

How District Leaders Tap Tech To Solve Pressing Problems



CHAT

Leaders from very different types of school districts—urban, suburban, and rural—are figuring out how to use technology to personalize learning, provide equity in education, and to help students develop the technology skills they will need to succeed in college and the workplace. Gail Pletnick, the superintendent of the 24,000-student Dysart Unified School District in Arizona and Dan Walker, an assistant superintendent for the 4,000-student Lower Kuskokwim School District in Alaska, will discuss how they're using technology tools and approaches such as video conferencing, 1-to-1, Bring Your Own Device computing programs, and blended learning to improve student learning. They'll explain how to make these initiatives work on tight budgets.

This chat took place on Thursday, April 24, 2014, at 4 p.m. ET.

Guests

Gail Pletnick

superintendent,
Dysart Unified school district, Ariz.

Daniel Walker

assistant superintendent,
Lower Kuskokwim school district, Alaska

MODERATOR

Michelle R. Davis

senior writer, Education Week
Digital Directions

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Amplify.

Stacey Decker

Good morning! I hope you are looking forward to today's chat, How District Leaders Tap Tech. to Solve Pressing Problems, sponsored by Amplify. I've opened the chat up for questions, so please submit any you have for our guests below.

We will be back at 4 p.m. ET with Gail Pletnick and Daniel Walker. See you then!

Stacey Decker

Hello and thank you for joining us for today's chat, sponsored by Amplify. We will be starting our chat in 10 minutes. Please feel free to submit your questions to our guests!

Michelle Davis

Good afternoon and welcome to today's chat.

We're thrilled to have two education leaders with us today who will discuss ways schools and districts can use technology to help solve problems. For background on this chat, please take a look at the profiles I wrote of our two guests for Education Week's Leaders to Learn From 2014 report. You can find Gail Pletnick's profile here <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/03/05/23ltlf-pletnick.h33.html?qs=gail+pletnick>

Michelle Davis

And Dan Walker's profile is here

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/03/05/23ltlf-walker.h33.html?qs=kuskokwim>

If you want to take a look at the rest of our 2014 Leaders to Learn From, you can access all the profiles here

<http://leaders.edweek.org/leaders-to-learn-from-2014-report/>

Michelle Davis

Now I'd like our guests to introduce themselves. Gail and Dan?

Dan Walker

Hi everyone...

Dan Walker

I'm the ass't superintendent of the lower kuskokwim school district in Alaska

Gail Pletnick

Thank you, Michelle. Hello, I am Gail Pletnick, Supt of Dysart USD. We are a growing district north west of Phoenix, AZ with approximately 25,000 students . We are dedicated to preparing our students as 21st century leaders and learners. That requires using technology to transform learning and equip students for the new century world of work. See our strategic plan and profile of a Dysart Graduate on our website www.dysart.org

Dan Walker

We have 4000 students, in 27 schools spread over a an area the size of Ohio

Comment From Beth

Gail/Dan, how did you start the process of increasing connectivity in your districts?

Michelle Davis

Dan, why don't you tackle this one from Beth.

Dan Walker

We have an extensive distance learning network where we run live interactive two way video conferencing to reach our remote students

Dan Walker

Thanks Michelle...

Dan Walker

We starting by working with our ISP

Dan Walker

With such a huge geographic area we needed to make sure our “up” time was maximized

Dan Walker

We had to make sure our local infrastructure could handle all the live video conferencing we wanted to throw at it

Dan Walker

We set about increasing our local infrastructure in our schools through the use of erate, priority 2 funding...

Dan Walker

We spent about 2 years bringing everything up to speed with our local infrastructure...4
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Dan Walker

Our ISP simultaneously was doing a similar upgrade

Michelle Davis

Thanks Dan. Gail, I know your district emphasizes personalized learning. Can you give Lamm any advice? And can you talk about your district philosophy on personalized learning?

Comment From Lamm

Where can I find resources on using technology for personalized learning?

Gail Pletnick

Sure. Lamm we have been working with a number of national and state collaboratives on this goal

Gail Pletnick

For instance, the Alliance for Excellent Education
<http://all4ed.org/>

Gail Pletnick

They provide a number of free resources and have established a network of districts working on building that 21st century learner environment

Gail Pletnick

Another great resource is EdLeader21. A group of districts working together on processes and tools for this purpose

Michelle Davis

Thanks Gail. Dan, you have a 1-to-1 initiative at some of your schools. Can you answer this question from Staci?

Comment From Staci

I like the idea of iPads but I have a hard time keeping kids focused on them. What are some ways to make them not play around?

Gail Pletnick

At the state level Dysart has joined with districts looking at online resources including OER resources and works with the Center for the Future of AZ

Dan Walker

Staci...I have heard similar concerns from our teachers...

Dan Walker

I'm not sure there is an easy answer to the challenge....it is about creating activities using the technology that are engaging to kids....

Dan Walker

We are constantly looking for new activities and creative ideas that engage learners with their tools...

