



TRANSCRIPT

Educational District Technology Planning

An interview with Shelley Rossitto, Executive Director of Instructional Technology and Professional Development for The New York State Association for Computers and Technologies in Education (NYSCATE)

Jared Heiner: Hello and welcome to another episode of the Digital Aspirations in Education Podcast, sponsored by Cisco. My name is Jared Heiner. I'm the Director of Education for Aspire Technology Partners. And I'm excited right now to have Shelley Rossitto on with me. Shelley and I actually go back a little bit. She was the IT Director at the Monticello School District. Now, she works with NYSCATE. Shelley, how are you?

Shelley Rossitto: I'm great. Thank you.

JH: Good. Good. And like I said, you and I have a little bit of a history here, but you were the IT director at Monticello for how long?

SR: I was there for 16 years. And I was the Coordinator of Technology for Orange-Ulster BOCES for eight years. And before that I was a teacher.

JH: And, again, as we've talked about in the past, I started off as a teacher. So, it's always good to run in these small circles together because we can relate to one another. But you also work for NYSCATE. What is your role with NYSCATE?

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SR: I coordinate the corporate partners, the corporate focus groups. We have 44 corporate partners that we work closely with. I put together panelists and they provide feedback to the partners based on what their questions and needs are.

JH: And Aspire, obviously, is a corporate partner. We've been in those focus groups. They're hugely valuable. In fact, that's how we got to this conversation here.

How the Pandemic Impacted Education & Technology

You and I were having some conversations along the lines of how the pandemic has really impacted technology. And I know people hear that and they go, "I know. I know. We've heard this: Here to stay." But there are some deeper-rooted changes that you and I have had some great conversations about. And our focus group was amazing when it came to talking to IT directors, superintendents, and asking, "How does this impact the direction?"

And I think I know, and you know. We've both written technology plans. You look at your budget. You look at the direction. You've talked to lots of IT directors. And from your perspective, this pandemic destroyed most technology plans. We had to go in directions that folks never anticipated, from budgeting to implementation, and staff and student learning, everything went virtual. How do you envision those plans either changing or potentially changing? Because I would assume that most tech directors are now going to just sit down and go, "I'm starting from a brand-new place." What's that going to look like, in your opinion?

SR: I would say that, yeah, I've spoken to a lot of tech directors throughout the state. I worked with a lot of them. I worked with a lot of companies in this past year. I would say the goal for most tech plans is unchanged. I know that's a crazy thing to say now. I think it was the timeline to get there that raised havoc. Networks are always built to be responsive. Things are always changing, such as administrative and instructional requirements. There's Education Law §2-d now, the NIST Cybersecurity Framework. So, initiatives and new technology are out there. Data security has come into the mix.

But I think the difference last year was it happened in a split second. And planning was done like during a coffee break. And implementation was in a parking lot with masks, with one hand tied behind your back. So, I think many of us had in our plans one-to-one initiatives that were going to occur but we didn't expect them to happen, like, tomorrow. Added to that - and I think the tech department really had a rough time with this - was the need to forklift the way we teach and do business by adding the remote component to it.

So, in the past, you ramp up your technology. You slowly bring in professional development and so on. But the actual way people were teaching actually changed. So, I'm not going to say that everybody was impacted. And I think it's impossible to recreate what school means to everyone. In fact, I'm not sure anybody even realized the full impact teachers have on kids until this happened.

So, I think in the tech planning process, I think we still need to be responsive. And I think strong partnerships with experts in the field is critical. Experts that focus on very, very specific aspects of the network kind of realign job descriptions. The tech department was called on to do more than they usually do. And I think you need to really rebuild the people infrastructure to be more community-focused.

JH: That's great and very, very deep and full of depth. And so, inside of there, one of the things that you mentioned was the teachers impact on students, how valuable teachers are. And what I find interesting - especially now, I've got two of my own kids. One of them is in middle school. She was doing a hybrid two days on, two days off, where she'd be physically in school two days and then virtual two days. My son went fully virtual - we used to see technology as an offshoot and it really has become just another way to connect.

But I mean that from the social-emotional perspective. We knew that we could pass information over the internet. But now with Chromebooks, I think there's a much deeper ability to connect socially-emotionally with students. Thoughts on that, do you think that that's something that folks really open their eyes to and will we see that continue?

A Community Approach to Technology

SR: Well, I think now we're talking about holistic. And the experience that students require is not much different than the experience that the teachers and the staff members require, the staff members who are also isolated. So, everybody was in this isolation mode and only able to connect through some type of technology. So, tech became people's lifeline. So, now, you take that lifeline and you think, "Oh."

