In order to evaluate the Poland Local School District (PLSD) Educational Technology Plan (http://www.poland.k12.oh.us/SServ/Poland%20Local%20Schools%20Technology%20Plan.pdf) for 2009-2012, both the national technology plan and the Ohio technology plan have been referenced. Also the plan has been viewed with the ISTE technology standards in mind. In addition, the eTech Ohio Technology Planning Tool (TPT) and the resources provided by eTech have been utilized to make sure all required elements have been addressed.

The guiding principles for this evaluation of the plan are integration and sustainability. While public school districts across Ohio and the nation struggle to raise standards to produce life-long learners with 21st century skills with little or no increase in funding, this evaluation must focus on what can be done in the district without jeopardizing or usurping other necessities. Therefore, although all aspects of the plan are essential, the area of Curriculum Alignment and Instructional Integration is foremost with special attention given to Budget and Planning.

In broad terms, the plan fulfills the necessary requirements to qualify for the federal E-Rate program, but it falls short as a document to support a much needed technology vision of PLSD for its students and teachers. PLSD and its technology planning committee need to ask themselves what technology usage and integration should look like in their school buildings. Even taking into consideration that this plan is outdated and in the process of an overhaul, more attention needs to be paid to the students’ experiences with technology on a daily basis. Delving into the five areas of the plan will yield more specific strengths, weaknesses, and recommendations.

**Introduction and Team Planning: Needs Improvement (1)**

Although the technology planning team includes 11 positions and three “approvers” by name, the team is not inclusive or balanced. What is missing is a stakeholder from the community: a government official, a business expert, a local business representative and/or a higher education representative. This added position(s) will help provide the input of those who need productive and capable students to graduate from PLSD and to enter the job market or to attend college. With the voice of a stakeholder outside the school district, the plan can be more encompassing by addressing the needs of the community at large.

Also, at least one student member should be invited to join this team. Since all others on the team are digital immigrants, a digital native will help keep the group focused on what students need. For example, teachers and support staff might need extensive professional development concerning the latest software; this may lead the team to believe that students also need to be
trained on the software, but a student committee member might voice the opinion that very little training is needed because the software is similar to another program that many students use. This student’s opinion may save the technology planning team time and money by focusing the team on what is really needed. The addition of team members to represent more stakeholders is highly recommended.

**Curriculum Alignment and Instructional Integration: Needs Improvement (1)**

To sum up all sections of the Curriculum Alignment and Instructional Integration in PLSD’s plan is easy because they are virtually all the same. The attention to detail in this section of the plan is sorely lacking. Most content areas have been addressed with a “cut and paste” narrative, making the answers to these questions too similar:

Where are we now?
Where do we want to go?
How will we get there?
How will we know we're getting there?
How will we sustain focus and momentum?

A disconcerting oversight and probable typo is in the Mathematics section where the answer to “Where are we now?” is 5 and the answer to “Where do we want to go?” is 4 in grades 11-12. Obviously the district does not want to regress.

In essence all content areas describe the fact that each teacher has his/her own computer, some classrooms have SmartBoards, and computer labs are in each building with a smaller number of computers in certain classrooms. Overall, the emphasis for integrating technology seems to be in student use of Microsoft Office. Although this is an excellent way to make use of technology for various projects, especially those involving the writing process and presentations, the integration of technology needs to go beyond what this suite of programs has to offer. It is commendable that PLSD is and will continue to make use of this software, but more educational software should be utilized by students too.

The areas of Mathematics, Science, and Technology are considered complete in terms of embedding Ohio’s Technology Standards; however, the descriptions provided for these content areas are lacking in terms of true integration as the emphasis seems to be on the teachers’ use of SmartBoards as presentation devices. Although students have some access to limited computers in Mathematics and Science classrooms and a computer lab in Technology classes, there is little description of the specifics of how these are used. More detailed description of student activities is needed to show true integration of technology.

It is disturbing that the plan calls for the OAT and OGT to be the main indicator that the technology plan is successful. Obviously, these two assessments were in place long before technology became a priority; therefore, the effective integration of technology is not incumbent
on the increase of these scores. A better indicator of success would be both informal and formal observations of technology usage. Dr. Edie Holcomb in her recorded interview entitled “Asking the Right Questions” suggests a simple graph to show the number of student projects that utilize technology. She states that this data gathering may even stimulate more technology usage because the graph can be created quickly and shared with all stakeholders, including students. The plan also indicates that teacher evaluations will include a technology component. While this is a good evaluative measure, it must be approached with caution because building principals may not be aware of all the ways a particular teacher integrates technology on a daily basis.

**Policy, Leadership and Integration: Acceptable (2)**

There seems to be some confusion in the plan of who the “leader” is: the Special Services Director, the building principals, or the technology technician supplied through the Mahoning County Educational Service Center (ESC). Clarifying the responsibilities and duties of these three distinctly different positions is highly recommended, as the current plan seems misleading in terms of delegated duties. Of course, all three need to work in tandem with one another to make sure the plan is implemented and evaluated. The plan currently places too much responsibility on the building principals, who are integral to the success of the plan but seem to need more professional development in all areas, especially the ISTE NET Standards. The suggestion of a Curriculum Links Web page as part of the District’s website moves the administration and faculty towards more technology integration as a team, but the brief reference to “ongoing, high quality professional development” is not well defined.

