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Logging On with...

Robert Parks

After 40 years of serving Broward County schools, the educator turned politician remains a force for technology integration. by Jeff Weinstock

IN A LANGUID, COMFORTABLE drawl that he says has notes of Virginia and Biloxi, MS, but is native to Key West, FL, Robert Parks is recounting how he landed his first job.

A statewide strike had left Florida's Broward County desperate for teachers. Owning a newly minted education degree, Parks walked into **Pompano Beach High School** and asked the principal if he had any openings. "He said, 'Can you teach?' I said, 'Sure!' He said, 'What do you know about track?' I said, 'Well, they run in a circle.' He said, 'Good. You can coach track.'"

And so a career in education was launched, one that has taken Parks through 40 years of service to Broward County schools, the last 22 of them as a member of the county school board, developing technology initiatives that have turned **Broward County Public Schools**, the country's sixth-largest district, into a model modern school system. Broward schools have wireless networks, electronic newsletters, and online school newspapers. Every teacher has a laptop. Parks refers to a band teacher at one school who puts guitar lessons onto his students' MP3 players that they take home to learn to play guitar. "We believe in technology," he says.

Parks' job is to translate that belief into policy, and it was his conceiving of and orchestrating the development of Broward County's strategic technology plan in 2003 that is guiding the district's use of technology in the 21st century. He calls the plan "the best thing I've ever done," noting that there was no precedent for it in the district's history.



"Our technology was spread out in bits and pieces all over the county," Parks says. "There was a lack of communication and coordination. The divisions and departments didn't talk with one another. This was the first time we looked at things comprehensively. Curriculum, Facilities, ETS [Education Technology Services]—everybody began to talk the same language. The one comment that came out as I went to meetings and talked to people about the plan was, 'It's about time.'"

Parks called together the superintendent, fellow board members, administrators, and faculty and staff to hammer out a plan for the coordinated implementation of technology in the district. "My biggest challenge was making sure that the task force was made up of the right people, the experts in that field," he says. "What we discovered was that those experts were already employed by the Broward County school system."

That is an abiding principle of Parks': He believes in the people he works with. "That's the operative word—*with*. I don't tell people anything; I work with them. We all know what our mission is: to use technology with a purpose. And that purpose is to increase student achievement.

"If this were an election year, I'd take all the credit, but it's been a real collaborative effort on everybody's part. Everybody knew the need for the plan. I just happened to be the force to bring people together to bring it forward."

By his own admission, Parks is no techie. His savvy extends to being able to edit an iMovie and create a podcast. Any further out than that and he's in too deep. His strength is in seeing what can be, convincing others on the school board to back that vision, and then executing a strategy for implementation. "I may not know some of the vocabulary," Parks says, "but I know what the results should look like."

He has his own kernel of homespun wisdom to define his approach: "I know what I know, I know what I don't know, but I always know who knows what I don't know."

The person who most knows what he doesn't know and so is the one he leans on most is Jeanine Gendron, Broward County's instructional technology director. For instance, Parks

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recently hired a public relations firm to create a website to pull together all aspects of the district's green initiative. The firm sent him an outline of what the effort would entail. "The first thing I did," he says, "was send it to Jeanine and ask for her feedback. My job is to listen to people like Jeanine Gendron."

He and Gendron met a few years after Parks was hired in 1994 to be the director of the Teaching and Leadership Center at Florida Atlantic University (FAU), a position he stepped down from two years ago. It was then that Parks took an interest in promoting instructional technology in the public schools. He found Gendron, then an instructional technology specialist in the school district, to be of like mind.

"As we talked," he says, "we had the same vision of the value that technology would have by being part and parcel of the classroom."

It's Gendron and another of his advisers, Angela Coluzzi, director of systems integration services, whom Parks credits for conceiving of a program that became a linchpin of Broward County's technology integration efforts. "I'd love to take credit for everything," he says, "but the truth is, Jeanine and Angela came to me and said, 'We have this idea.'"