When you talk about equity, not everybody had equal access, even though the school district might have provided them with an iPad or a phone book. Not everybody had equal access to that lifeline. So, that's why we talk a lot about the community and this being part of a community initiative, not just a school initiative. Because you're right, I mean this was unprecedented. But, still, I'm not so sure. The school is only one piece of it. The school is only one piece of it because I think everybody is working in

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silos. And I think it's common when these types of things are magnified during a crisis. When you have emergencies in their community, sometimes it reveals the shortcomings of the systems that we all build on our own.

And I would venture to say that some of our school networks have built-in at a higher level in terms of their infrastructure than many of those areas in the community. Many times, the Police Department, the Fire Department - and I know I'm kind of going off a little from your question, but it's kind of related - have part-time paid people to kind of oversee the day-to-day. The town might have an organization that's off-site. A church has a volunteer. A mental health center might have VLA.

A school district typically employs a department with support in-house and usually they're highly educated and knowledgeable. So, trying to bring all those entities together is quite a challenge because they don't always reside locally. And that is essential for social-emotional wellness because we had parents, teachers—every single person was impacted by this.

JH: Well, while you're saying you went off-base from the question, I agree with you. I don't think you did. And we see this with cell phones, right? Everyone has a cell phone. You can connect over that cellular network. It's all around the ability to communicate. But then, we shifted gears and we started using devices beyond the cell phone. And you have folks, to your point, who were doing virtual church services. Even Town Hall meetings were beginning to be done virtually.

But the dilemma then becomes, “Now, I've got my device.” Let's say it's my cell phone, and now I've got to do this particular meeting application. And I've got to do Zoom or Skype or Google, whatever the case may be. And I think you're right, there has to be some type of community standard. And to your point, we see a lot of regulations coming down in education. And I agree with you, I think that there's a bigger conversation to be had to how we connect community, municipality, higher ed, K12. Because, at the end of the day, we're trying to accomplish a task, what does it matter who controls that network?

SR: Right. Because the ISPs, the Internet Service Providers, or some of the for-profit organizations that are in your community, that's where I think you kind of have to tap into to pull these people together. Because whatever solution we create should be across the board. Otherwise, the stress level and the equity issue is even bigger.

At one time students would come to school and would have access to everything they needed. And we just kind of stayed within the four walls. Because, I mean, education is an institution, basically. I remember years ago when we started blogging, I talked to my son about it and I asked him, 'Why is it

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that people just aren't really getting into blogging and there's all this and that?" And he says, "Because you're an institution, mom." You have four walls around your building, and that fortress is this protector. And now, that protector is broken. And we are in the community now. And, actually, the school is now a part of the community because it's happening anywhere.

In fact, one of the network administrators I talked to said, "How do you deal with kids that are logging in from Europe and Colombia?" He had two students that were logging in. People travelled to their families; they went to other places during the pandemic. How do you deal with that? So, it's definitely community.

JH: And so, that's a great example because it reminds me, I've got a friend of mine who has a second home on Cape Cod. So, I'm in New York. They have a second home in Cape Cod. The pandemic green-lighted their ability to take their two kids, one elementary and one middle school - and I know that sounds oddly similar to my situation. It's not me - and they went, and they were saying, "Well, both our kids are virtual so we might as well just spend time."

Now, the reason I bring this up is because it breaks that barrier of, I'm living in a place but my education is coming from a home district that's in another place. We've really mixed the whole thing up.

SR: Well, remember, the Florida Virtual School started that way many years ago, and they believed in online. And there's quite a few schools nationally that do online high schools. They're all virtual. They've been doing it for the last 15 to 20 years and they've been very successful. But they're not brick-and-mortar.

Connecting with Information: Education Outside of the Four Walls of the School

JH: Yeah. I agree with you. But I also think that when we look at what learning is, it doesn't have to happen in four walls. And I hate to use this example because it's been so overplayed, but Khan Academy was founded by this guy, I think it was his nephew needed help, so he started making videos. I always have had this thought, if we're going to break down these walls and a kid can learn from anywhere, why can't we upload all of these different lessons? Imagine being able to access hundreds of sixth grade English teachers. I struggled with Calculus. But imagine being able to go in and pick and choose based on maybe even preference in terms of your learning style - we could debate learning style. But to be able to say, "Wow. I have access to all of this." It just really starts opening the doors to what could this really look like, not just connecting information in the community, but your ability to connect to learning and education.

