls

#### Spotlight: Voorhees School District

The Voorhees School District is located in Southern New Jersey. When the district became part of innovateNJ, Assistant Superintendent Dr. Diane Young kicked off the process by forming an Innovation Committee with all of the key players, including curriculum specialists and content supervisors.

A key part of her strategy was the creation of a Branding Group to answer:

- What do we want to be known for as a school district?
- Who are we as a school district?
- What do we stand for?
- What results do we want for our children?

Digital innovation represents a complete change of educational culture, and integration requires a shift of approach. By setting up the Branding Group, Dr. Young was able to keep the program focused and bring educators together at the same time.

Clubs, mom-and-pop stores, even fast-food venues. The innovateNJ program works with school districts to develop game plans for reaching out to these community organizations to help give access to students who don't have online access at home.

The response to their strategy has been overwhelmingly positive. "We've been surprised at how open folks are to sharing with our students in that way," Saylor says. "It makes us very happy to know that there's something that can be done to facilitate that."

Another strategic factor is the utilization of early adopters. As part of joining the program, each school was asked to partner with another school that represented a student demographic 180° different from their own. This gives students who would normally be considered disenfranchised a partner on a high leadership level, and helps to close the gap of digital access.

Bridging that gap is a key focus for Saylor, and she views access as a human right. "If we don't declare it a human right to have access, then we are only perpetuating a gap in the digital divide amongst the haves and the have-nots. And we can't have that."

## Advice for School Districts

The best place to start in developing your digital curriculum strategy, Saylor says, is with a human capital assessment. Review all of your available resources, their skills, and their available assets—teachers, parents, early adopters, students, even community organizations. After implementing this assessment, many school districts were surprised to find out how many resources they already had available amongst their staff, and how many of their educators were already certified in the necessary skills to create or implement digital curriculum.

Using existing resources also has the advantage of making implementation and adoption easier. Instead of being instructed via a top-down method, teachers are being taught by their fellow teachers. The result is a collaborative process that brings teachers and school districts together, increasing the effectiveness of the program.

## But What Do Students Think?

The students have had nothing but positive things to say about their experience and are much more engaged when interacting in a digital medium.

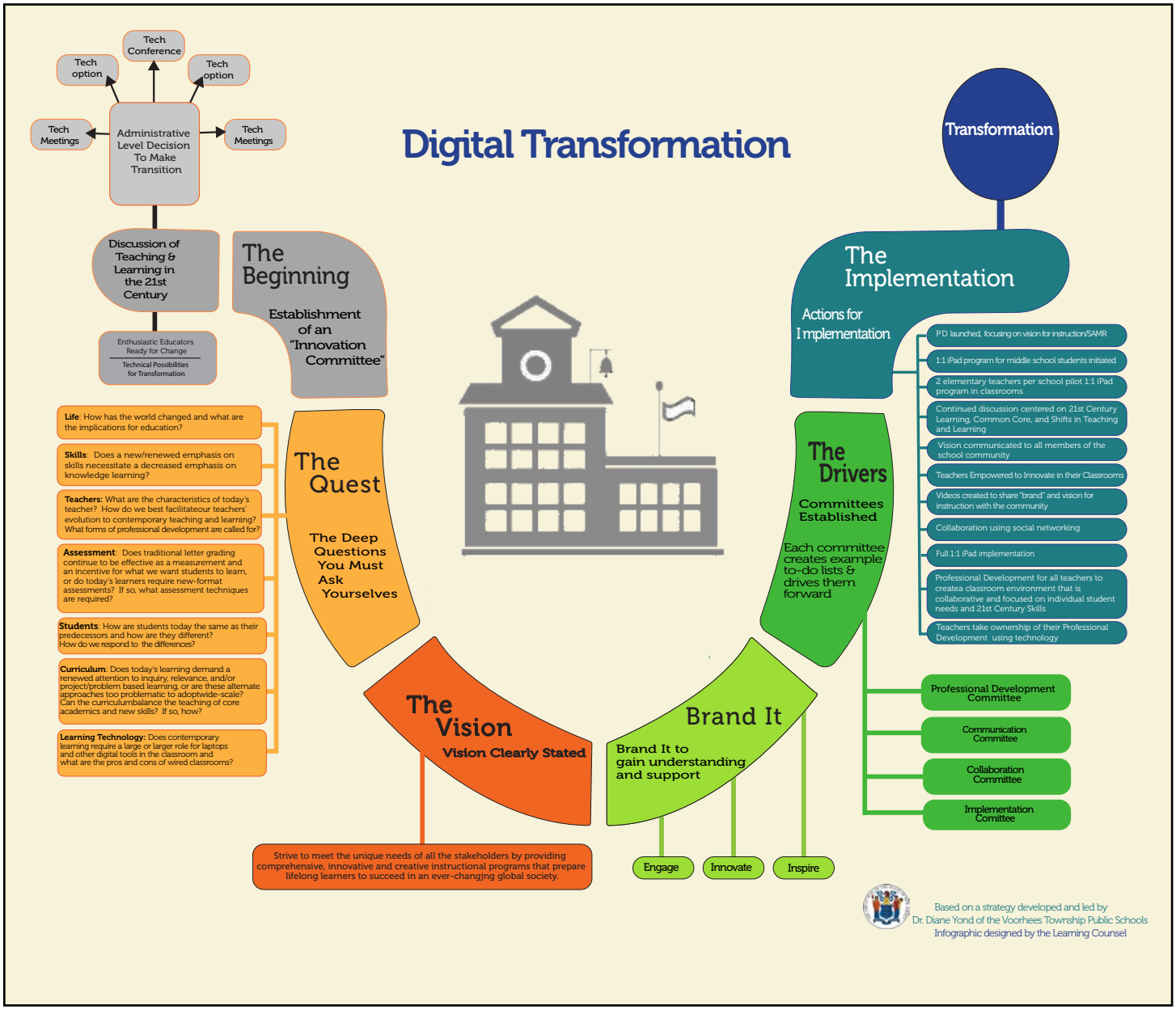
Students have even taken to connecting over their phones or meeting in coffee shops to teach and work with each other.

Some students are even developing their own educational apps. Creating these helps students teach themselves concepts that they had trouble grasping in a traditional setting. These apps are then used to help educate their friends, empowering students to take charge of their own education.

## Excited for the Future

The task of implementation and innovation may be tough, but Saylor thinks that all of the work is well worth the rewards for students.

"I'm excited about it because it means that it broadens our landscape," she says. "When you start talking about curriculum that's delivered in a virtual medium or 'online' way, it really opens up a world of possibility. Students learn that there are like minds, learn about different cultures, and can have an education experience that really does create a diversified student population with a broadened perspective—a heightened level of experience that extends beyond their everyday surroundings."




*Currently serving as the Director of School Innovation for the state of NJ. Takecia was also the Manager of the New Jersey Department of Education Race to the Top Project and a is an Executive Leadership doctoral candidate at Fordham University. A 1993 Milken Scholar, Takecia has compounded her background in business with education administration experience to forge successful leadership opportunities for the past twenty years.*

*For the complete interview with Takecia Saylor, visit learningcounsel.com*