Beyond the Buzz

Why Some Teachers Still Aren't Using Technology

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Connecting Education

Introduction

About once a year, we set out to create a new edition of our Beyond the Buzz series. As a follow-up to our last project, "An Administrator's Guide to One-to-One Computing," our plan was to explore the popular "consumer to creator" movement by highlighting the exceptional work of several teachers from across the region. We wanted to learn about the creative strategies for engaging students with hands-on, technology-infused learning, with the hope of inspiring district leaders. We visited with teachers, met their students, and observed a variety of lessons that showcased the power of instructional technology in exciting new ways. Simply put, we witnessed some of the best practitioners at their craft, and the creative student minds that benefited.

During our visits, we asked questions of both teachers and students including one question in particular that resulted in widely different responses from school to school: "How many other teachers in your building are integrating technology like this?" Answers ranged from, "Almost none" to, "A few" to, "Pretty much everyone."

As we reflected on the insightful revelations, it became clear that spending our time on the factors that influence these differing school cultures would make for a more valuable publication than one focused solely on teacher talents. As a result, we created a document that identifies some of the most common characteristics of technology-inspired schools in an effort to better understand why some teachers still aren't using technology.

We couldn't help but include a brief profile of a few standout teachers we met along our journey. Their skill, dedication, and willingness to take risks are leading the way in this new era of teaching and learning.
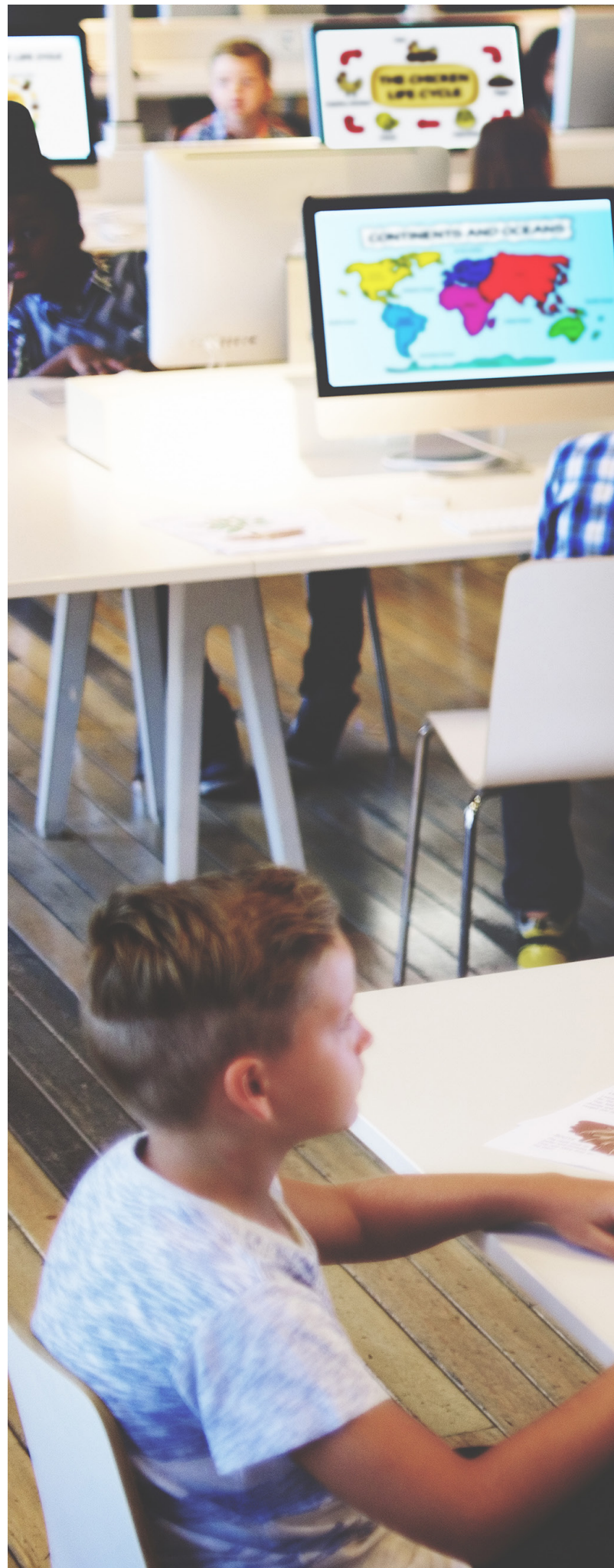
A Culture of Risk Takers

Technology adopters are often perceived as tech-savvy go-getters who not only enjoy gadgets, apps, and other techy things, but are innately better at using them. Let's face it, being wired for technology is a trait that some people have and others don't. What our classroom visits and conversations revealed, however, was that a teacher's propensity for risk-taking had an even stronger connection to whether teachers used technology in the classroom or not.

