



Digital Aspirations in Education Podcast S1E3 (transcript)

Welcome to Part 1 of our conversation with Dr. Amy DelCorvo, CEO and Executive Director of NYSCATE. You can listen to Part 2 at Digital Aspirations in Education Podcast S1E4

Jared Heiner: So, hello again, and welcome to the Digital Aspirations in Education Podcast, brought to you by Aspire Technology Partners in conjunction with Cisco. I'm very excited today. I have Dr. Amy DelCorvo on with me. She is the CEO and Executive Director for NYSCATE. It's a pleasure, Amy, to have you on and to have you speak a little bit about what NYSCATE does, and where you see things going in the future. Can you just, real quick, give an overview of the NYSCATE background? NYSCATE has been around since the '60s. What's the main charge and how are you impacting K-12 education and beyond right now in this moment?

Dr. Amy DelCorvo: Sure. Thank you, Jared. NYSCATE is an acronym. It stands for New York State Association for Computers and Technologies in Education. We were formed in 1965, and it was the data programmers, the vacuum tubes; and that group, which is very small, understandably, moved into more of the technology coordinator, director of technology—those roles. And, at that point, again, the organization was roughly around 500 to 700 people. And the reason for that, it was one person per district. So, you had one person on your data center, one person who had the control for the entire district.

And I think the biggest change that NYSCATE has gone through is that that control has shifted from the one person per district to every single teacher, staff member, administrator throughout every district. So, our membership right now is just under 30,000. And it really is just a fraction of what it could be in New York State, but we have seen exponential growth because we are all about empowering teachers, and administrators, and, again, anyone supporting education.

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And so, you ask about our mission. As I said, NYSCATE has been around since 1965. Our mission is to enhance education through the appropriate use of technology, and the emphasis is truly on appropriate. And why I say that is that it doesn't mean one-size-fits-all, one Chromebook for every student, one laptop for every student. It really is utilizing the power of the technology to assist every educator and every learner with their diverse needs.

How NYSCATE Supported Teachers During the Transition to Remote Learning

JH: Well, it's interesting you say that. And having been in the classroom myself, one of the things that I've always kind of used, foundationally, was this idea that the kids and the learning drive the type of the technology that we're utilizing. And I think for a while - and correct me if I'm wrong - there was somewhat of an approach to one-size-fits-all because we were trying to figure out how to integrate. Now, we're starting to see some major shifts in terms of what's in the best interest of my individual learners, because everything has shifted now, because we're in the middle of a pandemic. It's a complete game changer.

And I know you guys have done a ton around supporting teachers because that was night and day shift. Day one, you're in a classroom. Day two, you're at home. And you're not going back to that classroom. What are some of the things that you've really seen from a shift perspective for NYSCATE internally, in terms of how you're supporting teachers?

Dr. DelCorvo: Yeah. Well, internally, this has been our life's work. Everybody that is in our organization - our staff, our board - we believed and invested in education technology for years now. And what this did, it catapulted our mission, as you said, overnight because nobody planned on this happening. Our response internally. So, NYSCATE, I shared who we are. Really, what we do is we provide professional development services to all the districts in and outside of New York State.

Primarily, New York State is who we focus on, but we had an event that kicked off yesterday. We had a woman join from Saudi Arabia. Eight different states were in attendance. Obviously, in the virtual world, that can happen. But how we deliver our services are through events. We

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would run conferences and workshops. And we would like to think that NYSCATE is more of a convener than anything. The word 'networking,' obviously, you think of the cables and the wires. Networking in the sense of NYSCATE is people. It's connecting best practices, what works, what doesn't work—people just sharing and learning from each other. And that's always been what NYSCATE has stood for.

So, when COVID hit, our staff got together and said, "Okay, what do we do?" being a non-profit. And we do have a staff. There's four of us that support 30,000. But the initial response could have been, "Oh, my goodness. How are we going to be in business for not holding these events?" But it was never even the discussion. The discussion was, "What can we do for, not only our members, but for every educator in the state?" And our response to that—we had a couple hours to brainstorm—and the response was, "We need to provide real-time support when teachers need it and where they need it."

And we developed—we called it Office Hours—[something] where we would pull the best of the best from every area in New York State. We would put them online through a Zoom. And as teachers, and not the ones that were on that upper 10% that were used to teaching remotely, every teacher did not know what Zoom was or Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams. They had no idea. And, really, we need to understand that teachers were thrown into this environment. And what we, number one, did is we provided support. No matter what their question was, what their topic was, we were there to help them through it, and really do an awful lot of hand-holding.

And, out of that, we delivered over a million minutes of, not just only Office Hours, but over a million minutes of what stemmed out of Office Hours, which were subject-related webinars, live webinars. But we archived every session that we ran, and we polled our members and said, "Okay, give us what you're the expert on, what your credential's on," and we had folks from all over the state deliver on other platforms. Again, as I said Microsoft Teams, Google Classrooms, Castle Learning, but also going into the actual tools themselves. How do we help an algebra teacher teach in a virtual environment using graphing software? How do we assist science teachers doing real-time simulations online? And we pulled in these content experts.

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And, honestly, out of my 10 years of CEO, my 30 years, I was on the board 20 years prior to that, I cannot tell you how rewarding that was just to see, not only the membership grow, which was a nice aftermath of it, but just to see these teachers that attended every single day and called in every single day. And never was it a victim mentality. It was, "I am going to do what I need to do for my students." And I think you're seeing that throughout the country, but that's why educators need to be celebrated right now because they really have stepped up to the plate.

