

The ABCs of School District IT

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To succeed today, public-school technology gurus need a combination of tech know-how, understanding of the classroom and business savvy.

If you'd asked Bev White 30 years ago what she'd be doing today, she probably would've told you she'd be teaching high school math. That's because 30 years ago, she was doing just that.

Like many IT professionals in K-12 school districts, White has an extensive background in education. With a bachelor's degree in math education, a master's degree in education and postgraduate work in computer technology at a variety of institutions including Harvard University, Columbia University and Binghamton University, she also has more than two decades of teaching experience under her belt.

"I consider myself a lifelong learner," White said. "When I stop taking courses or going to conferences and learning things, it's probably the day that I'm just going to fold it up, you know?"

It was during her postgraduate work that White shifted her focus from math to IT, and soon after, she parlayed her background in education into her first role as an administrator of technology at the collegiate level. And then, when an opportunity opened up in the public school system, White jumped at it, eventually working her way up to her current position as chief information officer for Wake County Public schools in Raleigh, N.C.

"That was really where my love is," she said. "For the last 10 years I've been working as the district technology decision maker in K-12 districts, first in South Carolina for five years and [now] here in Raleigh."

While many school district IT pros break into the industry through the education or teaching side, there are two other standard career paths, White said.

"One of them is the technology background — someone who's been employed by a technology company [such as] IBM or Cisco, someone who has experience at a medium to high management level in those

companies," she said. "And the [other] one is the business arena."

In fact, White said the trend is shifting away from the education and technology backgrounds and toward the business side, as decision-making and communication skills become increasingly important.

"The path has almost always been: You have a teacher, the teacher's good with technology, people recognize this [and the teacher progresses on the tech side]. The challenge is that as this person becomes the technology guru for the district, they don't get in the decision-making strata," she explained. "I think that in K-12, you're going to continue to [need] some understanding of what the classroom is like, but I'm not sure that having a long history in the classroom is going to continue to be a requirement.

"[Additionally], we have people that are very strong technically and can make the technical decisions, but they're not in the role to be able to influence the decision making," White continued. "I think those folks [with business backgrounds] that come in and learn about [education] and learn how to do the leading and the management piece — that will be the career path."

That's because good soft skills — the nontechnical, more tactical leadership and management capabilities — are perhaps the most important requirement for the job.

"No. 1 is leadership skills," White said. "The management skills, like project management — how to interpret grant charts, the metrics that you get — [are important] because you have to make some decisions based on them. And then the third thing [is] being able to communicate the technical arena in language that Joe on the street can understand. We call that the Harris Teeter conversation because Harris Teeter is a grocery store chain in this area. So when you're standing at the produce counter at Har-



ris Teeter and someone comes up to you and says, 'Why did you really need \$8 million for PC refresh?' [you] need the 'elevator speech.'"

A technical background is important insofar as it establishes credibility. But that's about it, White said. She said her own experiences working on servers and doing programming simply allow her to relate better to her staff and give her staff a reason to listen.

The same is true for certifications, she added. White earned credentials as the need arose in her career — an A+ credential when she was running labs and troubleshooting, a Novell cert when she began doing networking — but none of them are current now because she's moved on to a different skill level, she said.

"At the moment, there is no certification for a district-level CTO [or] CIO," White said. "Were there, yes, I would go for it, because I believe it's important to have authentication."

However, it's important for school district IT professionals to keep current in terms of their knowledge of concepts and processes within IT.

"You need to understand things like cloud computing, and you need to understand how data security works hypothetically," White said.

A typical day for White involves three relatively constant variables: waking up in the morning and hitting the gym, going to work in the Wake County Public School System and spending quality time at home with her family. While the events remain the same, the time allotted for each can vary greatly, depending on the day. White said she could break down the nature of her work into the following steady ratio, however: She spends 40 percent of her time in operational management, 30 percent in overseeing her division and 30 percent in leadership of her district.

Operational management includes looking at what projects are going on and what work is being done, she said. Division leadership involves working with people and managing "everything that has to do with technology in the district — if you can plug it into the wall and it rings or beeps, it's probably mine," she said.

District leadership, arguably her highest priority, involves collaborating with decision makers in other

districts, including school principals, business leaders and industry experts.

“What I tried to do was distinguish between what I do that is truly operational and what I do that is more strategic,” White said. “It’s about 40 percent management of the operational, and then the other 60 percent is strategic, with about an even division between the strategic in my division and the strategic for the district.”

Little to no time is spent engaging in technical issues or troubleshooting problems. A typical day for White involves a lot of brainstorming and strategizing via meetings.

“Some of these are formal meetings, like board meetings or a meeting with all principals in our district,” she explained. “There are also meetings with my staff — my senior staff or my entire staff — and meetings that have to do with projects. The bulk of what I do is manage technology through people.

“The other part of my day is going to be involved in planning and preparation,” White continued. “That might have to do with looking at metrics out of my division, looking at comparatives that come from [research firm] Gartner, looking at educational publications, trying to do some thinking about where we need to go, planning for our next summit meeting. Our superintendent is extremely interested that we keep our focus in the right areas because we know that one of the biggest downfalls is to do the wrong thing really well. We need to do the right thing really well.”

There is a lot of opportunity for those interested in becoming IT administrators in school districts. White’s position was created less than 10 years ago, when the superintendent of the district recognized a need to bring the business and technology sides of education together. White has held the position for about five years and has had only one predecessor, who, she noted, came from a business background. Other areas still don’t have people in similar roles.

“If we’re going to maximize these folks and if we’re really going to move into 21st-century skills for staff and for teachers and for students, we’ve got to change this,” White said. “So instead of just hav-

ing a person who’s in a niche doing technology and saying, ‘Oh, this is my district technology leader,’ we need to have someone who is a district leader who specializes in technology.”

To that end, White said the Consortium for School Networking (CoSN) is working to boost awareness and develop a certification process for school district IT leaders.

Further, aspiring professionals in this area might find that opportunities are even more prevalent in cer-

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tain geographical locations. Those areas known for their high-tech presence — the Silicon Valleys of the nation — likely expect a lot from their school districts with regard to technology, White said.

“When your community knows more about technology than you do, you’re at a disadvantage. But they can be a wonderful partner,” she said. “I thought it would be interesting to look at areas where you have these enclaves of technology and see if that makes a big difference.”

She added that larger districts tend to recognize the need for a district-level technology leader more rapidly than smaller ones, but this may have to do with the money and space available.

Ultimately, the future is bright for those willing to apply their tech knowledge and leadership skills in the education arena.

“There are a lot of economies and a lot of advantages to putting those two sides of the shop together,” White said. “That’s what you get when you get a decision maker in that role.”

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