Dan Walker

as our teachers have increased their capacity for using the tech...things like smart boards...they have created fun and exciting activities. SmartTech has some really good resources on their website for educators to use that are interactive that are helpful for our teachers.

Michelle Davis

Dan, let me follow that up with a question from Russell G.

Comment From Russell G.

In going with a 1:1 program, how do you reason with the more tenured instructors who may not want to give up their print texts?

Dan Walker

Great...increasing web traffic is a constant and ongoing problem for us. We have invested in hardware to 'shape' the traffic on our network and prioritize mission critical services.

Dan Walker

That helps but there is constant pressure with new media formats that suck up the resources. We also communicate with our ISP to look at creative ways to increase efficiency.

Dan Walker

For the 1 to 1...

Dan Walker

it is about communicating the vision. It doesn't happen overnight...

Dan Walker

I would start with small steps. Help them experience some positive first steps with using the technology. They may be more open after that. If there are other instructors who are experiencing success that will add to the pressure to expand their use....

Dan Walker

I sometimes use the gentle pressure, relentlessly applied approach. But really it is about communicating the vision.

Michelle Davis

And Gail, I know you also have a 1-to1 project there. So to the larger point, how do you encourage teachers in your district who may not be as comfortable with technology to get on board?

Gail Pletnick

We have found that providing embedded support helps . . .

Gail Pletnick

We established an Innovative Ambassadors program . . .

Gail Pletnick

These are classroom teachers who model and mentor others on their campus on how to transform learning with technology. See for more information

<https://schoolweb.dysart.org/EdTech/Content.aspx?eiID=744>

Gail Pletnick

They also do Technology Showcases before Board Meetings and at special events. Success breeds success and encourages “risk taking” See the Ambassadors in action

<https://video.dysart.org/Videos/Video.aspx?v=273>

Gail Pletnick

We have had great success with that support system.

Dan Walker

Gail is exactly right on the success breeds success...and if kids are feeling successful teachers tend to go there...we also do a tremendous amount of PD.

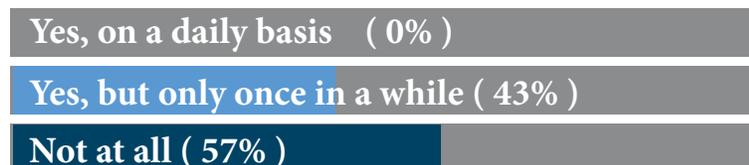
Michelle Davis

Thanks Gail. Dan, technology is so important to your district because many students are taught by teachers via video feed. So Celeste has a great question for you.

Comment From Celeste

How often does the regular instructional technology get interrupted by testing needs? Has the system every overloaded and caused difficulties for both sections of education?

DOES A LACK OF TECHNOLOGY OR TECHNOLOGY INFRASTRUCTURE IN YOUR SCHOOL OR DISTRICT PREVENT YOU FROM ACHIEVING YOUR EDUCATIONAL GOALS?



Dan Walker

Wow...this is a huge issue for us...

Dan Walker

We have limited bandwidth already...

Dan Walker

so when you add regular instructional technology use along side testing requirements, it is a recipe for disaster...

Dan Walker

Going back to the technology infrastructure is part of the answer ...

Dan Walker

we do everything we can to prioritize traffic on our network so mission critical services are a top priority..

Dan Walker

the challenge is that the more we use and come to depend on the technology, the more bandwidth we require...

Dan Walker

fortunately our tech workers monitor our network and respond to issues in timely manner...

Dan Walker

we know she our testing windows are open so we monitor the network and make sure the computers that are accessing the testing environment are working appropriately....

Dan Walker

We have to keep our eyes open and be ready at a moments notice to fix problems...and even then it can be frustrating for teachers and administrators...and especially students when they get knocked off the network while testing.

Gail Pletnick

We experienced infrastructure issues when we turned to BYOD as an answer to our hardware issues. It was great students were bringing in all these devices but our wireless . . .

Gail Pletnick

could not support all the devices. During the last two years we have upgraded the wireless networks at 14 locations out of 27 locations . . .

Gail Pletnick

We also increased our bandwidth two years ago from 400Mps to 700Mps. This year, depending on E-Rate funding we are increasing this bandwidth to 4-6 Gigs for less of the cost of 700Mps .

Michelle Davis

Gail, you've been very successful with your BYOD, or bring your own device, program in Dysart. You've told me it helps offset district costs and brings more technology to students. So this question from Sam is for you.

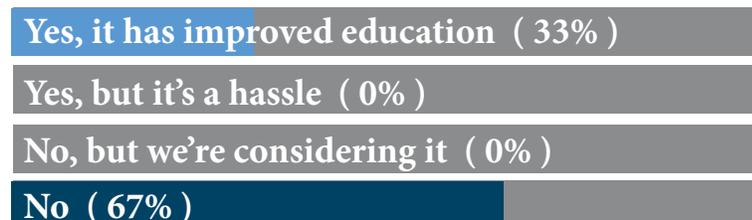
Comment From Sam

With cell phones becoming more and more prevalent, how are you including the use of smartphones in classrooms?