With Parks' support, that idea eventually became the Digital Education Teacher Academy (DETA). The academy offers professional development courses designed to teach teachers how to use technology in their classrooms. Tuition is free to Broward educators. So far, Parks says more than 8,000 of the district's 13,000 teachers have enrolled.

Parks struck a partnership with Florida Atlantic University, where he did his graduate work in education, whereby the school provides instructors for the DETA courses. In addition to the standard DETA courses, there is an advanced level, or DETA 2, as well as DETA for Administrators.

"If we were ever going to get technology in the classrooms, we were going to have to train the teachers," Parks says. "We took teachers who were struggling to integrate technology, and we showed them how to do it in a professional, systematic way."

Parks is currently working with the third of his advisers, Phyllis Schiffer-Simon, on a plan to wirelessly connect all Broward County schools. Schiffer-Simon heads the Broward Education Communications Network (*www.becon.tv*), a localTV station devoted to school news. The project, called OneBroward, aims to link not only the schools, but to extend wireless support to and through the sheriff's office, county government, two major hospitals, and FAU. Parks calls the trio of Gendron, Coluzzi, and Schiffer-Simon his own "kitchen cabinet." "If I run into technology issues I don't understand," he says, "one of the three will generally know."

Though he considers the strategic technology plan his crowning achievement, he continues to have his handprints on the district's technology programs. One is the Broward Enterprise Education Portal (BEEP), a point of access to digital resources for students, parents, teachers, and administrators. The portal hosts extensive curriculum guidelines and ready-made lesson plans. Another is the Global Learning Initiative Through Digital Education for Students (GLIDES). Parks says the program is an effort to increase student achievement and improve critical-thinking skills through project-based learning. Parks himself created and is now stewarding the district's environmental plan, in which a technology-forward approach is integral: School newspapers and parent newsletters are released digitally, either via e-mail or on school websites.

It was really all an accident that Parks ended up in education. He owes his career to his own tardiness. As an undergraduate in the late 1960s, he planned to go to law school, so in his senior year he showed up to take the LSAT. "The guidance counselor said to me, 'Bobby, you're about 15 minutes late; it has already taken place,'" Parks recalls. "Then he said, 'But I'll tell you, I've got a great place for you to go.'"

With that, he was off to Florida Atlantic University to get a master's in education, on his way to becoming a high school history teacher. He traces his involvement in school politics to 1976, when he joined the Broward County Classroom Teachers Association. He also became chair of the local teachers union's governmental relations committee and would often lobby the Florida Legislature on behalf of education issues. "After all this experience," Parks says, "I saw the people on the school board and I thought, 'I think I can do a better job than they can.'" So he ran for the board and won in 1986. He has been a fixture there since, running unopposed since 2002.

His background as an educator instills everything he does. "I still classify myself as a teacher," Parks says. "My focus is to bring about student achievement, to close the achievement gap, to improve graduation rates. And I see technology and a well-trained faculty as two of the most important things in accomplishing that."

You could call Parks an early early adopter. In 1983, Apple (*www.apple.com*) released the IIe, the company's first successful personal computer. Parks purchased one for his classroom. He also bought an inexpensive program for keeping track of grades. "I think I paid $29," he says. "It was a hard disk called Gradebook; it calculated your grades. It would print the grades out, and I would transfer them over to the hard gradebook that I had to turn in at the end of the year. I thought, 'This is the greatest thing in the world!' That's when I realized the advent of technology in education."

Now 63, Parks is still always on the lookout for a tech-based solution. "I saw teachers standing by a Xerox machine," he says, "and I thought, that's a waste of time. They're in a rush, it's a waste of paper. We worked out a partnership with FedEx Kinko's [*www.fedexkinkos.com*]. The teachers go online, put in their password, call up whatever needs to be printed, indicate how many copies, and it's delivered the next day by FedEx."

It's for storytelling that those genial Southern strains in his voice are so well suited. "When I was teaching, I'd have to bring the woman who ran the Xerox machine chocolates so she would do my work ahead of everybody else's." He lingers on the recollection. "At Christmastime, she did well." THE

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