

# DA

District Administration®

November/December 2023

Esports: More than just a hobby

Why district leaders are key to teachers' success with edtech

Sustaining funding: How to ask for an ESSER extension

# The Road To FETC 2024

We're back in Orlando!  
Everything you can expect at the conference  
+  
What to know before you go



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#### DR. JACQUELYN MARTIN

Superintendent, Keystone Central School District

Source: [www.lockhaven.com/news/local-news/2023/05/kc-takes-safety-steps/](http://www.lockhaven.com/news/local-news/2023/05/kc-takes-safety-steps/)

"It has been a deterrent to possession and use in the school and it's given a sense of comfort to other kids that don't want to be involved or around it. **Students have told me they finally feel comfortable using the school bathroom again.** That's really our heart and goal in the issue, is to prevent vaping, not to try and catch more kids making poor choices."

#### JASON FERGUSON

School Resource Officer, Eaton Rapids High School, Eaton Rapids, Michigan

Source: [www.wilx.com/2023/03/14/vape-detectors-installed-eaton-rapids-school-bathrooms-address-problem/](http://www.wilx.com/2023/03/14/vape-detectors-installed-eaton-rapids-school-bathrooms-address-problem/)



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**FIRST TAKE**



# It's That Time of Year Again

The Future of Education Technology Conference (FETC) has always been a platform for educators, technologists and industry experts to come together and explore the latest advancements in education technology. But the 2024 edition promises to reach new heights. Back in Orlando after being in New Orleans in 2023, the conference continues to grow and bring fresh content to its growing audience.

As in previous years, the conference will showcase groundbreaking exhibits by leading edtech companies, from interactive learning platforms to adaptive assessment tools. But it's not just about the technology—it's about the impact it can have on K12 education. FETC 2024 will emphasize the significance of leveraging technology to enhance educational equity and inclusivity, bridge the gap between different socioeconomic backgrounds, enable personalized learning experiences and empower educators to meet the wide range of needs of their students. This year will also include not only the Top EdTech Products Awards but the return of the Awards of Distinction, recognizing the top leaders from across the country in a number of categories.

FETC is also a wonderful opportunity for educators, administrators, policymakers and industry leaders to come together and network, exchange ideas and information, collaborate and—oh, yes—enjoy themselves.

In this issue, you'll find a feature about the conference as well as a “know before you go” guide to give you some helpful tips and insights about the event itself and the surrounding city's attractions so you can make the most of your downtime. It's the perfect way to kick off the new year feeling inspired, motivated and informed about the latest tools available to help transform the education experience for years to come.

**“I feel like when you develop a culture where your people want to be—where your kids want to be, where your staff wants to come to work—that's going to breed success.”**

—PRINCIPAL NIKOL YOUNGBERG,  
FLOUR BLUFF PRIMARY &  
ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS, TEXAS

**“Leadership, to me, is primarily about motivating others to do something new, move forward or reach their ultimate potential. It's best cultivated in an environment of trust, support, and open communication between all stakeholders.”**

—SUPERINTENDENT JOSH REITZ,  
MCHENRY SCHOOL DISTRICT 15,  
NORTHERN ILLINOIS

Lori Capullo  
**EXECUTIVE EDITOR**



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District Administration (ISSN 1537-5749) Vol. 59, No. 6 is published 6 times per year. A publication of ETC, part of the Arc network, 222 Lakeview Avenue, Suite 800, West Palm Beach, FL 33410. Periodicals postage paid at Trumbull, CT, and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to Renette Fortune, renette.fortune@etcnetwork.com. District Administration is a registered trademark of ETC. Copyright 2023. Printed in the USA.





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# Why social-emotional learning is foundational to learning—and the key to a healthy school culture

## Q&A with **Jill Moll**, Director of Development, Conscious Discipline

### How has our understanding of social-emotional learning in schools evolved over time?

In the past, most approaches to SEL focused on behavior modification, or essentially getting kids to behave in school, through fear-based systems of rewards and punishments. It was about controlling emotions and behavior, and getting obedience. It was usually considered completely separate from academics.

But today, we have a much greater understanding of how students' emotional state is foundational to learning, and how we should focus on giving them the tools to manage and regulate their emotions. It's about taking a more holistic approach to the overall wellbeing of students.

### What does an "adult-first mindset" approach look like, and why is it important?

Teachers and other adults model behaviors and emotions to their students. If a teacher or principal uses fear or threats of punishment, angrily barking at students about their behavior, they are demonstrating emotional dysregulation. This is exactly what they are telling students not to do. Students pick up on that because they learn by watching and through experience.

That's why Conscious Discipline uses an adult-first approach when working with schools and districts. It starts with teaching teachers evidence-based, trauma responsive self-regulation practices, so they can then teach and model them to students. We show teachers how to

coach themselves and to recognize and regulate their own emotions, and we focus on building a community of teachers who support each other in this approach. The whole culture of a school changes as a result.

### How did the pandemic illuminate where changes to traditional behavioral interventions for students are needed?

Human connection is a need that's as important as food, water, and shelter. The pandemic took healthy connection away for many of us and our students, in addition to the many other hardships it inflicted. That had a huge impact on development and mental health. The pandemic also took away many choices and a sense of autonomy. Without an environment of choices, decisions, and free will, kids don't learn impulse control.

What we continue to see post-pandemic is the impact of that isolation—a lack of impulse control, a loss of attention span, and a loss of social skills.

One of the ways students develop those skills is through play, but opportunities for play are too often being sacrificed as we increase our focus on academics and "making up" for learning loss. But an increased focus on learning will not be successful until we increase the focus on social skill and self-regulatory skill development.

This shift in focus starts with administrators. It is essential to understand that students' emotional state is foundational to their ability to learn, and that they will increase their gains in all areas when we



**Jill Moll**  
Director of Development,  
Conscious Discipline

take a more scientific approach to discipline and behavior. School leaders set the tone for teachers, who in turn, set the tone for students.

### What are some ways to communicate to teachers and parents the importance of prioritizing SEL, how the field has changed, and the reasons behind this approach?

We understand much more about these issues today than in the past, when most parents and teachers attended school. Sometimes there can be a misconception that this is a "soft" approach to discipline because of the lack of fear-based tactics and traditional reward and punishment. But the reality is that this is a scientifically backed approach built on information we simply did not possess back then. And the improved outcomes in schools implementing high-quality approaches like Conscious Discipline show it to be much more effective. The impact extends well beyond improving academic achievement; these are skills that help kids succeed in life. That should interest any engaged teacher or parent.



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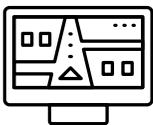
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# Looking to improve the efficiency of busing and transportation? Here are some key considerations to keep in mind

Faced with rising costs and pressures to keep expenses down, many district leaders are looking for areas to improve efficiency, and that often includes busing and transportation. Taking a close look at bus routes and finding ways to make them more efficient can make a significant difference, but there are some important considerations to keep in mind. One being to consider bringing in experts from Transfinder's Professional Services Team to help you execute the decisions below.

Here are some key tasks to consider:

**Use the right tools.** The complexity of bus routes requires software to make any improvements to efficiency, but your standard office productivity software is not up to the task. Unfortunately, there is still a small percentage of school districts using paper and pencil and physical maps to manually create bus routes. Using software specifically designed for school transportation is critical to efficiency.

**Prioritize communication and achieving buy-in.** It is crucial to communicate with everyone in the community about the reasons behind any bus routing or transportation changes you may be planning, so that you achieve buy-in from all stakeholders involved—including parents, administrators, or bus drivers. If you don't, you run the risk of any changes being walked back, because change is often met with resistance.

**“The more stops your buses make, the longer the routes take. And the more time your buses spend on the road, the more costly it is.”**

For example, the transportation department could design more efficient bus routes that would enable a reduction in the number of routes overall. But the change may require some students to walk to a bus stop, or walk to school, when they didn't have to before. If those parents are caught by surprise, there is probably going to be some negative feedback, and

you may have to undo all that work. Keep everyone informed about any future changes and why they are in everyone's best interest.

