

Maximizing Innovation On Any Budget



CHAT

Being an innovator means “thinking big” and inspiring everyone in your district to do the same

—even when your budget is \$4,500 per student. That’s what Linda Clark, who is superintendent of the West Ada, Idaho school district, does today. In fact, she’s been doing it for decades. Learn how her teachers acquire technology, and use it to engage students. And find out how Ms. Clark collaborates with other innovators in her role as leader of a district that is a founding member of The Digital Promise League of Innovative Schools. This national coalition of 52 district leaders is dedicated to improving outcomes for students and solving K-12 school challenges with learning technology and education research. Sara Schapiro, the league’s director, will explain how the most forward-thinking schools innovate.

*This chat took place on Thursday, Feb. 26, 2015,
at 2 p.m. ET.*

Guest

Linda Clark

superintendent,
West Ada school district, Idaho

MODERATOR

Sara Schapiro

director, Digital Promise League
of Innovative Schools

Michele Molnar

staff writer, Education Week
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Stacey Decker

Good morning! I hope you are looking forward to today's chat on maximizing innovation, sponsored by DreamBox Learning. I've opened the chat for questions, so please submit any you have for our guests in the comment box above.

We will be back at 2:00 p.m. ET with Linda Clark and Sara Schapiro. See you then!

Stacey Decker

Our live chat with Linda Clark and Sara Schapiro starts in 5 minutes! Submit questions now in the box above.

Michele Molnar

Welcome everyone! I'm Michele Molnar, and I'll be your moderator today.

Michele Molnar

A big welcome to our special guests, Linda Clark and Sara Schapiro. We're honored to have you both join us.

Michele Molnar

First things first. Linda, would you please introduce yourself to our audience?

Dr. Linda Clark

Thanks. I am Linda Clark, superintendent of West Ada School District (37,000 students) in Idaho

Michele Molnar

And Sara, would you please tell everyone what you do, and who you represent?

Sara Schapiro

Thanks for inviting me to participate, Michele! I'm Sara Schapiro and I'm the Director of the League of Innovative Schools. The League is part of Digital Promise, which is a bipartisan, nonprofit organization chartered by Congress to spur innovation in education...

Michele Molnar

Great to have you both with us.

Michele Molnar

Well, I'm delighted to share that Linda has just been honored as an Education Week 2015 Leader to Learn From for her work fostering innovation in the West Ada, Idaho school district. You can see her video, and read about her here:

<http://leaders.edweek.org/profile/linda-l-clark-superintendent-fostering-innovation/>

And her district is a founding member of the League of Innovative Schools, which is now in its 4th year of helping district leaders innovate.

Sara Schapiro

To get started on that big mission, we established the League, a national coalition of now 57 public school districts, representing more than 3.2 million students. One of the core goals of the League is to connect these districts with researchers, entrepreneurs, and, most importantly, each other...

Michele Molnar

That's terrific!

Michele Molnar

Linda, what innovations in West Ada have drawn the most attention of other districts across the U.S.?

Dr. Linda Clark

Our creative use of space to address growth; the “cafeteria” approach to PD; implementation of a “rotational” model for use of digital devices are among the most asked about

Michele Molnar

Could you explain “the cafeteria approach to PD?”

Dr. Linda Clark

Teachers can choose from a wide array of options, including a robust web site (Teacher Tools), use of academic coaches, online instruction, face to face, university courses.

Michele Molnar

Everyone likes choices. That’s a great array!

Michele Molnar

Linda, please share how you’ve been able to get so much innovation into a district that has one of the lowest per-pupil spending rates in the nation.

Dr. Linda Clark

We have a culture of Continuous Improvement that permeates the district - everyone constantly working to get better. Making every dollar count is a big motivator

Michele Molnar

Do you track who helps save money - or get grants - and publicly reward that?

