

# Success Story

## Despite Initial Fears, Mississippi Teacher Transforms Learning with Technology


When the Hattiesburg Public School District in Mississippi received a Cisco® technology grant as part of the 21st Century Schools Initiative (21S), not all teachers were equally enthusiastic. Shannon Rowell, who teaches first grade at Rowan Elementary School, had some concerns about learning and using the new technologies. As an experienced teacher with limited exposure to computers, Rowell was a little intimidated by the prospect of integrating technology into her teaching methods. However, through a process of training, support, and acclimation, Rowell soon learned how to use technology to create a student-centered learning environment.

### New Technology Versus Seasoned Teachers

Rowan Elementary's principal, Melvia Fountain, was mindful of the challenges faced by veteran teachers who are not accustomed to using technology. Rowell, for example, was reluctant to embrace the new program, stating, "It frustrated me because I didn't have the knowledge base that a lot of the other teachers did. I had to readjust my thought patterns and accept that this is not going to go away, so I have to go with it."

The school district provided a professional development program to make the transition easier for teachers, who were not only changing the classroom tools they used, but also their methods of teaching. Teachers at Rowan participated in introductory and then increasingly advanced workshops that focused on integrating technology into instruction in meaningful ways.

An onsite instructional technologist provided online modules and performance proficiency tests to help teachers develop learning plans tailored to their specific needs and abilities. Despite this, Rowell remained resistant and was unsure of her ability to master this new way of doing things. Fountain was encouraging and supportive, without losing sight of the school's overall goals and progress. This structured, yet supportive, approach allowed Rowell to proceed at a comfortable pace, while receiving encouragement from fellow teachers and administrators.

A photograph showing a woman with blonde hair and glasses, identified as Shannon Rowell, leaning over a desk to assist a young boy. They are in a classroom setting with educational posters on the wall.

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**Shannon Rowell**  
Rowan Elementary School  
First-Grade Teacher

## Collaborative Learning

A hallmark of the technology training program is its emphasis on teamwork. This was critical for Rowell, who not only benefited from supportive leadership, but also from being able to turn to colleagues for help. Rowan Elementary also helped foster collaboration by instituting formal environments for sharing best practices and innovative ideas through teams, planning periods, and staff meetings.

Rowell knew she could always ask the other teachers on her first-grade team for help, since they had more experience with technology and were more comfortable with it. She discovered that she could sometimes receive assistance from her students as well. “The students like the idea of coming up to the interactive whiteboard and manipulating things or solving problems,” she says. “They like using the electronic pen. They’re better at it than I am, even now.”

## A Successful Transition

Rowell’s initial reticence eventually became acceptance, followed by excitement. She recalls telling her students about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s historic speech in Washington, D.C., when she realized that she could find it online and show it to them. A few of the students, though only six or seven years old, made observations about the speech that she had not noticed before. For Rowell, this was an example of the new technology adding value to her classroom by bringing a historical event to life.

On another occasion, she showed the students a streaming video to complement a lesson on dinosaurs. “Everything we had just talked about was right there in the video,” Rowell says, “and it was expanded upon and illustrated so beautifully. That made it more real for the kids.”

Rowell also found that technology-based lessons were helping her students focus. She notes, “For just those few minutes, it takes their minds off whatever is going on outside of that classroom.” For many students with challenges in their home lives, the technology has a calming effect, often resulting in a more constructive learning environment. Since many students at Rowan Elementary live in low-income households without access to computers or the Internet, their experiences in the classroom are all the more valuable.

## Positive Outcome

Rowell’s initial fears and feeling of being overwhelmed were gradually alleviated as she participated in the training, excelled at her own pace in a supportive environment, and saw results with her students. Rowell says that the experience has been invaluable. “It helped me grow some backbone and have more faith in myself and my ability as a teacher,” she explains. “I may not have technology 100 percent figured out, but that’s okay. It’s not going to defeat me. I know how to use it, and I’m not afraid anymore.”

While Rowell says that her school district’s participation in the Cisco 21S initiative “dragged me kicking and screaming into the 21st century,” her personal growth and transformation over the past two years are a source of inspiration to other teachers with similar reservations about new technologies. Now, Rowell brings her new skills into the classroom with an ease befitting her years of experience.

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