## **Maximize “walk to stop” distances.**

Most school districts have some policies defining a safe walking distance to a bus stop, or what is a reasonable distance to ask students to walk to school, specific to grade level. But those policies are not always checked against the bus routes being used. Reconciling routes with those existing policies can help identify ways to reduce the number of stops or reduce the number of routes overall.

Once you've done that, try to design routes to pick up students beginning with those farthest away from the school, then work your way back towards the school, rather than vice versa. That minimizes the ride time for all students.

The more stops your buses make, the longer the routes take. And the more time your buses spend on the road, the more costly it is.

**ABCD: Always be collecting data.** What does efficiency mean to you? How will you know if it is being achieved or you are being successful? This could be defined as the number of routes, number of stops, average ride time, fuel consumption, or other data points. The key is having access to the right data, and a baseline to start with, so you can measure progress. Efficiency isn't a single goal you accomplish and move on. It's an ongoing process. Data is what enables you to measure and see the difference you're making over time.

**Prioritize safety.** In any effort to improve efficiency, remember that safety must be the top priority. There may be routes that are more efficient but are not as safe for students. For example, a new route might be more efficient, but could require students to cross a busy road to get to a bus stop. Efficiency is important, but the safety of students is what is most important.



Andy Hamilton,  
Professional Services Consultant,  
Transfinder

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The Future of Education Technology 2024's 7 track offerings are a must for K12 decision-makers

BY LENNY SCHAD

In the ever-changing landscape of K12 education, decision-makers play a critical role in shaping the direction and success of their districts. The Future of Education Technology Conference (FETC) 2024 offers a comprehensive lineup of tracks designed specifically to meet the needs of these influential leaders. Here, we'll delve into each track, highlighting their unique value propositions and how they empower K12 decision-makers to unlock the full potential of their districts.

**ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY:**  
EMPOWERING INCLUSIVE LEARNING

The Assistive Technology track at FETC 2024 focuses on harnessing the power of technology to support students with disabilities. Decision makers attending this track will explore the latest assistive technologies, gaining insights into tools and strategies that promote accessibility and empower all learners. By understanding how to effectively match technology solutions to student needs, decision-makers can foster a truly inclusive learning environment, ensuring that every student has equal opportunities to succeed.

**CAMPUS LEADER:**  
TRANSFORMING EDUCATIONAL SPACES

As the driving force behind school sites, decision-makers attending the Campus Leader track will acquire professional learning opportunities focused on managing schools, creating innovative learning spaces and embracing emerging technologies. This track equips leaders with the knowledge and resources to make informed decisions regarding technology implementation. By leveraging these solutions, decision-makers can transform their campuses into vibrant hubs of educational excellence, preparing students for success in the digital age.

**COACH:**  
GUIDING INSTRUCTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

The Coach track at FETC 2024 offers decision-makers the chance to dive into proven coaching strategies, both in-person and within virtual learning environments. Decision-makers will be introduced to cutting-edge technologies that can enhance instructional practices. By supporting instructional and educational technology coaches, decision-makers empower their districts with the tools and guidance necessary to drive impactful instructional transformation.

**DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR:**  
SHAPING THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION

In the District Administrator track, thought leaders share operational strategies and innovative instructional practices. Decision-makers will gain insights into how districts nationwide are leveraging new technologies to revolutionize education. By actively participating in this track, decision-makers can identify practical solutions to address current challenges and shape the future of their districts. This invaluable knowledge will enable them to lead with confidence, guiding their districts toward educational excellence.

Decision makers attending this track will gain professional development focused on best practices for collaboration, personalization, and creation through increased literacy and student-centered learning.

**EDUCATOR:**  
EMPOWERING TEACHING EXCELLENCE

The Educator track at FETC 2024 is designed to provide educators with skill training and professional learning opportunities focused on best practices for various teaching modalities. Decision-makers attending this track will engage in sessions that reimagine modern curriculum and pedagogical strategies, highlighting the accelerated use of technology integrated with critical and creative thinking. By equipping educators with these essential skills, leaders foster student-centered, personalized learning models that prepare students for a rapidly evolving world.

**INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY:**  
TRANSFORMING TECHNOLOGICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

The Information Technology track addresses the operational strategies and best practices essential for those responsible for IT leadership. Cybersecurity, technical solutions and policy development take center stage in this track. Attendees to this track will stay ahead of the curve by exploring emerging technologies. By leveraging these insights, decision-makers can optimize their district's technological infrastructure and ensure the secure and efficient operation of their IT systems.

**LIBRARY MEDIA SPECIALIST:**  
REVOLUTIONIZING LEARNING SPACES

The Library Media Specialist track empowers decision-makers to transform libraries into dynamic learning spaces. Decision-makers attending this track will gain professional development focused on best practices for collaboration, personalization and creation through increased literacy and student-centered learning. By supporting and partnering with library media specialists, decision-makers can cultivate innovative installations, curate digital resources and introduce new and emerging technologies to revolutionize their districts' library experiences.

FETC 2024 presents an unparalleled opportunity to explore the diverse range of tracks tailored to your needs. By attending FETC and engaging with these tracks, decision-makers can unlock the full potential of their districts, foster inclusive learning environments, drive instructional transformation and shape the future of education. Don't miss out on the chance to revolutionize education—register for FETC 2024 today.

# Your Partner in Educational Staffing



**97%**

of superintendents report concern about their district's ability to hire qualified special education staff

**86%**

of school districts reported difficulty hiring new teachers

**80%**

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Allison Hurtado, *Director of Business Development*

ahurtado@sunburstworkforce.com | sunburstworkforce.com

# 3 sessions new superintendents won't want to miss

At a time when turnover at the top is increasingly common in school districts throughout the country, new and aspiring superintendents must equip themselves with the knowledge and tools necessary to thrive in an undoubtedly complex profession. Often, superintendents are let go before they have time to create real change simply due to their inexperience, but that doesn't have to be the case.

Each year, the Future of Education Technology Conference (FETC) provides educators and district leaders with hundreds of insightful sessions and keynotes designed to educate attendees on the latest trends and innovations impacting the K12 space today. Among these sessions are some that new and aspiring superintendents in particular may find valuable as they address some of the most pressing concerns new leaders face.

If you've just entered the superintendency—or you're planning to in the future—here are three sessions you won't want to miss at next year's event on Jan. 23-26.

## **CULTIVATING INNOVATIVE LEADERSHIP: FOSTERING A CULTURE OF CREATION**

District leadership is fast-paced and constantly evolving. Thus, it requires one to be innovative and impactful beyond what traditional management and administration requires.

In this session, you'll hear from Matthew Joseph, assistant superintendent at New Bedford Public Schools in Massachusetts, about how you can prepare your own district for dynamic change.

Throughout this interactive session, you'll be asked thought-provoking questions, including: How do you know students are learning? Are we teaching them for their future or our past? Will the pressure beat you?

"Let's explore answers to these questions and start creating a mindset on how always to have your school/district ready for dynamic change," the session description reads.

## **YOUR FIRST SUPERINTENDENCY: KEYS TO SUCCESSFULLY BUILDING YOUR PROFESSIONAL NETWORKING PIPELINE**

Your first job in district leadership shouldn't be tackled alone. In fact, you should have a strong,



Among the sessions are some that new and aspiring superintendents in particular may find valuable as they address some of the most pressing concerns new leaders face.

diverse network of people who will support you and drive personal growth.

This session will be hosted by Neil Gupta, superintendent at Oakwood City Schools in Ohio, who will arm you with tips on how to construct your own professional networking pipeline to ensure "you are equipped to navigate the challenges and seize opportunities that come your way," per the session description.

## **WHAT IS YOUR DISTRICT'S CALLING CARD? BRANDING IS THE ANSWER**

Once you enter district leadership, you'll find yourself competing against neighboring districts for things like your students, professional talent and community perception.

At a time when teacher shortages and student enrollment continue to be some of the most pressing issues leaders face, superintendents must learn to move beyond the traditional methods of promoting their district's brand. Static websites and predictable taglines don't cut it anymore.