Especially now, with technology so ubiquitous in our daily lives, almost everyone knows how to point, click, email, search, and download. The days of, "I don't do tech" are, for the most part, gone. Pair a basic knowledge of technology with a teacher who is willing to try something new and you have fertile ground from which exciting new learning opportunities can grow.

So, how do you encourage teachers to venture outside of their technology comfort zones? Teachers, and the integration specialists who work with them, told us that it's all about creating the right environment. Teachers want to be encouraged to take risks, they want to feel supported by peers and supervisors, they need strategies on how best to get started, and they want to know where to turn when things fail. We heard time and again that the two key elements that foster a school environment like this are having a supportive principal and having embedded technology support. We will explore both over the next two sections.
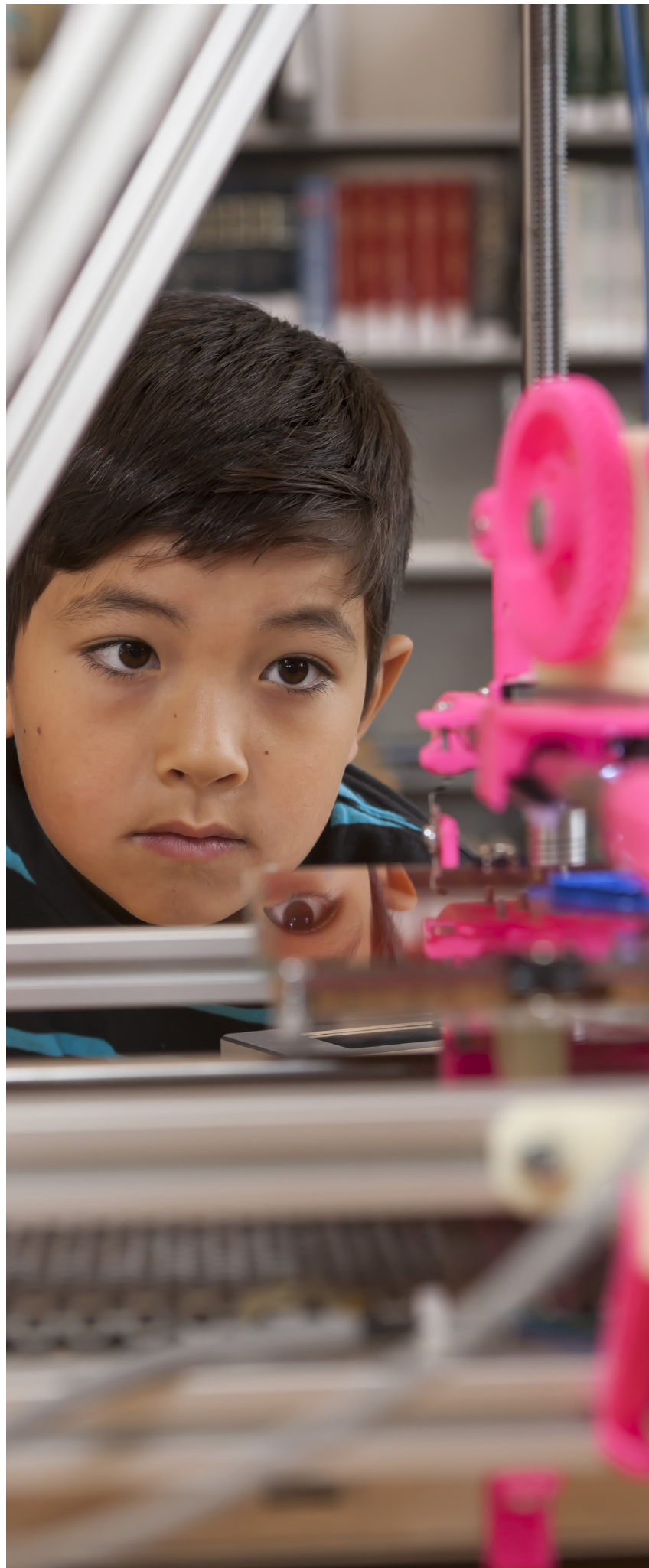
Penny Meskos
Librarian

Penny Meskos is the librarian at Fremont Elementary School in the East Syracuse Minoa Central School District. She has students using Osmo for coding and Tinkercad to create designs that they can produce on the 3D printer. She also has an amazing makerspace full of robotics and cool toys. Penny provides a valuable resource for teachers by helping them weave these engaging technology activities into the curriculum.

