



CASE STUDY:
**D.C. EVEREST AREA
SCHOOL DISTRICT'S
DIGITAL TRANSITION**

Behind the scenes of a
successful districtwide
1:1 conversion



SUPERINTENDENT: DR. KRISTINE GILMORE

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Many districts face the same challenges after choosing to embark on a 1:1 digital transition. They need to choose the right devices, the right curriculum supports, and they need to ensure their school board, every school employee, and parents, are on board with the leap. All parties involved must understand why digital is necessary to prepare students for the world they'll face after they graduate.

LOCATION: Weston, WI

STUDENTS: 6,000

FARMS*: 32%

*Percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals

D.C. Everest has lifted itself to sit alongside some of the best school districts in Wisconsin, thanks in part to its ambitious technology plan and implementation of quality professional development. But the road wasn't easy. District leaders had to navigate their unique set of challenges in order to make their digital transition a success.

The common thread for the D.C. Everest region is the school district, which serves 11 municipalities, none with historic downtowns. Established in 1953, D.C. Everest is one of Wisconsin's newest school districts. That youngness carries with it a scrappy demeanor that leans toward new methods of teaching and doing whatever it takes to provide the best opportunities for students. Its district leaders and teachers have proven to be innovative, taking risks to ensure students have what they needed to be successful.

Superintendent Kristine Gilmore, Ed.D., who has served as D.C. Everest's superintendent for 14 years, helped guide the district through its digital transition over the past two years. And who better to lead the district into the future than a local girl with a long history in the region? Gilmore happens to be a graduate of D.C. Everest schools.

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"It's the 'local girl comes home' story," she said. "Growing up, I had never dreamed of it, but it's been a great place to give back to the community and raise my three kids with my husband."

Another facet of the district that sets it apart from others in the region — the district has a large number of English Language Learners, comprising 12 percent of the school district. This is due in part to the region being home to a growing Hmong American population, who located there over the last three decades.

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WHY GO DIGITAL?

Devices have been a part of D.C. Everest classrooms for years, but in 2014, they went 1:1 with iPads and Discovery Education Techbook, a digital textbook series. Of course, devices and powerful curriculum supports weren't enough to transform the district. They needed a plan that would allow every student to succeed.

But before making its digital leap, D.C. Everest had to ensure that every level of the district's faculty understood why they were making such a fundamental change. A key component of that change was keeping the promise of equal access to success for their students, said Gilmore.

"Technology for us was about providing every kid with the best opportunity to be successful," she said. "The 1:1 initiative has provided both teachers and students with more choice and voice. Students now have 24/7/365 access to educational tools and resources that allow them to explore their individual interests, learn in a manner best-suited to them, and share what they've learned in a format they're most comfortable with."

D.C. Everest is not alone. Educators across the country are using Techbook to transform their

classrooms into interactive learning environments, where lessons aren't always one-sided lectures. Students can explore concepts with hands-on labs, getting a better understanding of real-world problems. Teachers can customize their lessons to meet the needs of their students by altering the Lexile levels, or language options.

District leaders also selected iPads paired with Techbook because that combination enabled students to learn offline. If Wi-Fi access wasn't available at a student's home, they could download chapters of material at school and take that back home to study videos and instruction. The solution helped ensure that technology barriers wouldn't leave students without Internet access at home behind.

"For kids, learning in digital environments isn't a new, exciting, scary thing — this is just their life," she said. "We need to be sure that education is where our kids' lives are at, not where our lives as educators were at."

In a departure from many school districts across the country, D.C. Everest students are allowed to bring their iPads home over the summer. Gilmore said it's a way of combating the so-called "summer slide," effect in which knowledge melts from students' minds over the summer months. To help retain some of their learned skills, the summer brought students educational programs such as STEM camps, summer school, and current resources on their iPads.

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GOING 1:1

For Gilmore, there was a spark that marked the beginning of her digital journey. She had attended a Suburban School Superintendents Conference in San Francisco, where former Mooresville superintendent Mark Edwards had spoken. His message about digital transition, helping students learn to be great learners, was influential for Gilmore.

"As he told the story of his district, I thought, 'Why not D.C. Everest?'" said Gilmore. "Our kids deserved these resources, and it was time to roll up our sleeves and make it happen."

The district had been discussing going 1:1 for a few years. It previously had around 5,000 devices unequally distributed across its approximately 6,000 students. But Gilmore's experience at the conference resulted in a decisive push for D.C. Everest's transition to 1:1.

"You don't have full access to the benefits of a digital curriculum until you go 1:1. That really allowed us to push content to all of our kids. We don't have to guess at what our kids have. This initiative was about providing equity for our children and countless opportunities for the future."

Initially, her team was concerned about budgetary constraints, but Gilmore assured them that they could overcome those challenges. No one has an unlimited budget, she said, but we can prioritize. By 2014, the district had rolled out 6,000 iPads to all of its students in under two weeks.

Through its 1:1 plan, school board officials wanted to provide students with rich, innovative classroom experiences. But funding new devices alone would not pave the way to the board's goals for innovation. To support its technology plan, the district invested \$4 million in infrastructure improvements, such as routers, bandwidth, mobile device management solutions, and Wi-Fi, and began investing in solid professional development (PD) to help educators adapt to the new shift in teaching.

"More than anything you need for teachers to shift their pedagogy around the higher levels of thinking for kids, creativity, innovation, personalization," she said. "All of this comes down to how we can change the classroom pedagogy to meet the needs of our students. The device is a resource — never a substitute for a great teacher."