In this session, you'll hear from several inspiring leaders about how you can build a community and culture that "reflect the academic programs at an intellectual, social and cultural level, creating a more positive and supportive environment for all," according to the session description. Visit [fetc.org](http://fetc.org) to register and get all the details about the big event.



# PROPEL YOUR SCHOOLS FORWARD!

## Here's What You Can Expect at FETC® 2024:

View Full Program at [www.FETC.org](http://www.FETC.org)

- Hundreds of in-depth workshops, sessions, keynotes to revolutionize your district.
- New visionary speakers, trailblazing administrators, and industry pioneers.
- Cutting edge sessions endorsed by the Consortium for School Networking (COSN).
- Future Ready Schools® (FRS) presentations for district administrators and leaders.
- Bustling Welcome Reception in the Expo.
- Energetic lunch and coffee breaks.
- 4 innovative, content-focused theaters: Emerging Technology, Esports, IT and STEM
- Insightful Leadership Roundtables led by nationally recognized district administrators.
- Thought Leadership Panels.
- Cybersecurity Training.
- And much more professional development learning opportunities!

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Promo Code DAFALL23 to save 10%!  
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## 3 FETC sessions for administrators looking to become better champions of technology

2023's Future of Education Technology Conference (FETC) came on the heels of a COVID-19 pandemic that changed the world of education and edtech in ways unimaginable, and, for some, for the better. The conference's program agenda included a plethora of professional development opportunities for educators, administrators and district leaders wanting to gain a better grasp of the latest emerging technologies that will inevitably end up shaping teaching and learning in their classrooms. Here's an early look at some of FETC 2024's sessions, specifically those designed for the K12 administrator.

### PROVEN TECHNIQUES FOR DEPLOYING AND MANAGING CHROMEBOOKS

Chromebooks have become one of the most common student devices leveraged by school districts. But some, may not know where to start. In this session, you'll hear practical advice, tips and tools for developing a successful Chromebook program at your school.

### DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION & LEADERSHIP: NAVIGATING DISRUPTIVE TECHNOLOGIES FOR 21ST-CENTURY LEADERS

This interactive workshop will explore the vital responsibility educators and leaders

The 2023 conference's program agenda included a plethora of professional development opportunities for educators, administrators and district leaders wanting to gain a better grasp of the latest emerging technologies.

share in embracing and navigating the challenges brought about by disruptive technologies. Participants "will engage in thought-provoking discussions and collaborative activities that delve into the core concepts of digital transformation, such as emerging technologies, changing learner needs and the shifting educational landscape," per the session description.

### CULTIVATING DIVERSITY IN K12 IT DEPARTMENTS: LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES FOR 2024 AND BEYOND

In recent years, IT departments have become the backbone of K12 schools. Thus, it's crucial that leaders understand the importance of fostering a diverse IT staff in order to ensure an inclusive education experience for students. In this session, participants will learn:

- The current state of diversity within K12 IT departments and leadership
- The multifaceted benefits of a diverse IT team, from broadened perspectives to enhanced problem-solving
- Challenges and barriers to achieving diversity in IT roles and how to overcome them
- Proven strategies and initiatives to recruit, retain and promote diverse talent within the K12 IT sphere
- Anecdotes and lessons learned from the panelists' journey towards fostering a more inclusive IT environment.

Visit [fetc.org](https://fetc.org) to register and get all the details about the big event. **DA**



# Know Before you





If you haven't been to FETC in Orlando before, get ready to work — and excited to play.

**BY VICTORIA THOMPSON**

**A**s an Orlando area resident, I am especially excited for FETC 2024 to be back in my town after having been held in New Orleans last year.

In addition to the wide array of excellent sessions taking place at the Orange County Convention Center, there's a lot going on in the exhibition hall—and plenty of ways to engage with the conference and the great city of Orlando. If you're attending FETC 2024 Jan. 23-26, take a look at some "know before you go" information in this article so you can not only learn from and stay connected with FETC but also have fun in the city.



- **Wear comfortable shoes, and pack clothes for an “Orlando winter.”** The Orange County Convention Center is the second-largest convention center in the United States, with over 7 million square feet of space. While conference activities take place mainly in a central space, be prepared to walk to different sessions and events that you plan to see. Comfortable shoes will help you navigate the conference hall, the poster session arena, and more. Additionally, winters in Florida tend to be milder than other climates—it’s not uncommon for temperatures to hit the high 60s/low 70s.
- **Review sessions on the FETC website.** With attendees and speakers that range from IT specialists, educators and instructional coaches to school leadership and more, there’s plenty of content to choose from. There are also poster sessions, playgrounds and activities. Previewing which sessions and activities you’d like to attend may also help you plan your conference schedule. (You can preview the sessions by visiting [fetc.org](http://fetc.org), or by downloading the mobile app.) If you are on social media, follow FETC on X, formerly Twitter (@fetc) and LinkedIn (Future of Educational Technology Conference) for updates and session highlights.
- **Be sure to check out the Expo Hall.** Here, you’ll be able to speak with employees from education and technology companies—many who come from education themselves—and others who are invested in using educational technology to enhance their curricu-

lum and learning experiences. Expo passes at FETC 2024 are free, so even if you can’t attend the full conference, it’s worth your time to visit the Expo Hall.

#### **WHEN YOU’RE “OFF THE CLOCK”**

- **Last but not least, be sure to check out the great city of Orlando.** Orlando is nicknamed “The City Beautiful” for a reason. It’s a gorgeous city with lots to do. The area is known for its theme parks, tourism, and food scene—but there’s much more to explore, too. Here are my top five things to do within 15 minutes of the Orange County Convention Center:
- **Disney Springs.** If you follow me on social media (@victoriathetech on X and linkedin.com/victoriarosethompson on LinkedIn), you won’t be surprised that I’m a huge Disney theme park fan. I have an annual pass to the theme parks, and whenever visitors come to town, they ask to hang out in the theme parks. However, if you’re looking for a “free” option, Disney Springs is one of



While conference activities take place mainly in a central space, be prepared to walk to different sessions and events that you plan to see. Comfortable shoes will help you navigate the conference hall, the poster session arena, and more.

the best. It's a vast outdoor shopping center with over 60 restaurants as well as shops, live entertainment and more, and unlike the theme parks, admission is free.

- **Universal City Walk.** For my Universal Studios fans, this one is for you. Universal City Walk is similar to Disney Springs, where you do not need a ticket or an annual pass to Universal Studios in order to get in. Nicknamed the “Epicenter of Awesome,” it has an impressive selection of shops, bites, places to eat, and even a movie theater. You can also experience live music, and even play mini-golf. For the Harry Potter fans attending FETC, the Universal Studios store will have a great section of souvenirs in their Wizarding World of Harry Potter area.
- **Discovery Cove.** If you've got some time to spare and you're a fan of the ocean, I recommend that you check out Discovery Cove. Discovery Cove is a resort where you can swim with dolphins, snorkel among thousands of tropical fish in the Grand Reef, feed hundreds of exotic birds in their aviary, and explore their Freshwater Oasis. This will cost money (you can check the Discovery Cove website for rates), but it's worth a visit and a must-see if you are interested in marine biology, the ocean, and oceanic animals.
- **Orlando Museum of Art.** Founded in 1924, this museum is easily one of my favorite places to visit in the Orlando area. Each year, it presents about a dozen shows consisting of special and visiting exhibitions, as well as those curated from the museum's collections. Orlando Museum of Art welcomes more than 130,000 visitors each year and the museum's education programs serve 16,000 annually.
- **ICON Park.** This 20-acre, open-air, gate-free entertainment destination features plenty of space for you to spread out and relax after the hustle and bustle of attending the conference. Located in the heart of Orlando's International Drive, ICON Park offers more than 40 amazing restaurants, funky bars, boutique shops and attractions, all huddled around “The Wheel,” a Ferris wheel that rises 40 stories. **DA**



# Why district leaders are key to teachers' success with edtech

We have invested in edtech, but we have invested considerably less in supporting teachers to use those tools effectively as part of their instruction.

