digiLEARN
DIGITAL LEARNING INSTITUTE

2019 DIGITAL SCHOLARS INITIATIVE REPORT

Personalized learning helps students become active participants in the creation of their own goals and teaches them how to collaborate with others, think critically and solve problems effectively—skills they will need no matter their future career. But personalized and differentiated learning only work when teachers, who are on the front lines with students every day, are equipped with the resources and support they need to be innovative in the classroom.

The Digital Scholars Initiative was created to provide opportunities for teachers and schools to accelerate innovation and build effective personalized and differentiated learning models for all students, but especially for students from economically disadvantaged areas. The initiative was created by teachers who wanted professional development opportunities that were authentic and personalized to their needs in their classrooms. Digital Scholars are master teachers who take on invaluable leadership roles at their school and district levels while remaining practicing classroom teachers. Scholars receive release time, personalized professional development and extended employment so they can:

- Learn how to lead other educators.
- Use their classrooms as Learning Labs for other teachers to observe and learn new instructional practices.
- Collaborate with researchers and other teachers to design solutions to help their schools innovate and design new personalized and differentiated learning models especially for diverse learners.

The Digital Scholars Program launched in January 2018 with Rowan-Salisbury Schools (RSS) in southwestern North Carolina. Three scholars—one each in high school, middle school and elementary school—participated in year one. This past year, RSS expanded the initiative to include two additional scholars. Through additional funding support, the program also expanded to Durham Public Schools. RSS teachers helped initiate the program with two Durham Scholars—one in elementary school, and one in high school.

This year, the Digital Scholars model consisted of the following main activities:

- Personalized professional development for each scholar based on their needs;
- Administrative support for Learning Lab visits of the Scholar's classrooms;
- Administrative support for Digital Scholars to lead their own professional development; and
- Follow up and coaching of teachers who have visited Scholars' classrooms.

The Friday Institute at North Carolina State University partnered with digiLEARN from September 2018 through June 2019 to evaluate the program's second year. We are excited about the initial findings, which show that:

- Digital Scholars received valuable professional learning opportunities, shared their knowledge more and gained greater awareness of and confidence in their role as teacher leaders.
- Learning Labs continue to be a promising strategy for sharing digital and personalized learning instructional practices.
- Visiting Learning Labs has inspired and helped teachers in each district to expand their understanding of digital technology in the classroom and gave them concrete examples of how to implement it.
- Students' participation, communication and enjoyment of the learning process have all increased, and their academic performance is increasing.

Impact on Scholars: Empowerment and Innovation

In May 2019 The Friday Institute conducted end of year surveys and interviews with each of the Digital Scholars about the impact of the program on them, their colleagues, and their students, as well as their reflections on how the program can develop in the future.

Participants in the Digital Scholar program reported that they have:

- Access to new information, tools, strategies, resources and models to improve their teaching, particularly in digital learning and related practices.
- Increased sharing of knowledge about digital learning and related practices with other teachers because of increased confidence in skills for teaching other teachers, increased credibility with peers, and more opportunities to teach and share with colleagues.
- Shown how district culture and support plays a large part in how easily the Digital Scholars can share their knowledge and effectively serve as teacher leaders.
- Increased students' learning and engagement, including increased class participation, a more positive outlook on personalized learning and a better understanding of content.
- Increased their skills and confidence in leading teachers in their school; they use their voice as a teacher leader more often because of the program.

- Allowed the majority of Digital Scholars to have the skills for serving as teacher leaders in their district and are satisfied with the type and number of opportunities they have to use their voice as a teacher leader in their district.

Scholars reported the following immediate changes to their classroom or practice:

- Improved lessons as classroom teachers.
- Expanded horizons concerning teaching, being teacher leaders, and seeking out innovative approaches to education.
- Developed a broader idea repository.
- Fostered collaboration and increased credibility among peers.
- Increased project-based learning.
- Increased confidence in their teaching skills both in the classroom and for teaching other teachers.
- Helped foster new opportunities for sharing knowledge with colleagues.

Professional Learning

The Digital Scholars attended professional training to develop their digital learning instructional skills and used digital learning practices in the classroom. This included the Blended and Personalized Learning Conference in Providence, Rhode Island where they attended and presented.

Some areas that they reported increased skills include:

- Exposure to digital learning models and strategies.
- Improved understanding of student voice and how to amplify it through classroom instruction and activities.
- Improved implementation of project-based learning.

Impact on Visiting Teachers and on Students

VISITING TEACHERS

Teachers who visited a Learning Lab reported:

- Being surprised and inspired by the student behavior they observed in the Digital Scholars' classrooms, noting high levels of engagement and on task work, particularly independent work.
- Interest in trying many different strategies and tools they observed, particularly playlists, in their own classrooms.

After the Learning Lab, many had specific questions about how to implement and manage the teaching practices and tools they observed.

Inspiration & Immediate Changes

Visiting teachers were inspired by the student behavior and outcomes they observed, as well as many of the tools and strategies in the Digital Scholars' classrooms, including

- Playlists
- Flexible seating
- Student independent engagement and individualized activities
- Digital tools
- Google Classroom
- Real-life situations
- Technology integration
- Music creation applications

IMPACT ON STUDENTS

Digital Scholars reported great changes in students in their classrooms:

Change in engagement

- Increased participation
- Increased conversation and communication
- More positive outlook on personalized pathways
- Increased enjoyment in the learning process

Change in Student Learning

- Observed academic growth
- Better understanding of content
- Embrace of a fail forward approach
- Asking more questions
- Greater valuing of feedback

Moving Forward

Over the first two years of our Digital Scholars work, we have validated our model and confirmed that, with strategic programatic support and focus on personalized professional development, our Scholars are able to build and demonstrate the right skills for success. As we move forward with the Digital Scholars initiative, we are:

- Seeking funds to expand the Digital Scholars Initiative to other districts in North Carolina and in other states.
- Working with the North Carolina State Board of Education, along with boards in other states, to develop Digital Scholars as a recognized micro-credential.
- Developing digiLEARN as the credentialing organization for the Digital Scholars credential.
- Developing a growing cohort of Digital Scholars who have the ability to develop other teachers in their own districts into Scholars, thereby creating sustainablility and capacity at the district level.