

# Success Story

## Technology Integration Specialist Inspires Teachers to Put Students at the Center of Learning

Administrators in the Jefferson Parish Public School System (JPPSS) have long been committed to evolving the district into a 21st century school system. After Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005, they remained dedicated to this goal, despite damages inflicted on many schools. Less than two years later, with the help of the Cisco® 21st Century Schools Initiative (21S), JPPSS had integrated technology into a student-centered learning environment in 16 schools, with plans to transform the remaining 71 over the next 18 months.


21S helped put the district on a fast track toward realizing its vision, while technology integration specialist Mary Beth Almerico provided the inspiration Jefferson Parish teachers needed to grow and change.

Superintendent Diane Roussel believes Almerico's contributions have been critical to the success of the program. "Mary Beth did a remarkable job of winning the confidence of our teachers and providing individualized coaching," says Dr. Roussel. "Being able to motivate so many educators, with varying needs and levels of experience, is quite an accomplishment—she definitely knows the secret to professional development."

### Assessing Needs and Gaining Trust

As a first step, Almerico assessed each teacher's individual needs. "I felt I needed to learn as much as I could about the teachers," she explains, "what level of technology skills they had, how successful they'd been in using technology in the classroom, and what they perceived their needs to be in getting students more engaged."

Almerico developed a schedule that enabled her to work in each school on the same day each week, so that the teachers knew when to expect her. Spending a lot of time in the field helped her assess each teacher's skill level and openness to technology while earning trust and respect. "When you take the time to develop a rapport with the teachers, it makes a big difference," Almerico says. "They feel like they know you and they become comfortable with you. They see you working with the students, and they realize you understand their situation."

A portrait of Mary Beth Almerico, a woman with short blonde hair, wearing a black and white sleeveless top. She is looking slightly to the right of the camera.

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Mary Beth Almerico  
Jefferson Parish  
Technology Integration  
Specialist

## Providing a Variety of Training Options

Almerico was also responsible for the challenging task of ensuring the effective use of classroom technologies among teachers from all grade levels and with varying levels of technology experience.

Almerico's strategy was to meet each teacher at his or her own level. "You have to approach professional development in the same way you approach children in a student-centered learning environment," she explains. "Every teacher learns in a different way, and every teacher has a different level of experience and anxiety. Some just need technical skills, while others need help in reframing what it means to allow kids to work collaboratively in the classroom."

Almerico used a variety of training formats—including one-on-one sessions, small group sessions, and modeling—to show teachers how to integrate technology in a way that works for them. She tried to provide relevant, up-to-date content and demonstrate which technologies would yield the best results.

Sometimes Almerico worked with teachers individually—discussing their needs, planning lessons, or debriefing after a lesson. Other times, she worked with small groups and conducted hands-on workshops. Different grade levels often required different training models. For example, since high school teachers are accustomed to working alone and specializing in one content area, they often respond better to one-on-one training sessions.

In some instances, Almerico found that none of these approaches were effective. On these occasions, she often discovered that the teacher was resistant to the training. "It wasn't unusual for teachers to be fearful of technology. I had to stand right by them and work with them until they began to relax," she recalls. "Others were resistant because, in changing to a student-centered learning approach in the classroom, they feared they would no longer be in control. That group was the most challenging. To help them be more receptive to change, I spent a lot of time with them, modeling different uses of the technologies, and gaining their trust."

## Winning Converts and Engaging Students

In the short time since Jefferson Parish became part of the 21S program, the teachers and the students have evolved significantly. Results from a recent third-party survey indicate that 84 percent of Jefferson Parish teachers use computers daily, 78 percent use the Internet daily, and 66 percent use the interactive whiteboard system daily in their classrooms. "The teachers are energized and enthusiastic, and the students are clearly engaged," notes Dr. Roussel.

Almerico agrees. "Some of the most unlikely teachers—the ones who were very resistant initially—have become the biggest cheerleaders for this program," she remarks. "They are proud of what they and their students have accomplished. This has been a really wonderful experience for so many of us."

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Cisco's Global Education group is actively engaged in the work of transforming education systems to be relevant to meet the needs of 21st century learners, educators, and organizations. This effort requires a shift in the way teachers teach, leaders lead, and students learn.