Dr. Linda Clark

Most of our projects are truly a team effort and our partners are very important in the process. We have been giving Teacher Innovation grants as part of our digital conversion. We also recognize teachers at board meetings, etc. There are several opportunities for teacher recognition - through the annual Tech Expo, quarterly Teacher Innovation Showcases, online Teacher Talk chats, etc. -- Teachers teaching Teachers

Michele Molnar

Thanks, Linda!

Michele Molnar

Sara, what do you think distinguishes Linda’s approach as an innovator?

Sara Schapiro

As your piece highlights, Michele, Linda does not let the lack of district resources prevent her from bringing new ideas, approaches to teaching and learning, and technology to West Ada...

Sara Schapiro

Linda also believes that innovation cannot be a top-down mandate from the central office. As she just said herself, Linda believes that innovation should be driven by teachers in the classroom. And she puts the limited resources she does have behind teachers who are willing to take a risk and try new approaches in their classrooms.

Michele Molnar

Sara, what are some other ways you’ve seen districts get creative in finding funds to try new things?

Sara Schapiro

Many districts that decide to make an investment in new tech and digital tools are taking a look at their budgets and figuring out how to pay for new tools – and phase out things that are becoming obsolete. And they’re becoming more creative about how to purchase and leverage new tools in the classroom...

Sara Schapiro

Some districts lease devices, which saves a significant amount of money. Mooresville Graded School District does this...

Michele Molnar

That's a great idea.

Sara Schapiro

Other districts purchase refurbished devices and some do a Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) program. But there are definitely some equity issues so districts need to be prepared to provide devices to those who don't have them. And districts, like West Ada, save a lot of money by taking advantage of open education resources.

Michele Molnar

Interesting equity challenges around BYOD in some districts. Linda, do you have BYOD?

Dr. Linda Clark

We are using BYOD in a few schools. The district will augment the classrooms with devices to ensure equity

Michele Molnar

That approach ensures everyone has an opportunity. I like it!

Dr. Linda Clark

The classroom teachers like it, too

Michele Molnar

Now, for a question from our audience. I'll start with one from Michelle.

Comment From Michelle

Some people say that new technology allows districts to find ways to save money and be innovative. Has that worked in your district?

Michele Molnar

Linda, that one's for you.

Dr. Linda Clark

For us, it has been more a matter of redirecting the resources. As a tech leader from the early days, we had funds directed to desk tops, etc. We have redirected these funds

Michele Molnar

Sara, do you think technology encourages innovation?

Comment From Ann

What a few examples of how West Ada School District is funding innovation on their existing budget?

Sara Schapiro

Technology is certainly a tool for innovation, but I think we need to be careful not to make those two terms interchangeable.

Michele Molnar

Good point, Sara

Michele Molnar

Linda, can you take the comment from Ann, who wants to know a few examples of your funding innovation on your budget?

Dr. Linda Clark

We have a Plant Facility fund that is outside of our general fund. This has been the tradition source of funding for technology and we are using it for devices. We accessed E Rate money for the initial teacher grants and now can use some State Tech money for grants. We also are very active in seeking external grant funds

Dr. Linda Clark

Basically, we are looking under “every rock” for funds

Michele Molnar

Yes, I was surprised to learn that you hired a grants “point person” - but it seems to have worked. Your teachers work with this person, right?

Dr. Linda Clark

Yes. She helps find external grants and assists teachers and schools in writing grant applications. She is worth her weight in gold!

Michele Molnar

Now I have a question from Sean.

Comment From Sean

Linda, Sara -- do you see districts becoming more reluctant to make big ed-tech purchases, after witnessing the problems that districts like Los Angeles have gone through?

Dr. Linda Clark

I think districts are taking a more measured approach -- finding the device that fits the situation, providing pilots, etc. before making big expenditures. Our innovative teachers have taught us a great deal about what works where. . .

Sara Schapiro

I agree. I don't think districts are more reluctant to purchase technology, but they are definitely trying to be careful about what they're purchasing and why. Technology decisions should be grounded in the learning needs of students.