BY TRACY HUEBNER AND RACHEL BURSTEIN

Spending on edtech is way up in K12 districts, spurred by an infusion of federal funding and the need for new technologies to support remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

One estimate puts edtech spending by schools at more than \$50 billion per year. Teachers are using more digital technologies than ever, with one report finding that districts each used around 1,500 different digital tools per month during the 2020-21 school year.

Yet for all this edtech spending, usage and access, student academic outcomes are declining. What accounts for this discrepancy? Research is ongoing and there is no single answer but early signs point to the varied quality of technologies and a mismatch between the myriad technological tools available and the ways that they are used—or not used.

## AWASH IN EDTECH: 3 TIPS

District leaders play a critical role in facilitating technology-enabled instruction among teachers in their school communities. What can they do to empower and support teachers in embracing proven technology-enabled instructional practices?

Here are three tips:

**1. Demonstrate how technology-enabled instruction can be used to advance a district's vision, priorities, and plans.** Even the most motivated teacher has few incentives for embracing technology-enabled instructional practices if they do not feel supported by their school or district or if they don't see a clear alignment between those practices and the school or district's overall goals. Research makes clear that aligned district vision and goals, and strong, supportive leadership play a significant role in teachers' embrace of technology-enabled instructional practice.

District leaders can work to show how technology-enabled instructional practices can contribute to achieving shared goals. For example, if a district's strategic plan or vision stresses the importance of serving English language learners equitably, plans for technology-enabled instruction should help further that particular vision. In doing so, district leaders show that they believe that teachers play an important role in achieving high-level goals.

**2. Help teachers overcome negative beliefs and attitudes toward technology-enabled instruction.** Research shows that teachers' beliefs and attitudes about technology and pedagogy play a significant role

in their willingness to embrace technology-enabled instructional practices. Yet those beliefs and attitudes are also malleable and responsive. District leaders play an important role in helping teachers overcome beliefs that are correlated with a failure to embrace technology-enabled instruction.

For example, a teacher may value certain pedagogies above others or may perceive their own technological knowledge as subpar. District leaders can provide teachers with structured opportunities to articulate those values and perceived skills. They can then offer opportunities for teachers to observe colleagues with similar values who use technology-enabled instructional practices effectively and in ways that do not require significant technical knowledge.

District leaders can also offer professional learning opportunities that demonstrate how technology-enabled teaching has meaningfully improved learning outcomes. Or they can work with school principals to have teachers shadow peers who can demonstrate how they are improving their instructional practice with technology.

**3. Support social-cultural spaces that promote effective technology-enabled teaching.** Teachers are often willing to consider using research-backed, technology-enabled instructional practices when they are exposed to a set of social-cultural influences that

promote those practices. Many of these spaces do not require significant resources. For example, a district leader might support a set of teacher-run PLCs across schools to discuss technology-enabled instruction.

Other types of influences may require more resources. For example, an instructional coach may be deployed to different classrooms to work with teachers on effective instructional practices or to help teachers parse learning data generated through the use of technological platforms. In any case, such programs or personnel must be available in an ongoing manner and offered in the context of support rather than evaluation.

As with so much in education, context matters deeply when applying these approaches. But across school communities, one thing is certain: district leaders can play a significant role in encouraging and supporting teachers in embracing technology-enabled instructional practices that are correlated with better learning outcomes. **DA**

*Tracy Huebner is a director, advancing teaching and learning at WestEd. Rachel Burstein is an independent education researcher and writer. They are the co-authors of "Strategies for Encouraging Effective Technology-Enabled Instructional Practices in K-12 Education: A Thought Piece Drawing on Research and Practice," published by WestEd.*



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## Esports: More than just a hobby

Schools can help students take their love for gaming to the next level by establishing an esports program, which can drive postsecondary success through scholarships and even career opportunities.

BY MICAH WARD

**W**e've all heard it before, whether it be from your parents, your teachers, or your closest friends: "Get off your video game; it'll rot your brain." But that way of thinking has long since been retired. Now, young adults are encouraged to chase the activities they find the most fun and engaging, including gaming, because you never know how it may change their life.

Esports has become one of the most innovative opportunities for students to pursue a passion that ultimately started within the comfort of their own homes. Nowadays, schools can help students take their love for gaming to the next level by establishing an esports program, which may ultimately drive postsecondary success through scholarships and even career opportunities.

Gaming is no longer just a hobby, and here's why.

"I see unlimited potential for so many individuals who may or may never have had a voice before," says Glenn Robbins, superintendent of Brigantine Schools (N.J.), during the Future of Education Technology's recent webinar highlighting the latest trends and strategies surrounding esports in the K12 sphere. "This is a whole new sports program. You don't have to be extremely athletic. You don't have to have the best grades. You can just be a gamer."

The list of possible outcomes students can take advantage of through gaming alone is significant, he adds.

"Who would've thought we would be saying that a few years ago?" Robbins says.

The growth surrounding the esports industry is something we can't ignore, posits Katrina Adkins, vice president of the United States Academic Esports League and professor of Gaming and Esports at Post University.

Esports has also expanded opportunities and involvement in extracurricular activities for women, notes Jihan Johnston, esports education specialist for the North America Scholastic Esports Federation (NASEF).

"It not only just brings fuel and a light to the community, it highlights the value women have in this space," said Johnston. "But also, when it comes to an educational space, it highlights the different career opportunities that are available for women."

But designing an esports program requires more than simply providing students with a gaming device and saying, "Have at it." Superintendents and administrators should start by involving their own students in the conversation, and from there, look at what opportunities and funding are available so they can hit the ground running.

### ADVICE FOR ADMINISTRATORS

"Administrators and educators need to be brought on board," argued Chris Turner, director of the Mixed Virtual Innovation Gaming and Esports Institute at Southern University Law Center. He said one of the best ways leaders can get an idea of where to start is by surveying your students. Ask them what games they're playing,

how they're playing them and when.

*District Administration* also recently published a "Guide to K12 Esports" for administrators wanting to learn more about how to build an esports facility in their own districts.

Sustainability, however, is one of the most important questions K12 leaders must address before moving forward with an esports program. There are several factors to consider: internet connectivity, hardware maintenance, and funding. Adkins explains that schools can experiment with very little resources.

"I get a lot of calls every day from people asking, 'What can we do with Chromebooks and some Nintendo Switches? Can we start a program?' And the answer is, yes, you can," she says.

Leaders don't have to start with a flashy new arena or gaming center, although these could be goals later on down the road. But for now, leaders can leverage inexpensive Chromebooks or Nintendo Switches for games like Minecraft and Mario Kart with a focus on careers and curriculum.

"There are a lot of resources out there," said Adkins. "I would encourage everybody to take a step back and ask, 'What do I want out of my program? What is my mission and my vision?' Because if you don't have that, you can't create something that will be sustainable for years to come." DA

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# Sustaining Funding

How K12 leaders can lobby states to support students beyond the ESSER deadline.

BY QUBILAH HUDDLESTON AND VENTURA RODRIGUEZ

**T**he school bells have rung for many districts across the country, and as students across the nation return to the classroom for a new school year, their school, district and state leaders are reckoning with a looming ESSER spending deadline. On Sept. 30, 2024, the unprecedented federal funding designated to remedy pandemic-related learning disruption will come to an end, pushing many high-need districts closer to a fiscal cliff. Because ESSER funds were distributed based on the number of students living in poverty, schools with the highest needs will be hit hardest.

With this deadline rapidly approaching, state education leaders and state legislatures can play a critical role in finding ways to sustain the programming that has effectively supported students of color and students from low-income backgrounds for the past three years—and district leaders can and should advocate for this support.

Facing and mitigating the risks associated with the

fiscal cliff requires communities to work together to invest in programs that drive student achievement and support vulnerable student populations. It also requires bold action from state education leaders and state legislatures to ensure that our nation's most vulnerable student populations—including students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, multilingual learners, and students with disabilities—continue to receive the programming they need to recover from the impacts of the pandemic.