SR: Well, remember, also, you can include uncles, aunts, grandmas, anybody can have access to that learning. But in the past, that learning has always been available. But there's always been a type of student that responds well to that. Then, we have the students that don't respond well to that. It's not for everybody. So, taking down the four walls of the school district is very challenging because we've lost that safety net that a lot of kids really need. And that really personalized relationship they have with their teachers, which is just amazing.

JH: I agree. And when you said the aunts and uncles' piece, it made me realize, too, we had a podcast - gosh. It must have been a-month-and-a-half or two months ago - [Dr. Joe Dragone from the Capital Region BOCES was on](#), we were talking about workforce development. But one of the pieces of that conversation, if we have access to put learning in the Cloud then we have access to more than just the students who are enrolled. It's the ability for anyone with an internet connection to theoretically have access to a certified teacher to be able to follow on.

And I'm heading down the role of MOOCs, if you remember those. But this idea that, why should learning have to happen at this time and this place? And so, we can go down that path. But I'd like to ask this question instead, do you think that there would be a movement on behalf of, maybe, superintendents to start talking to one another and saying within their own localized municipalities, if you will, or BOCES, or RICs in New York, whatever the case may be in other states, how can we do this?

Reimagining Learning & Blending Learning Models

SR: It's not new. Twenty years ago, I was the distance learning coordinator for BOCES, and we were doing online learning, video conferencing classes to reach everyone at any time with experts, museums, teachers in other schools, collaboration with other students. So, really it isn't anything new. It's just kind of reigniting it again. The difference is people just had a choice.

In Monticello, one of the school districts didn't have a physics teacher. So, our physics teacher taught students in two other school districts. Chinese was big for a while, and so we got a Chinese teacher. Or sign language was really big. In fact, Pine Bush schools had two distance learning rooms that they used to teach to the whole county. And in the western part of the state, they're still doing a lot of distance learning. The colleges are actually connected.

So, it's really not new. It's out there. It just kind of went to the wayside because we got so many devices and didn't need specific rooms where people had to do this. So, I think it's still a possibility. But I think

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more of a blended model where people can actually see each other. It's still going to be something that people are more interested in.

JH: No, no doubt. In fact, I think it was you and I that had this conversation. Back in the day, we used to set up the webinars or the video conferences. And you had to have two days' notice to test the connection. The tech team would have to come down. And now - and I've seen this happen before - you can bring anyone into the classroom and you don't have to even have a technician anymore. It's just, I can pull up my phone and FaceTime somebody or Skype somebody or Zoom somebody - which leads to a whole another conversation about how we're protecting identity of students. But, again, that's another conversation. I think you're right. The game has entirely changed. How do we hang on to some of these things as we presumably head into an upcoming school year where we're no longer as virtual?

SR: I think that we have to leave that to the teachers, students, and parents to discuss. I was thinking about this. It's been frustrating at best, but they know what the "keepers" should be. And from there, I would hope the educators could build programs to integrate what's worked. Because a lot of what we do in education is research-based, but I would say this is the first time we all lived it and we were the research models. We're a part of all the results.

So, every single person in the school district now was a little researcher. So, it's not like a college or professor taking a small group over here and taking a small group over there. Every single person lived this. So, I think this is something that has to unfold and be highly organized to talk to teachers, students, parents, staff members, and so on, not to discuss necessarily the impact in the beginning, because I think that's a separate discussion. So, you could build programs for those students that really didn't thrive in this environment. It's more like, what do you think worked really well and how do we make that an integral part of education in the future?

I would venture to say that there are some people out there that probably are like, "I never want to do this again. Please don't make me do this again." And there are some people out there that thought, "I was kind of forced into this and I can see that there's a little more accountability and this and that." But it starts at a very young age. When we started with online learning years ago, we began at the high school level because we were preparing the kids for college. These are first graders and kindergarteners. So, I think the first question you have to ask yourself is, how are you going to inspire learning?

Because for students to sit down at a computer or do all the things that you were talking about, video conference in the museum or look at Khan Academy, they have to be inspired to do that. They have to want to find out when they look out the window and they see bees buzzing around a tree like, "Why is

the bee doing that?” They have to be more inquiry based on their own. So, that inspiration needs to start at a very young age.

So, I still think we flip back to instructional models and education more than the technology. This conversation exactly, we've been talking about inquiry-based education for 40 years now. It's really the same conversation. Although we ended up in this virtual world, which really threw us all over the place. But I still think it's not a new conversation.

