FUTURE READY CASE STUDY #4

Toms River, New Jersey

Toms River Regional School District

16,125 Students

18 Schools

Suburban

A Comprehensive Digital Learning Plan Bolstered by Strategic Partnerships

FUTURE READY FOCUS AREA

- ○ Collaborative Leadership
- ○ Personalized Student Learning
- ○ Robust Infrastructure
- ◉ Personalized Professional Learning

Toms River Regional School District is located in a coastal community in New Jersey. As the largest suburban school district in the state, Toms River Regional Schools serves students in grades Kindergarten through 12. The student population is predominantly White (76%), with about 13% Hispanic, 5% Black, and 4% Asian or Pacific Islander. Approximately 28% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and 1% are classified as English language learners.[1]

Prior to its implementation of a Future Ready approach to digital learning, Toms River faced challenges familiar to many other districts. District leaders were in need of a research-based approach to digital learning to serve as a foundation for Future Ready implementation. The district's technology plan was rudimentary, covering only a one-year term, limited to basic technology requirements such as infrastructure (e.g., bandwidth) and computing devices, and contingent upon federal funding. Professional learning opportunities were generally district-wide only, professional learning interactions with neighboring districts were minimal, and the professional development that teachers received did not cover a diverse range of topics. Through the use of the Future Ready Schools (FRS) resources, Toms River district leaders transformed the district approach to technology via a detailed, carefully considered digital learning strategic plan coupled with strategic community partnerships.

[1] Source of district statistics is the 2014–15 Common Core of Data, the most recent year available at time of publication.

Transition to Digital Learning

The district's transition to digital learning was guided by a strengthened strategic technology plan. District leaders developed a more comprehensive plan that extended beyond basic technology requirements to include topics such as self-funding, leadership, use of time, professional learning, and the development of external partnerships. Furthermore, the Toms River technology plan is now a rolling, three-year plan that accounts for technological advances and budget changes. During each annual review of the plan, district leaders assess what was or was not accomplished during the previous year, amend the plan accordingly for the next two years, and then add a new third-year plan. Each year, then, Toms River creates what is, in effect, a new three-year technology plan.

As part of its technology improvement plan, Toms River has leveraged various community partnerships to build student, professional, and community digital learning. For example, leaders note that one of the district's most beneficial partnerships is with a small laboratory school in New Jersey that exclusively serves students with disabilities as referred by the local school district. Despite bringing together two very different education communities, the partnership—a result of participation in a New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) initiative known as innovateNJ—created many learning opportunities for teachers and students. The two staffs have met numerous times to conduct joint professional development events around digital learning (e.g., augmented reality trainings), tour one another's buildings, and attend one another's activities, such as graduation ceremonies. In addition, Toms River students and students from the partner school video conference one another for fun activities and to share ideas (e.g., students from the partner school have demonstrated how to program robots). Toms River also nurtured partnerships by establishing the Jersey Shore Makerfest, a free annual event that invites families, educators, and community members to participate in hands-on experiences related to science, technology, engineering, mathematics, art, literacy, and civic involvement. As part of the Maker Movement (a technology-focused artisan community), the "makers" coordinating these experiences include school districts, colleges, community organizations, museums, technology companies, and artists. In the first year of Makerfest, the district enlisted approximately 100 different organizations as "makers," increasing that number to 125 during the event's second year. In addition to bringing together district staff and the surrounding community to share ideas and bolster support for the Future Ready initiative, Makerfest has become a vehicle for Toms River to build partnerships with various attendees by collaborating on grant writing and other joint projects that support the district's continued transition to digital learning.

Use of FRS Resources

Toms River's transition to digital learning was informed by its use of several key resources. The district used NJDOE's New Jersey Technology Readiness Tool (NJTRAx) to evaluate its hardware, training, and infrastructure capacity (e.g., devices per student, bandwidth, professional support). This helped the district determine its readiness to make technological advances. As a next step in its assessment and implementation of classroom technology, district leaders decided to use FRS

resources because the Future Ready Framework was well-researched and represented a nationwide initiative that could provide structure and tools for sustainability. In addition, Toms River recognized that other districts engaging in the Future Ready process could serve as potential models and partners. District leaders took the Future Ready Pledge, and each of the district's 19 school leaders completed the District Leadership Self-Assessment and implemented the Framework. Interestingly, results sometimes contrasted among school leaders, indicating that school-level perceptions differed relative to the district's approach to digital learning.

The use of FRS resources helped district leaders to reach several significant conclusions. The Framework pointed the district to stronger approaches in curriculum and instruction, such as creating new types of learning environments through the makerspace initiatives and a new student-activated literacy space. More broadly, leaders realized they could use the Future Ready Framework to help refine their technology plan to include a more comprehensive approach to digital learning. In doing so, they recognized that past approaches had focused primarily on curriculum and instruction and had failed to thoughtfully integrate other critical elements such as professional development, leadership, and the formation of strategic partnerships. While many of these components—including partnerships—were in place in the district prior to its implementation of FRS resources, their use helped leaders to affirm and direct the district's efforts to adopt a more comprehensive digital learning effort.

Results

The district has experienced a number of positive outcomes as a result of its Future Ready efforts. Toms River's comprehensive digital learning plan, for example, has been recognized as a model for other districts. District leadership reports, "Our plan is now so comprehensive and includes so many more elements than are required or recommended by the state that we were asked to share it by the Department of Education."

In addition, the district's partnerships have created increased opportunities for students and educators. Toms River has obtained grants and sponsorships that have fully funded Makerfest for the past two years, allowing 4,000 guests to attend each year at no cost. Foundation grants have also funded the launching of makerspaces in every school in the district. Articulation agreements with colleges and universities have provided opportunities for Toms River students to access higher learning resources and earn college credit while in high school. Community partners, moreover, have served as mentors and advisors to Toms River students. Engineers from the local Naval Air Command, for example, worked with summer Makercamp students on projects, and the mayor of Toms River has been involved in district video projects for initiatives such as drug addiction treatment. Finally, the district's partnerships have deepened its relationship with the town. For example, district leaders attend town events and town leaders attend district events, district leaders participate in the town's Green Team, and the district has established shared services agreements with the town's public works and law enforcement agencies. District leadership reports that this "helps bind the community in mutual support and respect."

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Toms River's district leaders learned the value of the Future Ready Framework and its Gears as both a foundation for a digital learning plan and a common language for communicating with others. District leaders, for example, have developed simple slide presentations, videos, and documents to create and share a cohesive strategic message. The district also has conducted regular meetings with diverse stakeholders and has developed teacher leaders to use the new framework in their schools and departments.

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Toms River leaders stress the importance of building and maintaining strategic partnerships while becoming still more Future Ready. By learning what other districts are doing, Toms River's leaders have found that it is possible to leverage new ideas and to avoid pitfalls that other districts have experienced. One district leader explained, "There's not a single time that we've ever gotten together with another district that we haven't walked away with a good idea. …[The FRS] resources are great, but even greater is to use those resources with a partner, with some colleagues, with support of your peers."

About This Case Study

This is one of nine case studies that examine and document districts' uses, applications, and perceptions of the Future Ready Schools (FRS) professional learning resources in their efforts to become Future Ready. The resources of interest include the Future Ready District Pledge, the Future Ready Interactive Planning Dashboard (and District Leadership Self-Assessment), and the Future Ready Summits. The FRS resources are built on a Future Ready Framework with a set of seven Gears to support a comprehensive transition to digital learning.

Visit http://futureready.org/ for more information on Future Ready Schools and the resources discussed in the case studies.

September 2017

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