## ESSER DEADLINE URGENCY

Time is running out, and it's time for district and state leaders to take decisive action to continue prioritizing students' needs beyond the ESSER deadline. Here's how:

**1. Extend fund availability transparently and inclusively:** While the spending deadline at the federal level is approaching, many state legislatures have

## Facing and mitigating the risks associated with the fiscal cliff requires communities to work together to invest in programs that drive student achievement and support vulnerable student populations.

the power to change laws and regulations at the state level to enable districts to carry forward state and local funds beyond the deadline and accelerate student learning. This would allow districts to prioritize and strategically spend their remaining ESSER funds while saving state and local dollars for future fiscal years.

Equity should be at the forefront of fiscal decision-making now and beyond the ESSER deadline, so it's particularly important for these elected leaders to invite all relevant stakeholders—educators, administrators, caregivers, students, and advocates—to help shape their next budget and policy choices. It's especially important for district leaders to prioritize Black and Latino families and families from low-income backgrounds in their decision-making processes to ensure extension strategies best serve these communities.

**2. Increase state revenue to help districts through the fiscal cliff:** Recent historic increases in public education funding in states such as Michigan and Tennessee prove that policymakers can make a considerable impact on districts' funding allocations. State legislatures should identify funds within existing revenue streams that they can reallocate to better support districts through the fiscal uncertainty ahead. Raising new revenue to increase state funding can also enable leaders to allocate investments equitably across districts in their state.

**3. Assess districts' sustainability risk:** Research has shown that ESSER funds account for anywhere between 4-17% of total revenue, depending on the state. Because of this significant range, states across the country will face varying degrees of fiscal cliff severity in 2024.

State education leaders should identify the districts that will be hit hardest by this impending deadline by assessing those with a combination of a high percentage of ESSER dollars in relation to their overall budget and a large number of high-needs students. District leaders can help this important process by proactively organizing and communicating their data points.

In addition to providing more funding to these districts, advocates and policymakers can help leaders in these areas implement both short-term plans for preparing for change and strategies for fostering long-term sustainability.

**4. Help districts modify ESSER plans and promote promising practices:** To manage the fiscal cliff effectively, districts need help adjusting their overall

ESSER plans to ensure they're using funds as effectively and equitably as possible. By collaborating directly with district leaders, state education leaders can help evaluate current plans and prepare for changes ahead.

They can also identify and promote promising practices many districts are already putting into action. Northshore School District in Washington, for example, developed eight guiding principles—ranging from regulation compliance to equity-focused actions—to help leaders determine how they will reduce expenditures and increase revenues in the coming years. Incentivizing these and other practices can enable state leaders to facilitate knowledge-sharing across districts in their state.

While the steepness of the upcoming fiscal cliff will vary from district to district, every school—and every student—will no doubt be impacted by the drop. The time is now for district and school leaders to advocate for the support they need from state education leaders and state legislatures. We must ensure that we have the resources necessary to sustain programming that has been effective at aiding vulnerable student populations and remedying unfinished learning.

With these tools and the support of communities and families, state and district leaders can make the right decisions and ensure that all students—especially those who need the most support—receive the proper education that prepares them for college and career advancement. **DA**

*Qubilah Huddleston is the Ed Trust Policy Lead for Equitable School Funding. Being on the P-12 policy team, Qubilah informs and manages Ed Trust's policy positions on equitable school funding. She is responsible for analyzing state and federal policy proposals and supporting state partners and advocates in achieving more equitable state funding formulas for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds.*

*Ventura Rodriguez is an ERS partner and leads ERS' State Practice Area. In this role, he supports ERS' work to enable the design, implementation, and continuous improvement of effective and ambitious state-level policies that create critical enabling conditions for school and system leaders to transform how they use resources (people, time, and money) to support schools and students.*



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## Teacher shortage check-in

3 bold ways leaders are addressing the issue midway through the school year.

As teacher vacancies continue to plague K12 schools across the country, administrators are looking for more creative incentives to bring teachers back into the classroom—and keep them. Recent research suggests that benefit packages alone, which many leaders have upgraded using federal funds, aren't enough to quickly recruit educators. Most often, applicants desire a salary that's livable and respectable. Unfortunately, not every school district can offer competitive pay. So, what are they doing instead?

### A STATEWIDE INTERVENTION

Several districts are leveraging newly implemented strategies to increase their exposure and potentially draw more eyes—specifically potential teachers—toward their schools. That's the case for Pennsylvania,

which launched a new website this week encouraging students of all ages to pursue a career in education as the state continues to deal with teacher vacancies in its classrooms, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reports.

Initiated by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, the “Teach in PA” website includes insights and testimonials from current teachers who describe the certification process and how others can join the teaching profession.

“At the Pennsylvania Department of Education, we know the critical and fundamental role educators play in our communities and are committed to rebuilding the educator pipeline in the Commonwealth,” Education Secretary Khalid N. Mumin said in a statement. “What's more, as a former teacher and administrator, I know firsthand how rewarding this

job can be. The Teach in PA website will help inspire students to become educators and provide them with the resources they need to enter into this meaningful, fulfilling career.”

This strategic intervention comes at a time when at least 7.7% of teachers throughout the state left their jobs between the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years, according to research by the Penn State Center for Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis.

### VIRTUAL TEACHERS FILL CLASSROOMS IN THE MEANTIME

Montana is still seeing the negative effects brought forth by the pandemic in their classrooms, so they're relying on virtual teachers to fill their vacancies while they work to replenish their teaching staff, *NPR* reports.

According to Montana Public Radio's Austin Amestoy, who was interviewed by *NPR*, several math classes at Florence-Carlton High School in Florence, Montana are being taught by virtual teachers as provided by the state-funded Montana Digital Academy. For the first time ever, students enter the classroom with their laptops in hand as they await their instructor via virtual communication.

“Florence-Carlton is one of several schools in Montana relying on the state's online learning program to fill teaching positions,” Amestoy told *NPR*. “It's one symptom of an unprecedented nationwide crisis of teacher recruitment and retention.”

### SEEKING TALENT ABROAD

At the Eagle County School District in Colorado, officials reported having more than 40 vacant licensed positions (including teachers) ahead of this school year, according to *Vail Daily*. Superintendent Philip Qualman said that their trouble recruiting teachers largely stems from the

area's cost of living.

“What we’re experiencing in terms of the challenge of hiring qualified educators, it’s not isolated to us, it’s a national problem,” he said during a board of education meeting last month, according to *Vail Daily*. “We feel it much more here than others because of the cost of living here. We have a very hard time hiring people because nobody can afford to live here.”

Given the district’s shrinking pool of local applicants, they’re looking to expand their options by considering international applicants. Qualman said that the vast majority of their applicants now come from overseas, and very few have gone through “traditional ed programs.”

According to the district’s Chief Human Resources Officer Adele Wilson, the district had 59 teachers from other countries heading into the 2022-23 school year. The process started nearly 20 years ago, but the district’s reliance on international educators has grown significantly since the pandemic.

However, it’s not a long-term fix to their recruiting and retention challenges, *Vail Daily* reports. The district works with J-1 visas to make these international hires, and the contract lasts three years and can be extended an additional two. Additionally, the cost per visa is around \$3,000 apiece.

Qualman said he is working with state senators to hopefully update the state’s visa laws so that there is more flexibility time-wise for international educators serving public education.

“It takes three years, at least, for a domestic teacher to understand the job and become extremely proficient at it,” he said, according to *Vail Daily*. “So for somebody coming in from overseas, it takes a little bit longer because there’s a cultural adaptation that has to happen.”

-Micah Ward



## Strategic plans

5 topics that have risen to the top of the priority list in 2023.

Strategic plans are the pride and joy of many a superintendent, but do you know what your fellow district leaders are prioritizing in their visions for their students and staff? And do you know which K12 topics are becoming more important in your colleagues’ strategic plans?

For instance, social-emotional learning was covered in about 25% of the 2018-19 strategic plans and local control and accountability plans scanned by the school data tracking firm, Burbio. SEL became more prominent in the early years of the pandemic, peaking in 2021 at 42% and declining gradually since then and is now a key term in about 30% of the 2,200 plans that Burbio analyzed.

On the other hand, “bilingual” seems to be on a more cyclical schedule. While it was far more prominent than it was pre-COVID, the focus on it ebbs and flows. It was

included in 10% of plans in 2020, fell to 8.9% the next, peaked at 17% in 2022 and is now at 12%.