“Building a Strong Community Responsive Infrastructure is the Key to Everything”

JH: I agree. And I think that we have a lot of teachers, and I even think about the teaching programs in college, but not to mention the students. We just went through over a year-long, in some places I suppose - and by the time this ends, it'll be over a year-long - experiment in virtual learning. And to your point, I don't know if there is a coming back from this. Everyone's going to say, “Remember that time.”

But that's going to generate change because the expectation is now going to change. And I certainly hope so, because most kids are going to be walking around with a device. And this is our opportunity. We've talked about this a gazillion times to, like you said, inquiry is going to be right in front of the student. It's your ability.

In fact, I'll give you a perfect example. My son was in fourth grade, they were doing a story, it's a fiction story. I think they were calling it the mouse deer. It's a very short story. It's a fable from Borneo. But long story short, they are looking at this picture of what they call the mouse deer. And my son's looking at it, he calls me over, he goes, “Dad, they're reading a story of this animal. It's just bizarre looking. It looks like a deer but they put it in the dryer.” And so, we started doing some research right then and there because we have access to the internet. And they actually have something called a pudu, P-U-D-U, which is literally a 12-to-16-inch deer that lives in South America.

I know like, “This is crazy. He's going off the deep end.” But my point is, in that moment, he was able to take his fascination and dive in. And the next day, the teacher says, “What do you think?” He raised his hands and said, “Do you know there's actually a mouse deer? It's called a pudu.” And so, I think that our ability to expand from just what we had planned and go to that experiential place has just opened up. And I hope we don't end up going back and forgetting some of these lessons.

SR: I think you have to really rebuild a lot of what's happened to make this work. So, I would say, one of the biggest issues the tech department probably faced, with those many issues they faced, but one of

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them was, the tech department was on the front lines. They were required to answer questions for students, staff, parents. They were speaking to uncles, grandmas, the mailman. I mean they were speaking to anyone - anyone. And they had no training. No guidance. They were blind to what the parents and the students had in their own homes. Some parents didn't speak English. Some needed help with applications. Some had slow internet. That was probably one of the largest issues.

And you think about these network administrators, I mean, they need to be focused all day. Like, I used to stick mine in the cone of silence when they would just totally stress. And I'd say, "Okay, everybody. The cone of silence is here. Don't call. We have office hours", just so that they could get into the weeds of what they needed to do. But now, they were really on the front lines. And as you know, it's very tricky dealing with the community and dealing with parents. You don't really know who you're talking to and you don't know what they have on the other end.

So, I think we need to create a community support infrastructure to train and build capacity amongst community members, including the internet service providers, with some kind of centralized first line of support to route issues appropriately. And there needs to be some kind of workflow that would be a community endeavor that would include those calling for help as they solve problems. To me, to build a strong community responsive infrastructure is just the key to everything.

Because the schools get called for everything. If someone has a hangnail, they call the school because, maybe, they read about it on the internet and somehow, they've associated what they think to the internet.

JH: Right. Right. The internet doctor.

SR: Yes. They get called for everything. So, that's a really big challenge.

Balancing Network Needs with Innovation & a New, Open IT Department

JH: Listen. I think what you just hit on is really the kind of the crux of one of the reasons that I wanted you on so badly, and you said it masterfully. This idea that the community is now utilizing technology and the school is very much at the heart of that, how do we change that. And to your point, when I was an IT director, I'm looking at our technicians, I'm looking at our engineers, their job is to make the network work and to solve those problems. But you're right, it becomes so overwhelming when you start having to answer questions. You don't have time to do the job. And I think that's the hard part, how do you balance all that.

And to your point, we have to come up with a better solution. And I think I mentioned this to you once before, when I was working in a school district, we reached out to the Police Department in the city. And we actually created a shared network with them because one of the things we recognized was that response time to crises was really at the heart of how you minimize issues. And so, now, we weren't just taking on the school's technical issues, but, also, our ability to connect with the PD. But the benefit was there. So, how are you going to do that if you don't increase or do something about workflows, if you don't increase personnel?

SR: What if a tech provides some support to a user and something happens to their equipment at home? Who's liable? How much can they say? These kinds of things need to be worked out. Because somebody could come back at them and say, "Well, before I called the tech line in blah, blah, blah school, my computer worked fine." It's kind of scary. And there are help lines that have been built and are available through the internet service providers at times. So, you've got to be able to partner with them so you can build solutions together. Who's everybody calling?

JH: Great point. Great point.

SR: I mean this kind of broke the tech department wide open. It opened them up, a department that's really very isolated in a school district. We have locks on our doors. If there's a window, you have it covered so no one can see inside.