Michael Flood
Science Teacher

Michael is a High School Science teacher in the Trumansburg Central School District. He has been "flipping" his physics classes for several years. Michael uses both self-created video clips and free resources to provide the instructional component for each lesson. His students learn at home then take a short online quiz (also at home) which provides a check for understanding so he can tailor the classroom work for the next day. Classtime is used to ask questions, complete work, and engage in labs. The students we spoke with love the model.

The Supportive Principal

"My principal supports us." "Our principal is great." "My principal takes an active role with technology in our building." The teachers provided some insightful comments indeed.

In our travels, the buildings with higher tech adoption rates tended to have principals who had established clear expectations for staff. Many used some kind of framework for teacher competencies (like the ISTE standards), and most included technology as part of the teacher evaluation process. Several principals used technology regularly at staff meetings and on professional development days, setting the tone for teachers and students. In these ways, making technology a priority for the school and leading by example with the technology in hand, help get teachers on board.

Teachers noted that there is a big difference between "mandating" and "actively supporting" technology integration. The former results in teachers feeling burdened by yet another thing to do, whereas the latter results in them feeling a sense of challenge and excitement. When principals support teachers through the technology adoption process the levels of trust, risk-taking, and engagement soar.

At BOCES, we interact with a variety of administrators on a weekly basis. Superintendents, directors of technology, business officials, curriculum coordinators, and others are regulars at our meetings, workshops, and seminars. We share insights and engage in discussions, the fruits of which we hope make their way into classrooms across our region. One notable group that we have fewer interactions with, likely due to their need to be onsite with the students they are responsible for, is principals. It should come as no surprise then, that we struggle to get some of our most valued technology guidance to the people who have the potential to make the biggest impact. We are committed to finding creative ways to get this done and are open to suggestions. Plans are already underway for a summer technology academy exclusively for principals. More information will be distributed soon.

Feel free to contact Jason Clark, CNYRIC Model Schools Coordinator, with ideas or questions about the summer principal academy (jlclark@cnyric.org).

My Technology Personal Trainer

The third hallmark of schools that flourish with risk-taking tech-adopters is a well-orchestrated plan for professional development. Specifically, that is defined by training that is ongoing and embedded in the classroom. Readily available, shoulder-to-shoulder support provides a safety net for taking risks, an expert resource for knowledge, and a "personal trainer" of sorts to help keep teachers on track. Teachers and their integration specialists can work through a collaborative cycle of planning, modeling, co-teaching, and evaluating in the comfort of their classroom.

The teachers we spoke with gave high praise for the individuals who help fill this role. Many times it was a dedicated technology trainer within the district, a contracted BOCES integration specialist, or the library media specialist who worked in this capacity. While there is a cost associated with having resources like this, even when funds are tight, fellow teachers can provide a helping hand. As mentioned in the last edition of Beyond The Buzz, "[teacher teams] provide teachers with a small group of like-minded colleagues with whom they can share ideas and learn. It also allows for curricular-focused discussions that can lead to the development of innovative teaching practices and higher adoption rates."

Kim Kanuck, High School Teacher in the Port Byron Central School District, told us, "I would not be where I am with my tech integration without the help of Mike, our BOCES integration specialist."

Kim Kanuck
Global Studies Teacher

Kim teaches tenth grade global studies at Port Byron Central School District. She has eliminated the traditional textbook and created an amazing digital notebook to teach her curriculum. Kim has amassed a wealth of digital tools and resources that are accessible from her Google Classroom site. She has students create interactive history maps to help engage them in the digital learning space. Despite limited internet access in certain residential areas of the district, she has found strategies to make it all work. Kim feels strongly that a supportive principal, embedded training, and a propensity toward risk-taking are the biggest factors for teacher tech adoption.

Jessica Matzke
Elementary Teacher

Jessica teaches third grade at Wheeler Elementary in the Onondaga Central School District. She has her students using G Suite to complete work that ultimately lands in the digital portfolio that each student creates. We observed students working on Chromebooks, taking pictures, and writing autobiographies with the plan to video themselves reading their finished work. Jessica seamlessly uses students to help each other troubleshoot tech problems during class, which keeps lessons running smoothly.