The most common topic was attendance, which appeared in just more than half of the plans tracked by Burbio.

### HOW STRATEGIC PLANS ARE CHANGING

Here are the five topics that have seen the largest growth as strategic plan priorities. The first figure is how many *more* plans include these topics in 2023 compared to 2018-19. The second number is how many plans the term appears in:

- **Multitiered system of supports (MTSS):** 14% increase (in 32% of plans)
- **Mental health:** 9.8% (40%)
- **Inclusion:** 7.7% (31%)
- **Community engagement:** 7% (34%)
- **Excellence:** 7% (52%)

-Matt Zalaznick



## 4 ways leaders are hoping to curb chronic absenteeism

Often times we hear superintendents say, “If you’re not in your seat, you’re not learning.” But what are leaders doing to address the issue?

Many school districts are nearing the halfway mark of the first semester, yet one issue remains: Students are still missing school at alarming rates. Exacerbated by the pandemic, chronic absenteeism poses several negative consequences for students, namely the inevitable significant learning gaps they face throughout the academic year. Often times we hear superintendents say, “If you’re not in your seat, you’re not learning.” And that’s the simple truth. But what are leaders doing to address the issue?

### A STATEWIDE TASK FORCE

Throughout the country, school districts are launching initiatives to understand where their students have gone and why they’re missing school, including the entire state of Virginia.

Gov. Glenn Youngkin has announced the creation of the Chronic Absenteeism Task Force as part of his “ALL IN VA” plan to combat academic learning loss. The initiative comes in response to the state’s nearly doubled chronic absenteeism rates since the pandemic. The task force will develop resources and action plans for districts to address absenteeism in their schools.

“The decision to shutter schools for extended periods during the pandemic continues to have lasting, detrimental effects on our children,” Youngkin said in a statement. “To prevent losing an entire generation of our children, Virginia is leading the way to accelerate our students’ learning loss recovery through intensive tutoring and combatting chronic absenteeism.”

### KNOCK, KNOCK

Kalamazoo Public Schools in Michigan was set to host what it calls a “Knock and Talk” event in an effort to target students with more than 10 absences.

The initiative is similar to Los Angeles Unified’s Alberto Carvalho’s iAttend LAUSD campaign where officials visit the homes of students with low attendance to better understand why they’re not coming to school.

“We’re going to go out and knock on every student’s door,” said Superintendent Darrin Slade, according to *MLive*.

The district has reported a 27% chronic absenteeism rate, meaning more than one-fourth of students have missed at least 10% of school. And the problem persists throughout the entire state, according to KPS, which said Michigan has the fourth-highest chronic absenteeism rate in the country, according to *MLive*.

### LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY FOR FAMILIES

Alexandria City Public Schools in Virginia is also seeing the effects of the pandemic play out in its classrooms. Chronic absenteeism in the state is defined as any student who has missed more than 18 days of school. Between 2019 and 2021, the number of absences has doubled from 8% to 16%, according to NBC4 Washington.

In response, ACPS has launched an app called Parent Square to track absenteeism rates for students in grades 6-12 in real-time. It automatically logs reports at the end of the first period, at lunchtime and after school. Email and text updates are then sent to the student’s parents.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LEADERS

These new initiatives are but a mere sample of the innovative tactics superintendents and administra-

tors are implementing to help curb absenteeism in their schools. However, recent research offers some more widespread recommendations leaders may want to consider before taking a more specialized approach in their districts.

A recent study from Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), an independent, non-partisan research center, explores the effects of chronic absenteeism throughout the state of California. The researchers offer some recommendations for action that leaders in any state can take advantage of.

Here's what they advise for district leaders wanting to reduce absenteeism in their own schools:

**“To prevent losing an entire generation of our children, Virginia is leading the way to accelerate our students’ learning loss recovery through intensive tutoring and combating chronic absenteeism.”**

- Leverage data to identify disparities and bright spots.
- Invest in best practices and data systems that monitor driving factors for both excused and unexcused absences.
- Review and update local and state policies related to unexcused absences.
- Ask how attendance policies and practices can be better communicated to students and families.
- Invest in professional development to improve attendance and truancy practices.

*By Micah Ward*



## Talking Points

These are the top 10 topics school boards are discussing right now.

This may come as news to some superintendents and district leaders: Book bans and pride flags are not the main topics of discussion at *every* school board meeting in the country.

Still, the elected officials who hire and fire superintendents are grappling with some complicated topics—particularly those having to do with wellness and human resources, according to a survey of meeting minutes by Burbio, a service that tracks K12 data. The company has compiled a list of the terms most frequently discussed by about half the nation’s school boards at their last three meetings as of Sept. 28, 2023. Here are the top 10 catch phrases, along with the percentage of school boards discussing them:

**Special education:** 60%  
**Mental health:** 36%  
**Nurse:** 35%  
**Staffing:** 32%  
**Negotiations:** 31%  
**Labor:** 28%  
**Contractor:** 28%  
**Bargaining:** 24%  
**Behavior services:** 21%  
**Psychologist:** 21%

“Substitute teacher,” “collective

bargaining,” “autism” and “school psychologist” also landed in the top 20. Absent from Burbio’s list are headline-grabbing topics such as transgender students, bathrooms and critical race theory.

With districts entering the final school year of ESSER funding, the survey also examined the top construction-related terms. At the typical school board meeting, members and district leaders are drilling down to furniture, lighting and air quality of projects at various stages of the approval process. Here’s the top 10:

- |                           |                  |
|---------------------------|------------------|
| <b>1.</b> Safety          | <b>6.</b> Table  |
| <b>2.</b> Construction    | <b>7.</b> Space  |
| <b>3.</b> Security        | <b>8.</b> HVAC   |
| <b>4.</b> LED             | <b>9.</b> Energy |
| <b>5.</b> Classroom chair | <b>10.</b> Door  |

Speaking of ESSER, the survey took a close look at spending in one state to gauge how much federal relief funding remains in district coffers. Michigan’s districts have spent 54% of their ESSER money and have just over \$1.5 billion left. Some 38 school systems have between \$5 million and \$50 million remaining, with three still having over \$50 million still to spend.

*By Matt Zalaznick*



## 4 edtech trends superintendents should be paying attention to now

“The only constant in life is change”: A statement nearly 2,500 years old remains true today as district leaders grapple with the everchanging edtech landscape.

The 2022-23 school year was the first “normal” school year since the pandemic—at least, that’s what most hoped. But the reality is that many of the challenges brought forth by the pandemic remain. After all, how could such a disruptive force not come with lingering effects? In the world of education technology specifically, the pandemic marked the beginning of an era. Today, leaders are faced with edtech solutions beyond their wildest dreams, but navigating the landscape has become much more difficult.

To that end, K12 schools are asking for guidance and funding in order to meet the demands of the latest edtech trends and IT issues—but state education agencies may not be doing enough to help, declares a new report from the State

Educational Technology Directors Association.

According to the responses gathered from edtech directors, state superintendents, chiefs of staff and other senior state officials across the country, one IT-related issue continues to plague K12 schools, which is why it ranks No. 1 on their list of priorities this school year.

The “2023 State Edtech Trends Report” identifies four prominent trends both district and IT leaders must be addressing now:

### **CYBERSECURITY TOPS THE LIST OF PRIORITIES**

At least 42% of respondents underscored the need for increased funding and support for addressing their cybersecurity needs, suggesting that they currently aren’t receiving

enough help from state agencies.

Furthermore, 24% of respondents overall said cybersecurity was their state’s top technology priority, followed by equity (access to the internet) and technology for instruction.

“Improving K12 cybersecurity posture has become an issue of resources and equity,” Brad Hagg, Director of Education Technology at the Indiana Department of Education said in the report. “Understaffed districts and communities without access to a pipeline of cyber specialists will struggle to meet the requirements, often dictated by insurance companies, as well as the best practices necessary to implement a strong cybersecurity threat mitigation program.”

### **GUIDANCE ON AI IN EDUCATION IS STILL LACKING**

In the first five days of its launch back in November 2022, more than one million users logged into ChatGPT to see for themselves what the hype was all about. Soon after, media headlines painted a grim picture of the future of education citing concerns about academic integrity and plagiarism.