Gail Pletnick

Sam, students use these founds for research, for collaborating with others, in place of other tools they used to have to carry like calculators, for notetaking . . .

DOES YOUR SCHOOL OR DISTRICT HAVE A 1-TO-1 OR BRING YOUR OWN DEVICE PROGRAM?



Gail Pletnick

Anything that is in the cloud is on their desktops and can be used as a learning tool. To see more ideas look at <https://www.dysart.org/Sites/Default.aspx?pgid=209>

Michelle Davis

Dan, I know that you're in a low-income district. Do you have some advice for Celeste?

Comment From Celeste

Is there funding sources out in the land of educational funding or grants that can be accessed to upgrade technology needs for a school system?

Dan Walker

Yes...

Dan Walker

We have accessed grant opportunities from the USDA through their Rural Utilities Services..RUS

Dan Walker

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Dan Walker

These are grants that are typically used for rural and low income areas....

Dan Walker

We made a huge upgrade in our distance learning network with one of these grants 2 years ago...

Dan Walker

they require a match and the more match your district can contribute the more points you get in the scoring....so you have to be prepared for that...but if you qualify, they will fund up to \$500,000 per grant award...

Dan Walker

I know of several rural districts that applied for multiple years and received multiple awards....

Dan Walker

another idea is to partner with industry...if you are doing any STEM initiatives many of the industry partners are willing to provide funding to help with technology needs.

Gail Pletnick

You can also utilize Title I funds for hardware and software and e-rate for infrastructure. Also, we have asked our communities to support our efforts like PTA at the site level and have gone after local grants . . .

Gail Pletnick

even small amounts add up. CTE funds can also be utilized and partnership with industries interested in having skilled employees can help with specific technology or software needs.

Michelle Davis

Gail, some people are skeptical about the use of technology in education. Joff has a question related to this.

Comment From Joff

Does technology really do anything that can't be done without it? Does it mostly just depend on grade level?

Gail Pletnick

Jeff, the answer is absolutely.

Gail Pletnick

We have lots of examples to share. . .

Gail Pletnick

We just did a 4C's Expo on our PD day featuring examples of how technology was transforming learning in our classrooms

<https://www.dysart.org/Sites/Default.aspx?pgid=1826>

Gail Pletnick

We work to insure technology is used when no other tool can produce the same results We have test drives and purchasing processes outlined before we will even buy new technology . . .

IS YOUR ADMINISTRATION SUPPORTIVE OF USING TECHNOLOGY FOR EDUCATION IN YOUR SCHOOL OR DISTRICT?



Gail Pletnick

See see <https://sites.google.com/a/dysart.org/technology-purchasing/home> for our technology purchase approval process and our test drive process <https://www.dysart.org/Sites/Default.aspx?pgID=186>

Michelle Davis

Here at Education Week we've been writing a lot about the education marketplace. I'd like you both to briefly respond to Todd about the best ways for companies to develop products that help educators and how to get them into districts. Dan, why don't we start with you.

Comment From Todd

You both seem to want to maximize the benefits of technology in the classroom, which is excellent. We are an education company that has a free product that's a hit with teachers. We'd like to start working more closely with school districts. What's the best way to work with both your districts?

Dan Walker

Sure...Todd...We are constantly bombarded by vendors wanting to help solve tech problems or provide solutions....

Dan Walker

one of my guiding principles is how does it help us meet our mission...

Dan Walker

making connections with district staff who can help things happen is key...We attend a lot of tech conferences and as we see solutions that help us meet that mission we are willing to try them out...I'd be happy to look at any products, but we vet them pretty thoroughly...teachers are incredibly busy so if I can do the vetting for them then I can provide them with quality products that help solve their challenges.

Michelle Davis

Gail?

Gail Pletnick

In our district we do not start with the idea we will use a piece of technology, we start with an educational challenge or goal. So your marketing material would have to specifically describe what . . .

Gail Pletnick

purpose it serves, how it is used, address sustainability and be willing to allow it to be test driven in our district before we would consider the item . . .

Gail Pletnick

We have had companies approach us when they read about one of our initiatives and provide that type of information . . .

Gail Pletnick

we then will work with them and look at what they have to offer.

Michelle Davis

I want to thank both Gail and Dan for their great insight and for sharing their expertise. For more information on ed-tech topics you'll find lots of stories on the Education Week web site and you can follow me on Twitter @EWmdavis. Since it's Take Your Child to Work Day, I also want to thank my daughter Madeline, who is here with me and helped me come up with the polls today.

Dan Walker

Thank you Michelle!

Dan Walker

And way to go Madeline!!! Great Job!

Gail Pletnick

Thank you, Michelle and thanks for all the great questions from folks!