Dr. Linda Clark

We use multiple devices in our elementary schools, for example, but are making changes now as we roll out to more schools. Based on what teachers are learning.

Michele Molnar

Being innovative means being very flexible, right Linda?

Michele Molnar

Sara, we have a question from Gordon for you.

Comment From Gordon

Sara, would explain the finance case for leasing vs purchase, if a district is allowed by law so to do?

Dr. Linda Clark

Yes, but within limits. Someone asked me of our innovation created the “Wild West”. . . to ensure that it does not, we have built some framework around choices, etc. For example, we have limited the device types to ensure that we had the IT staff to support them.

Michele Molnar

Linda, you've tamed the West!

Sara Schapiro

There are two financial benefits some districts have found from leasing. The first is that devices have a short shelf life and leasing gives districts a chance to upgrade their devices when needed. The other factor is that it keeps a consistent line item in a district's budget as opposed to needing larger amounts of money every few years.

Dr. Linda Clark

We are trying. We are engaged in changing virtually everything we know about education. Teaching and learning must look very different to meet the needs of this generation. That requires innovation, determination, and commitment.

Michele Molnar

Thanks to you both. We have an interesting question about Title I funds next

Comment From Ann

Have they found they are able to use any Title I funds for technology?

Dr. Linda Clark

Yes. The requirements for Title I spending have recently expanded the option to use the funds for technology purchases. Our Title schools are making good use of this option.

Michele Molnar

That's interesting. Thanks, Linda.

Michele Molnar

Our next question is from Ann about teacher-leadership.

Comment From Ann

Does the district use the "teacher leader" approach to assisting with professional learning? If so, could she provide an example?

Dr. Linda Clark

Yes. We have long believed in teachers teaching teachers. Our teachers teach university classes, provide face-to-face PD, are highlighted at the Tech Fair and Innovation Showcases, on our web site, etc. This is the most effective approach to PD that makes a difference.

Michele Molnar

Again, it goes back to giving choices for PD, and for being a PD presenter, too. Very good.

Michele Molnar

Sara, would you please tell us a little how the League of Innovative Schools spurs innovation among its members?

Sara Schapiro

The core principle of the League is that districts can become more innovative if they can learn from each other and be inspired and supported by each other's practice. Districts should know they are not alone in this work and we've worked hard to bring all of these dynamic practitioners together through the League.

Michele Molnar

That's great. Ann has a question about how it works.

Comment From Ann

How are the league of schools connecting or collaborating? Through conference calls, site visits, online?

Sara Schapiro

The League comes together twice a year for in-person meetings that bring together superintendents, district leaders, researchers, and entrepreneurs. We have regular advisory committee calls (and Linda is part of that group) and there are currently 8 working groups that regularly meet virtually on topics such as competency-based education, assessment, and funding.

Michele Molnar

Linda, as a founding member of the league - and as someone who was already an innovator - what have you gotten out of your district's membership?

Dr. Linda Clark

Participation in the League has added real power to our efforts! Sharing with our peers, visiting one another's districts, etc. has allowed us not only to get new ideas but more importantly, has provided the momentum to take ideas and use them as spring boards to expand. The League, through the 8 working groups, is tackling big issues.

Michele Molnar

Yes, I've seen the 8 working groups in action, and it's a sight to behold!

Michele Molnar

Now I'll ask Linda to give us some examples based on the following question from our audience:

Comment From Mizzougrad

Supt. Clark, with a per pupil allocation of under \$5,000, how do you even begin to dream up innovative schooling approaches?

Dr. Linda Clark

We always look for ways to expand our resources. Here are a couple of examples. . . We created Schools of Choice in our under-enrolled schools to provide choice but also to entice folks from over-crowded areas back into those in decline. In this way, we are able to not have to go to the public for bonding for 8 years. Another example is the creation of a comprehensive high school and PT magnet school within our district office. . . done without bonding or increasing taxes. . .

Dr. Linda Clark

When we face an issue, we start by examining the alternatives for addressing it. External partners are also important in this process.