JH: I've been where you are.

SR: Yeah. We're like, "Oh, my God. It's like The Emperor's New Clothes." It's just you're walking around totally exposed. And it was very difficult just even that little piece of it. And then, you select the principals in the schools dealing with people that are outside of their little community in their building. So, that's why I think that's a really big one.

And to your point before, this can help us be more inclusive. So, perhaps all students and even the community, we can work with teen pregnancy kids. We can work with kids that have to be home in the morning, incarcerated youths, students abroad. Seniors, like this whole group of seniors, we have teachers that are so gifted and have specialties. They teach writing. We had one teacher that was a specialist in Vietnam, but there wasn't a course for it. But - oh, my God - I'd love to take a course like that.

So, this kind of cracks open opportunities that the community can gain from our schools that typically have been up on a hill, behind a fence, with the park that no one's allowed to use after hours, and it's kind of shielded from the world. It's kind of opened up the three to five or 600 professionals that are in there that have tons of amazing skills. And that's a really good thing. But until you have that infrastructure partnership, I don't think the access is going to go smoothly.

What Does a District Technology Plan Look Like Now?

JH: So, bearing that in mind - and I just realized, this may actually be the longest podcast we've had so far. This is why I wanted to have this. And your points are, in my mind, so relevant and valid - I'm going to go right back to the very beginning, which was this question, based on everything we just talked about - and I don't want to say just IT director because it's so much more than that. I don't just want to say superintendent but so much more than that - if I'm sitting down now and saying we have to write a district technology plan, what does that look like based on all the things we just talked about? Would you start reaching out and making community connections in that plan? Would you start looking for guidance?

And the other piece that I think is valuable from Aspire's perspective, how does your strategic partner play into all this? Because listen, I used to make jokes all the time as an IT director and now I work on the sales side, "I'm just selling Blinky lights, but it's not that anymore." So, what does it look like?

SR: Yeah. I hesitate to say that the tech director in a school district should be leading a community effort. I think it needs to get done. But I can't imagine them having the time to even walk out of their office, let alone anything else. But I think there are a lot of people in the school district that already have those community connections. So, it might be sitting down with that group or being more a part of that group to talk about how do we pull the community together, so that we can start to build a comprehensive plan.

For example, if you're building a new security system, how are your cameras? How is everything talking to what's going on in the Police Department? How should it be built together? So, I definitely think you need to have some kind of a group that is going to start to figure out how do we bring in small community organizations to begin to build this together. I'm not sure. But the superintendent, if they were highly involved and the internet service provider was, perhaps, there could be some monetary help to bring somebody in, a consultant or whatever, to kind of pull those teams together so the burden doesn't lay on one person.

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But each one of those people, the assistant superintendent, superintendent, all the principals - principals have amazing context - assistant principals, all of them have some kind of connection with somebody. They're all connected. So, I think you just have to start out with a list of what do those connections look like and maybe some kind of protocols before you build anything new, who do we have to include in this process.

The second thing is, I would still spend a lot of time just looking at your infrastructure and working very, very closely with private industry, like yourself or somebody else, partnerships with experts in the field to make sure that you comply to the NIST Cybersecurity Framework. Because the NIST Cybersecurity Framework is really a guide. It's the same as when you're doing electric in your house or you're doing plumbing in your house. Because I'm rebuilding another house now, so I know what this is like. There are codes that you have to follow.

And the NIST Cybersecurity Framework are kind of codes for the tech department and the school district. It's not just the tech department. The school district is responsible for that because everybody has a piece of that. So, I guess that's where I would focus is make sure I'm compliant. That's where I would start.

JH: Well, Shelley, like I said, you and I could go on and I wish we could. But in the sake of kind of encapsulating this conversation and others, like I said before, NYSCATE in New York is a tremendous resource. We're privileged - as far as privilege - as a corporate sponsor to be able to work with you folks. And, again, that's how this whole conversation started and where I know the conversation continues.

So, if anyone has any questions or would like to participate with NYSCATE, they can certainly reach out to you or anyone, just go to the website. And we've had a number of great conversations about a number of topics that are on there as well. And so, I appreciate your time. I appreciate everything that NYSCATE has done. And, again, I regretfully have to close this by saying, again, thank you everyone for joining us here at the Digital Aspirations in Education Podcast, sponsored by Cisco. I'm Jared Heiner, Director of Education for Aspire Technology Partners. Shelley, so glad to have you on. I really appreciate it. This was a great conversation.

SR: Thank you.

This transcript has been edited for clarity

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