In the area of policy development, the team accepts complete responsibility for policy development and adoption, but the answer to the question “How do we get there?” relies almost solely on the building principals as both role model to teachers and assessor of teachers’ needs. Although the autonomy given to the building principal is admirable, more attention needs to be given to the process by which policies are developed and implemented. More stakeholders need to be involved not only to alleviate the size and scope of the building principals’ responsibilities but also to make sure all persons involved are providing input.

Throughout the technology plan, the teachers are described in varying degrees as reluctant adopters. The emphasis of the building principal as a role model is punctuated by the team’s statement that “You can lead a horse to water but…” While this statement is true of human nature, more planning time spent on exploring effective and worthwhile professional development would impact the practices and attitudes of the teachers. The somewhat negative attitude of the technology team towards “older” teachers needs to be eliminated from the language of the plan, as it only serves to divide further those who will use technology effectively and those who will not.
Infrastructure Management and Support: Needs Improvement (1)

As with most public schools, PLSD is understaffed in the area of technology. With budget restrictions, the technology technician is supplied through the Mahoning County Educational Service Center. This can be detrimental in terms of upkeep and trouble-shooting of hardware and software. Of course, as with most districts, PLSD must work with what it has. This portion of the plan focuses too much on the two-three day turn around for repairs and not enough on the support needed to train teachers and others in the integration of technology. A positive approach for the integration of technology in the classroom is the team’s suggestion that one staff member in each building can be trained to troubleshoot minor technology problems.

The access to technology in terms of where the district is currently looks promising with 1:1 computer to teacher ratio and 3.2:1 computer to student ratio. However, the district has not chosen to change those ratios for the future. Considering the need to get technology in the hands of the students to complete projects, the plan should allow for an increase in the number of computers per students.

It is evident from the plan that the Special Services Director has too many responsibilities to make technology a priority. Mr. Sommers also oversees the special education needs of the students. His divided attention to these two major areas may mean that they both suffer. An idealistic recommendation is to hire a full-time technology director who can focus on instructional technology, while the Mahoning County ESC technician continues to maintain the network and hardware.

Although professional development concerning technology usage in the classroom is referenced throughout the plan, the specifics of this professional development are vague. It is not sufficient enough to use the Mahoning County ESC to develop and deliver professional development. This seems like an easy fix to a difficult problem; in fact, teachers who attend these sessions may feel that the district is not investing its own time and resources to this very important aspect of education. The professional development provided by the ESC should be utilized but not as the main source.

Budget and Planning: Acceptable (2)

Although the necessary budgetary components and recommendations are provided in this section, the fact that there is no change in eight of the nine technology categories seems absurd. Of course, the budget does account for an upgrade of new computers for the high school and middle school for 2009-2010. Otherwise, the amounts remain static for four years. At the very least, an increase in the amount allocated for Technology Staffing/Support is highly recommended.

The reference to partnerships with local businesses is a positive aspect of this plan. More community involvement at the encouragement of PLSD may garner more funding for
technology. These stakeholders can be convinced to donate time, money, and equipment to PLSD. Continuing to focus on grants and other sources of funding is essential, as the plan indicates. A specific suggestion to deal with the lack of funding for professional development is to encourage a faculty member to pursue a Master’s degree in Instructional Technology. This faculty member should be someone who is willing to deliver professional development as part of his/her field experience. This strategy will allow teachers to receive the latest information on trends and research. This is another way to think beyond the traditional sources for funding and professional development.

The committee needs to delete the following from this section: “Poland is inevitably at the end of the line when eTech is handing out funding.” Sentiments such as this have no place in a technology plan that should focus on what can be accomplished, not on what cannot be attained.

**Recommendations for Change**

In addition to the suggestions made within the five sections of this evaluation, the following recommendations should be considered by PLSD and the technology team:

- Add additional voices to the technology planning team, including students and community members. Although more members can make it more difficult to reach consensus, adding variety to the team will make the plan easier to implement across the wide range of users.
- Consider writing SMART goals to answer the question “How do we get there?” and “How will we know we are getting there?” Specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time-bound goals will help implement, monitor, evaluate, and revise PLSD’s technology plan. For instance, instead of “We know when we’re getting there when all the English Language Arts staff members are incorporating the Microsoft office package into their curriculum” can be rewritten as “High School English teachers will use Microsoft Word for the writing process at least twice per grading period” or “High School Social Studies teachers will assign research projects that utilize Microsoft Word and PowerPoint once a year.” These are SMART goals that all administrators and teachers can understand.
- Explore student-used technology, instead of teacher-presentation technology. SmartBoards serve their purpose well, but for true technology integration to occur, students, not just teachers, need to use it every day. Implementing a 1:1 tablet program is not feasible for this district, but making use of more internet resources that are free can allow for more student use of technology in the learning process.
- Have a more positive attitude toward teachers who are reluctant to use technology. It is a difficult time to be a teacher because of the many changes impacting teacher performance in the classroom. Teachers are stressed. Finding ways to make technology integration easier for them will go a long way to increase a good faith relationship and better adoption of new technology.
• Seek professional development opportunities about TPCK for at least the administration and possibly the faculty. The plan is missing a key component to integrate technology: the need to interrelate Technology, Pedagogy, and Content Knowledge. Much of the technology usage described in the plan focuses on the teacher’s technocentric use of it.

Certainly, PLSD should be commended for creating this plan with the barriers that exist. As the district and the technology planning team begin a revision of this plan for 2013, there is no doubt that they will explore new and better ways to plan for technology in all areas.