Michele Molnar

I thought it was interesting how you approached the new school idea after the bond issue failed last year. Now you have a new, innovative proposal. Can you explain?

Dr. Linda Clark

Yes. The new elementary school that is part of the revised bond will be built in partnership with the YMCA and Meridian Library. All three entities will be housed in a single building, saving tax payer dollars due to maximization of space. It will cut 2 - 2.5 million from the cost of the elementary school. It is a very exciting venture.

Michele Molnar

I think it's interesting that the bond failure just sent you all back to the drawing board.

Michele Molnar

And you came up with a hybrid answer that you hope will work. Good luck with that election!

Michele Molnar

Sara, how are districts measuring the results of their innovative efforts?

Dr. Linda Clark

Thank you. A bond on the second day of school is challenging. Our parents are more mobilized now and we have high hopes for March 10th.

Sara Schapiro

Traditional metrics are not going to be sufficient to really capture what's happening in these new digitally rich learning environments. For example, Eian Harm, who leads research and innovation efforts at West Ada, is collecting student survey data on engagement, collaboration, and problem-solving...

Sara Schapiro

This type of qualitative data on cognitive and non-cognitive skills better represent what innovative districts like West Ada - and others in the League - are trying to achieve. Eian is also collecting data on teacher satisfaction and assessment of their own performance...

Sara Schapiro

Digital Promise produced a case study about the work that West Ada is doing and how they're measuring it. You can find that and other district case studies here: <http://www.digitalpromise.org/blog?category=case-studies>

Michele Molnar

Interesting to me that West Ada funds a position for "research and innovation" ... Does getting the data can support getting the funding for innovation?

Michele Molnar

That question is for Linda

Dr. Linda Clark

This is a recent position and it stemmed from our continuous improvement commitment. We can only make good decisions if we have good data. Tracking the results of our innovations and the changes that are underway in teaching/learning is very important. The achievement in our digital classrooms is hitting new highs. We need to know this and know what is influencing the changes so that we can replicate the strong things and eliminate the weaker ones.

Michele Molnar

Very interesting idea. I bet the position will pay for itself eventually.

Dr. Linda Clark

I believe it already has done so.

Michele Molnar

Sara, if there's one thing you would encourage districts to do to increase their "IQ" - their "innovation quotient" - what would that be?

Sara Schapiro

Applications for the League of Innovative Schools open this summer :)

Michele Molnar

Ah! So they would go to the Digital Promise/League website to apply?

Michele Molnar

We are almost out of time. I want to give each of our speakers "the floor" to add one last thought before we wrap up. Linda, any last pointers/tips for the audience?

Dr. Linda Clark

Think big! Engage folks in finding creative answers. Support innovation!

Michele Molnar

Great advice! Sara, your parting thoughts?

Sara Schapiro

So glad you asked! You can sign up for updates from Digital Promise about the League:

<http://www.digitalpromise.org/page/s/league>

You can also check out some of our case studies, including the one on West Ada here:

<http://www.digitalpromise.org/blog?category=case-studies>

Michele Molnar

Wonderful! Thank you Sara, and thank you, Linda. And thanks to our audience. One more thing ...

Michele Molnar

Everyone is welcome to join us on March 18 for our “Leaders to Learn From” live event in Washington, D.C., with Linda, 15 other leaders and Michael Fullan and Deborah DeLisle. Learn more here: <http://leaders.edweek.org/event-details/>

Dr. Linda Clark

Thanks so much for the opportunity to participate.

Sara Schapiro

Linda and her district are great to learn from and we’re excited that their efforts are being recognized by EdWeek.

Sara Schapiro

Thanks so much!

Michele Molnar

You’ve been great guest presenters. Thanks - and keep on innovating!

Stacey Decker

Thanks everybody for joining us for this lively chat, sponsored by DreamBox Learning.

Read more about Linda here: <http://leaders.edweek.org/profile/linda-l-clark-superintendent-fostering-innovation/>