Connecting the Dots

A talking-point that surfaced during our post-visit discussions was the notion that teachers often need meaningful justification to use technology. Especially for the risk-averse or those who aren't innately techy, providing a connection to something purposeful really helps. This may come in the form of helping teachers realize that tech-infused lessons could save time, improve student understanding, or elevate levels of student engagement. It could also be accomplished by sharing the research-based evidence that supports the tools teachers are being asked to use.

Too often, technology is injected into the classroom without a logical plan for how to use it or why it is being used. Jason Clark, CNYRIC Model Schools Coordinator, believes that, "When districts don't have a clear plan for what is expected and just hand out devices to students, it rarely works well."

District leaders can help make these connections by strengthening the tie between technology and the curricular goals so the overall plan for technology integration makes sense. Here are just a few examples of how this could be achieved:

1. Dedicate the first part of technology training sessions to an overview on why a specific technology is being adopted and the district goals it will meet.

2. Build time into team, department, and other curriculum meetings to review and discuss the pros/cons of software applications.

3. Connect teachers to other teachers in the region who are using similar technology/applications so they can engage in meaningful dialogue and share strategies.

"Connecting the dots" can go a long way toward helping teachers embrace technology as an integral part of the instructional program.
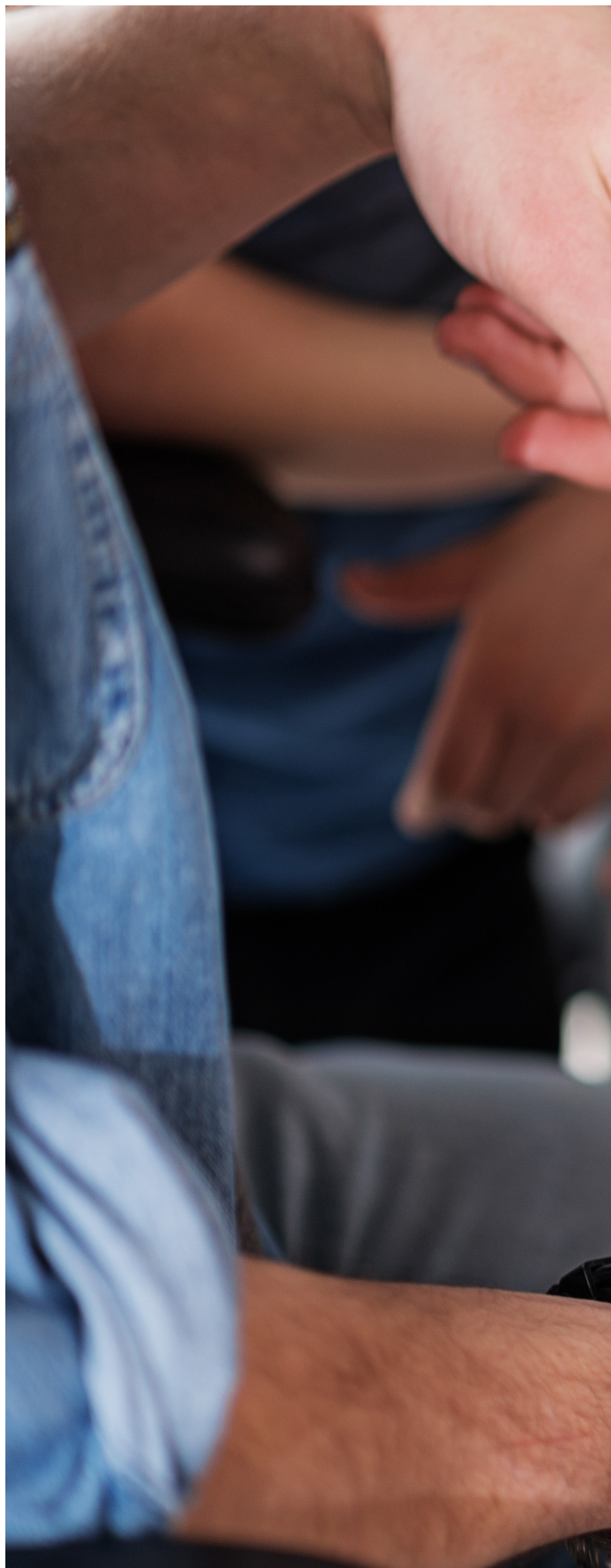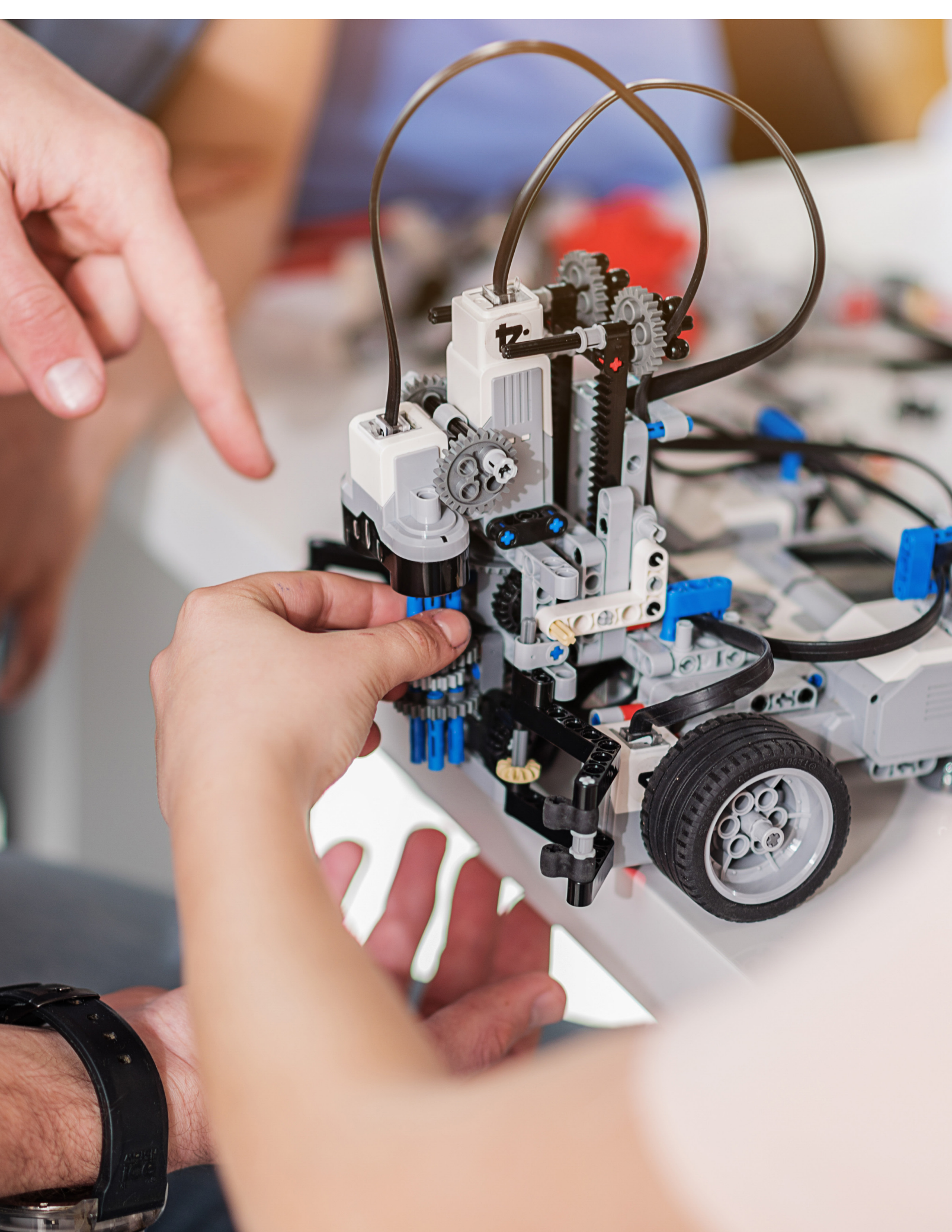
A Different Lens

Certainly, there are other factors that contribute to the level of technology use within buildings and districts. A well-run technology program that includes a functional infrastructure is critical. Teachers and their students need easy access to devices, the internet, and a supporting cast of applications to help them get their work done.

That said, what we found through our visits was that the four areas outlined herein provide a different lens through which we can examine the problem of why some teachers still aren't using technology. Supporting principals to work more closely with their staff to make tech a priority, developing a culture of risk-taking, embedding professional development in the classroom, and bringing awareness to the reasons why a district uses technology all emerged as key differentiators that can make a big impact. **So, while technology programs are often evaluated on measures related to budgets, staffing, and number of devices, it may be these more subtle characteristics that ultimately determine its success.** At the very least, we believe they are worth a closer look as districts review the effectiveness of their overall plan for technology integration.

As with all editions of Beyond the Buzz, our hope is that the insights we share stimulate discussions that lead to shifts, opportunities, and growth in the area of instructional technology.

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