Yet, that hype has since died down significantly as educators have realized its enormous potential to enhance student learning and engagement. However, leaders simply need more guidance in order to leverage this technology effectively in the classroom.

According to the data, 55% of respondents indicated witnessing an increased interest in AI policy development compared to last year. However, only 2% of survey-takers of this year’s survey said their state has an AI initiative in place.

The researchers are hopeful this number will rise in the future considering that AI has gained the attention of federal agencies, including the Department of Education.

## STATES IDENTIFIED HOME INTERNET CONNECTIVITY AS THEIR TOP UNMET NEED

Interestingly, last year's report identified cybersecurity and professional learning on the use of edtech as leaders' top unmet needs. This year is different as home internet connectivity surpasses these issues according to 29% of respondents.

"During the pandemic, home access was a major issue for schools desperate to ensure continuity of learning during closures," the report reads. Although some progress has been made, nearly 17 million students still lack stable home internet access, according to the Federal Communications Commission.

**"Improving K12 cybersecurity posture has become an issue of resources and equity."**

## EFFECTIVE EDETECH USE REMAINS A TOP PRIORITY FOR LEADERS

In 2022, most leaders explained that they don't need more edtech tools. Instead, they want to find ways to use them more effectively, and that remains true in 2023.

Although professional learning in this area dropped to the No. 4 spot on their list of unmet needs this year, nearly 40% of leaders said their state doesn't collect data on the "use or effectiveness of edtech tools."

"When it comes to effective use of edtech tools, more leaders view this as a priority than last year, but they are doing something about it because providing professional learning opportunities on the effective use of edtech is no longer the top unmet need," the report reads.

*By Micah Ward*



## 3 ways AI can positively impact educational outcomes

Cheating aside, AI can be employed for experiential learning, career exploration and more.

There have been highly charged debates and thousands of news reports about the ethical implications of AI and how students can cheat, avoid learning associated with critical thinking, and shortcut the education system. Most stories emphasize the potential threats to K12 and higher ed rather than highlighting the benefits of using these tools for good.

One often overlooked application of artificial intelligence is the proven benefits to teachers and administrators, who can presently use this technology to reduce the time it takes to create highly engaging lessons, complete tedious administrative tasks, and turn educational content, such as textbooks, into videos youth want to watch. Priceless time can now be directed toward engaging kids, providing more individualized attention, and helping them succeed.

Here are three ways that AI can create efficiencies for teachers and improve school system effectiveness while fostering higher levels of student interest:

- 1. AI brings personalized learning to life.** Widescale success cannot be achieved by the traditional, now-dated school model of lecturing to kids from a chalkboard—or gauging student potential based on test scores. While AI can bring benefits to teaching on a mass scale, a good deal of its value comes from helping reach children of all needs, in a customized manner, one student at a time.

With AI, gone are the days of teaching to the top of the class while other students flounder or fail. Already there are highly sophisticated one-on-one AI-

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driven tutoring systems that cultivate deep understanding and knowledge on an individualized basis while building confidence and empowerment among greater numbers of learners.

**2. Turn textbooks into interactive media that improves learning outcomes.** Video's appeal and popularity are unquestionable. Tens of millions of kids and adults consume and learn from videos daily. Volumes of data show that they can have a powerful impact on teaching and learning.

According to a study we recently conducted, AI-generated lessons from teacher-approved materials and textbooks generated better learning outcomes. Through patented AI technology that is now available, textbooks can now be scanned and turned into quality first-draft video lessons using a teacher's realistic avatar—or an avatar (with a non-robotic voice) derived from a subject that a class is studying (e.g., Thomas Edison, Jane Austen, Martin Luther King Jr., and countless others).

We found that students watching a teacher-produced video answered an average of 60% of the questions about it correctly, while the group shown the AI-avatar video achieved an average of 75% correct answers. This improvement suggests that the AI-assisted approach to content development enhances student understanding and retention of the subject matter. In addition, we asked students which teacher they found easier to understand and pay attention to; 49.5% of the respondents preferred the AI instructor while only 22% favored the teacher alone.

**3. AI brings meaning back to teaching.** Our nation's teachers need help—and fast. A typical

teacher works about 54 hours a week, with just under half of that time devoted to directly teaching students. It's therefore no surprise that up to 63% of educators are considering leaving the profession in the next three years and fewer young people are considering teaching as a viable career.

AI can help, so why not let it? It can ensure teachers save their irreplaceable time and reduce burnout. From our most recent research, we found that a teacher using an AI teaching assistant to create an engaging video lesson saves 15.5X of their time versus

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**One often overlooked application of artificial intelligence is the proven benefit to teachers and administrators who can presently use this technology to reduce the time it takes to create highly engaging lessons.**

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one who develops their own from scratch. Think about it: 15.5 hours (without AI) to just one hour harnessing technology's potential.

The time previously spent doing research, designing slides, searching for images, drafting and editing the narration, and sitting down to record their talk can now be spent with students. AI can also greatly reduce administrative tasks like grading homework, creating spreadsheets, calculating student progress, and identifying learning needs and trends. This way, teachers can spend more of their time actually teaching—and get home from work at a reasonable hour.

## **ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF AI: THE REALITY, REALLY**

The advent of social media brought fear, excitement, skepticism, and optimism. AI brings the same, and we need to embrace the positives and put them to good use for the betterment of students and teachers.

The edtech market is estimated to reach \$421 billion by 2032 and, undoubtedly, AI will be a major contributor. AI is here to stay (regardless of those who are opposed to the notion of machine learning) as demonstrated by its current use in so many things we touch, purchase, and experience as consumers and businesspeople.

AI is not new, but it's getting better and more intuitive. We must seize this moment of opportunity and use technology to level the playing field—and resuscitate struggling teachers and tuned-out learners. Yes, there are legitimate ethical implications of AI, such as how technologies like ChatGPT can lead to cheating on assignments, but these should be addressed head-on so they don't distract from the myriad of benefits AI brings to America's classrooms, teachers, and students.

So, cheating aside, let's employ AI in ethical ways and enable our schools to spend more time on experiential learning, career exploration, skills development, and other meaningful activities that will ensure the success of all students.

*By Deepak Sekar*

*Deepak Sekar is co-founder and CEO of Prof Jim Inc., which has developed AI to auto-generate personalized, interactive teaching videos. An inventor with 225 issued patents, his previous company was acquired by Doordash.*



**T**he **Solution Showcase** brings together the latest K12 education products and service solutions in one easy-to use section. This year’s collection includes 24 entries from solution providers. Their innovative products have been developed in response to needs expressed by school districts across the U.S. *DA* is pleased to work with these companies to showcase the most innovative and cutting-edge products and services.

We look forward to your feedback on our Solution Showcase and please let us know if there are any products you would like to see included next year.

Warmly,  
**Lori Capullo**  
 EXECUTIVE EDITOR

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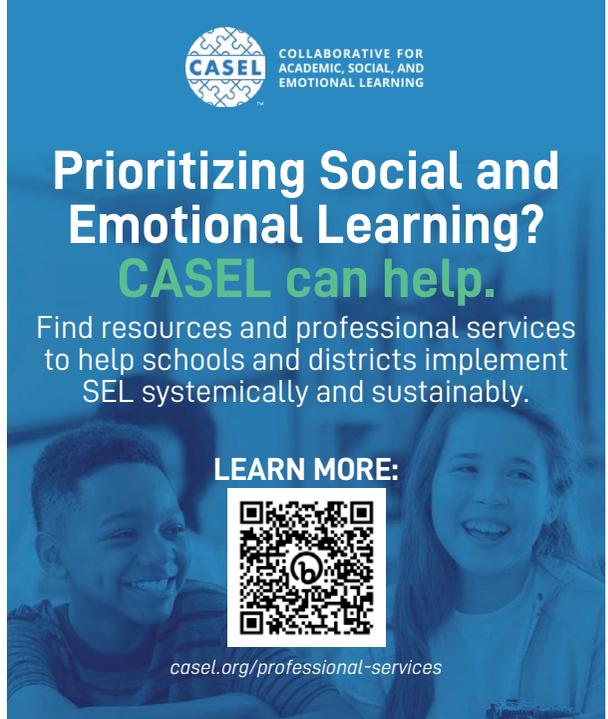
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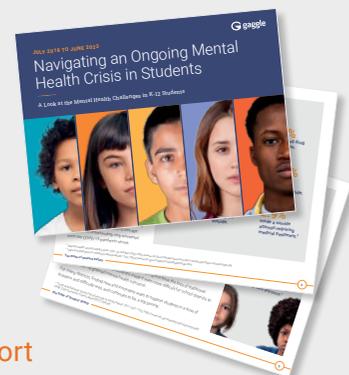