JH: Well, clearly. And I think I saw this someplace on social media: very few professions have been asked, if ever, to transform so dramatically in such a short period of time, yet it happened. And when you think about it, too, I don't want to put down any profession, but when you're dealing with interacting with other people, there's some real complexities to that. And when you first jumped on, you heard my conversation around elementary school teachers, in particular, who are so used to doing behavioral things and, now, that shifted to what does that look like when you're doing it virtually, and how do those expectations change.

Virtual Teaching: Culture Shifts and Student Development

So, to the point you made, it's not just a matter of I do graphing, for example, virtually, but what does it look like to teach virtually? How does the culture shift? And I think that that's one of the biggest areas where we're seeing a lot of folks looking around going, "What happens next?" Because, as you well know, the future coming back in the fall is uncertain. So, what are your thoughts around what that's going to look like, and possible professional development around how do we shift that culture?

Dr. DelCorvo: Yeah, that's a great question, Jared. And I think that that question is happening in every district in every state right now. What does the fall look like? And my crystal ball is not clearer than anybody else's. There are a lot of lessons, I think, that will come out of this, a lot of societal issues. Schools do not just provide instruction. Schools provide daycare, in many cases. They provide nutrition and food in many situations. And I think society has tackled some of the larger issues like the ones I just mentioned. I think learning itself is going to take on an entire new meaning as we come back in any form.

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And the reason for that is we have learned you can really change on a dime, and you can still complete learning objectives. You can have students have even more authentic experiences in a much more efficient manner. And we work very closely with ISTE, the International Society of Technology in Education. We are one of their partners in the ISTE certification program. And one of the modalities that they teach when it comes a pedagogy is it's really not that exam that's most important. What is most important is how you judge and how you gauge that the learning took place and by what modalities.

So, digital: you're going to be hearing that an awful lot right now because that's one of the main issues that we're going to be running into. Not every student has the same situation at home, and not every student has access to technology, has access to the internet, or has access to higher education resources within their family with the different education levels of the parents, siblings, and items like that. And what I think that we have noticed is that in some of the project-based assessments, especially at the middle school and high school level, you can actually give students choice to show how they would like to demonstrate their learning with the resources that they have. And I think you're going to be seeing much more of that coming up.

I think that we have learned, in either the non-profit world, the corporate world, or education administration, things can be done much more efficiently. I'll put NYSCATE right out there as an example. We would have two full-day board meetings four times a year where what we've learned is in a two to three-hour, power-packed virtual meeting. We can accomplish just as much, if not more, and save a lot of money and a lot of time, which are valuable commodities. So, I think from the education perspective, you're going to be seeing an awful lot of that as well.

Where I think the big divide is going to come is between elementary versus secondary education. I think for elementary students, it has been a much more difficult transition. Middle school, it certainly can be done remotely. High school absolutely can be. In fact, I believe it's a natural transition into shifting the responsibility on to the learner and form those individual relationships with the educators. And I think the high school has been phenomenal. The biggest issue in high school has been the socialization, the athletics, the clubs out, and that's a whole separate issue.

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But speaking of educational, I think that elementary is very difficult, for the daycare, for the socialization, for the behavior, for these poor kids. And talk about this - and I know, Jared, you and I had a discussion a month or so back - when you have a teacher who is trying to teach from home, regardless of what grade it is, then you have multiple students, in some cases, using the same technology, and it makes it so very, very difficult for the elementary classrooms.

JH: And really, I think, it's a shift in a whole different plane of differentiation. And, to your point, I think that what needs to happen, especially at the elementary level, because having two elementary school kids in my family, my house, and my kids, I end up sitting next to the youngest, who's in third grade, a lot because there's no way to mitigate behaviors. And part of elementary school is all about working on behavior, and do you get along with the group, and how is it no longer about you, and it becomes about everybody else. And I think, one of the biggest changes might have to be how work is assigned. And what I mean by that is it's going to have to be more individually project based.

And what I've seen work really well is virtual connections that are about the behaviors. One of the most successful ones I ever saw, the teacher gets on and says, "Oh, you've got pets. Let's show me your pet." If you don't have a pet, you can use stuffed animal, but it's taking turns. And it's working on almost soft skills that didn't necessarily come to the surface in the physical classroom because it was easier to mitigate. Yeah. So, I think it'd be fascinating to see how that plays out.

Dr. DeICorvo: So, yes. I would just comment that what you're talking about is really what we've always known as the flipped instruction. So, in flipped instruction. I'm sure you're familiar with it, it's just a term where you flip what is traditional. So, what the traditional environment was you would go, you would sit in your desk, and you would listen to your teacher who is stationed, for the most part, in the front of the classroom, and you would be the receiver of all the information. And then, you would go home. And whether it was a test or a project, you would demonstrate the learning and come back. And then, the next day, you would submit your homework, your worksheets, and such. And, then, you would come back, and you would see how you did.

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This notion of technology and what you just described is the whole flipped learning concept: you're given the assignment, the project, et cetera, and you do it on your own time. But, then, when you're together with a teacher, you discuss what worked, what didn't work, how to adjust, and that is more personalized learning but much more authentic as well.

Jared Heiner: Oh agreed. And I think, when done correctly, it's much more engaging for the kids because, actually, it becomes more hands-on in a way. And, again, it's not a criticism of the brick-and-mortar classroom. I think you just can't have that type of free-for-all taking place in a classroom. It doesn't work.

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