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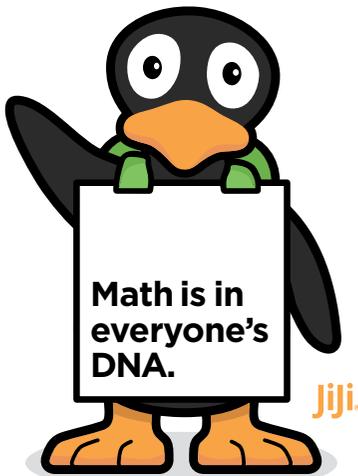
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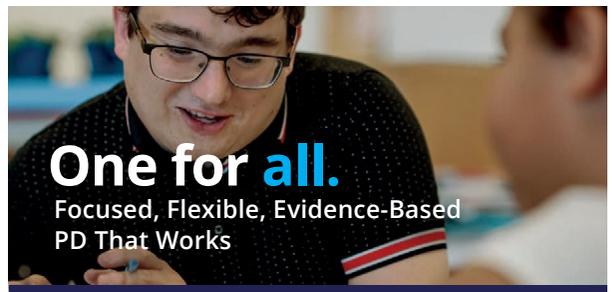
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# Keeping literacy varied and fun

A challenge in teaching students to read is they all learn differently. While repetition is key, some need it more than others.

BY ELIZABETH GREENE

One of the challenges of teaching students to read is that they all learn differently from one another. Some are visual learners who need to see things on the board. Kinesthetic learners might benefit from many different approaches, as long as they incorporate some kind of physical movement. And, while all students learn through repetition, some need it more than others.

Fortunately, the science of reading encourages a variety of approaches to meet the individual learning needs of all students. Here's how it works in my classroom.

## SMALL GROUPS

Differentiation is really important for my literacy instruction. If I couldn't teach in small groups, I'm not sure I could reach the needs of each learner. Students need to be grouped by ability to allow them access to instruction that fits their learning needs. We don't want anyone to be left behind, but we also need to be challenging those students who have mastered the new skills.

Independent work is also important. We use center rotations quite a bit—about two hours every day—so each student has opportunities to learn and practice their literacy skills in a variety of ways. Some center activities that we use include phonics transfer books, decodable texts, and sight word fluency exercises.

Now, our lessons are much better

for new students to adjust to quickly. This year, the lessons have also been updated to create center groups automatically based on activities or skill checks that gauge how well they've understood each new lesson.

## A VARIETY OF REPETITION TECHNIQUES

When students begin first grade, they learn how to look at a word and identify letter sounds and then put them together to make words. In their transfer books, they have word mapping exercises that are excellent for building those decoding skills with daily practice, one letter at a time. We talk about each sound and then work with the daily sound in our small groups. After that, we get to apply the new skill in a reading passage.

I like to work on nonsense word fluency with my students as well. This is another exercise that helps develop decoding skills in which students read made-up words. Since the words are made up, they have to identify the sounds themselves correctly instead of relying on their word knowledge.

## INTEGRATING TECHNOLOGY

Technology is incredibly helpful in the early literacy classroom. Using our literacy program, I am able to mirror everything we're doing up on a screen where the students can see it. That frees me to walk around and see what students are doing so I can see who may need more help or if some

students are ready to move on to the next step.

I do find technology challenging to use at times, perhaps because I'm older, but the students just connect with it so quickly. It's the future, so they need practice with it, but it also makes it so much easier to integrate different senses into instruction and practice.

We also do a lot of guided reading, both as a class and during center rotations. I might read a story to the whole class and then ask about characters or different story elements. I try to make it fun by choosing good picture books, and then we build our centers around the story. For example, they might be asked to retell the story using just pictures, so they have to place the plot's events in the correct sequence.

On our classroom iPads, we also have stories that students can read themselves or have read to them by the technology. They can even record themselves reading, which they love. We choose books that are appropriately leveled for their ability and then they answer questions to help develop their reading comprehension.

Students aren't always going to make perfect progress toward proficient reading. In fact, there are going to be new challenges every day, but if you can help them love what they are doing, they will be excited enough to rise to those challenges and grow throughout the school year and into their futures. **DA**



*Elizabeth Greene is a first-grade teacher at Springmore Elementary School in Cleveland*

*County, North Carolina. She can be reached at [ehgreene@clevelandcountyschools.org](mailto:ehgreene@clevelandcountyschools.org).*

# How mentoring can help new principals lead with kindness

Structured mentorship for new principals is an act of kindness, a gift of trust and collaborative support.

BY PHYLLIS GIMBEL AND PETER GOW

Each year, some new principals find themselves in new positions or schools with broken cultures—where staff and student voices had been silenced or ignored, change managed poorly, equity initiatives stalled, and difficult issues tabled. Our work on principal mentorship has highlighted the value of intentional and district- or state-supported, programs that stress trust, candor, and confidentiality.

Programs in Vermont and Massachusetts have shown that comprehensive mentorship improves principal confidence, effectiveness, and retention. Shared goals and standards are essential, as is careful training of mentors and matching with new principals. Meaningful mentor-mentee relationships should be sustained through at least the principal's first year.

What, then, of principals in schools where individuals and even entire constituencies feel alienated from one another? What can a new principal do where teachers have lost faith in their leaders, where students may feel unseen, and where the community may lack pride and a unified will to support the school? Principals must be committed to a single overarching concept: kindness.

Successful leadership involves being seen, knowing one's people

and institution, and prioritizing accessibility. Effective leaders develop vision and make policies through actively learning and appreciating the assets, wants and needs of their schools and communities. Such school leaders are empathetic and responsive. Their actions of listening, letting voices be heard, and offering support generate a culture of kindness.

It is in everyone's interest—including district and state offices—to have schools be places of trust and kindness. Principal mentorship programs should be expanded, and these programs should center kindness in their "curricula." Mentors must be trained to help new principals enact and nurture the elements of kindness in their daily practice.

Mentorship for kindness plays a key role in helping leaders face some of their most difficult situations. School leaders can learn in school or read in books about best practices for confronting hard issues and having "difficult conversations," but there is no substitute for being able to dissect complex situations with a trusted, experienced mentor.

A mentor can help a leader craft and role-play critical strategies like active and nonjudgmental listening, avoiding rushed "problem-solving" before multiple perspectives have been considered, not overplaying compassion at the expense of under-

standing, keeping cool to reduce others' stress levels, and knowing when, how, and from whom—like the mentor!—to seek further advice.

Research shows that constituent confidence in principals correlates broadly with school effectiveness, teacher engagement and student performance. A principal who shows and lives kindness can create a school climate that attracts teachers and to which they will want to remain attached—and in which families and communities take pride and pleasure.

To offer structured mentorship for new principals is an act of kindness itself, a gift of trust and collaborative support from a district that sets a tone and will keep on giving. Existing programs have been highly effective, and new leaders provided with ongoing support build authentic faith in themselves and in their communities that fortifies them to lead with calmness, consideration, courage, empathy, and equity—with exemplary, real, and contagious kindness. **DA**



*Phyllis Gimbel, a professor of educational leadership for Bridgewater State*



*University in Massachusetts, and Peter Gow, past executive director of the Independent*

*Curriculum Group, are long-time educators and school leaders and authors of Leadership Through Mentoring: The Key to Improving the Confidence and Skill of Principals (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021). They believe that kindness and mutual respect are essential to great teaching and learning.*

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