To leverage this new priority, D.C. Everest restructured its teacher compensation around quality PD. Teachers are compensated for pursuing individually-chosen opportunities that improve their teaching and learning strategies and are empowered to use those strategies within their classrooms in creative, new ways.

The incentive strategy paid off. By the end of the 2015-2016 school year, the district's just over 400 teachers accrued more than 25,000 hours of PD

outside of the school day.

The PD consisted of teachers teaching teachers best practices in the classroom, mini-courses on specific subjects, and three-day institutes focused on teaching and learning. During these sessions, Discovery Education's Digital Leader Corps played a crucial role, said Gilmore, bringing speakers such as Toni Robinson to guide educators through their transition.

"Our professional development was not just two hours of training, or reading a book. It's about changing the way that we teach every day. And even with newer teachers, that's often not something they're taught in school. Doing this well requires time and hands-on training, and an environment where risk-taking with support is safe," said Gilmore.

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF 1:1

Technology being placed in the hands of every student has helped to open the door for them to express and share their learning in creative ways. One way this was exemplified was how a fourth-grade class at Riverside Elementary School chose to take their study of the Iditarod Race and run with it.

The students' enthusiasm for the race evolved into a podcast series where they recorded their thoughts on the progress of the race. Their creativity paid off. The podcast drew the attention of a few actual Iditarod mushers, who had been following the kids' show. The mushers reached out to the class to congratulate them on their creation and encouraged them to keep at it.

The encounter was an affirmation for the students' experimentation with what's possible through a digital education.

"That kind of experience changes how kids perceive themselves as participants in their own education, as readers, writers, and authors, they have an authentic audience," said Gilmore.

By the start of the 2016-2017 school year, the district had two years of experience in a 1:1 learning environment. They also had become

well-versed with all three of Discovery Education's Techbooks — Science Techbook, Math Techbook and Social Studies Techbook — which supplement their existing curriculum.

Gilmore said the district selected Techbook because it allowed students to experience their education in a multi-faceted way. Traditional textbooks offer students textual ways to experience new places or concepts, and in Techbook, if they don't quite understand, they can watch the video, it can be read aloud, they can change the Lexile level, and in math they can see a problem solved in multiple ways.

"Adopting Techbook was really about engaging students and giving them opportunities to grow in different ways than a flat textbook might do," said Gilmore. "It's one thing to read about the desert if you've never been there, and another to watch a video and see it."

Social Studies students immediately took to the benefits of Techbook. Being able to witness world-changing events in video form, and study history through multiple lenses has afforded students a more well-rounded education. But implementing Math Techbook has been more complicated, said Gilmore, because it has involved a mindset shift around how to teach it.

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Math can be a touchy subject for districts. Unlike Social Studies, it is generally taught in a very concrete fashion, and there are very distinct milestones to hit for state standards. Since rolling out Math Techbook, Gilmore said she noticed a reticence of certain teachers to adapt to the changing learning styles around Math.

"We all want to provide kids with more meaningful experiences, but that often involves setting up the classroom differently, learning differently — and change is difficult," she said.

OVERCOMING THE FEAR OF CHANGE

This reluctance to change represents one of the challenges that have reared themselves since the district went 1:1, and D.C. Everest is not an island unto itself. Many districts nationwide experience resistance from educators fearful of altering the trajectory of teaching and learning, particularly when that change involves abandoning the traditional, stand-and-deliver method of teaching. Instead, modern teachers are often moving from the center of the classroom to the periphery as a support for student-driven learning, aided by the device.

To address teacher concerns, professional development courses and Discovery Education's Digital Leader Corps offered educators intensive training in the new methodologies around teaching, helping them acclimate to the change in their comfort levels with technology in the classroom. Every school in the district also has learning labs, where teachers are encouraged to try new methods of teaching. Educators also bring their peers to these sessions to help solidify best practices across the district which has proven to be more effective than a supervisory model.

The same skepticism toward technology in the classroom was voiced by some parents in the community after the district announced its plans to go 1:1. To help navigate these troubled waters, D.C. Everest hosted informational panels where parents could ask questions about their children's education. It also helped that when students brought their devices home, parents could witness what their children were learning.

"A parent told me that before, they felt clueless about what happened at school, but the devices have helped them connect with their kids' lives in ways they just couldn't before," Gilmore said.

TAPPING THE POWER OF YOUR PEERS

No educator — regardless of their role in the hierarchy of a district — needs to operate in isolation, said Lance Rougeux, Vice President of Discovery Education's Learning Communities Innovation. To succeed in today's high-stakes climates, educators need a place where they can explore new ideas for their schools in a safe atmosphere with their peers, free from judgment or consequence.

Rougeux helps lead The Discovery Education Community, a professional learning network that helps connect school leaders with their peers around the world to share their wealth of knowledge.

"By participating in professional learning communities, district leaders are making new connections with each other, whether it's in person or virtually," said Rougeux. "They're creating valuable, new relationships that can help them overcome any number of challenges they may face."

Since it launched in 2005, thousands of educators have joined the Discovery Educator Network (DEN), a passionate group of leaders who share their stories of teaching with digital media, share resources, and network at nationwide conferences.

Gilmore is one of 40 members of AASA's Digital Consortium, which has allowed her access to a series of conferences and district visits across the country. The consortium provides district leaders with the opportunity to work together and gain insights into emerging, successful models for using digital materials to support engaged, effective learning experiences.

Among the most valuable lessons from these sessions for Gilmore was the ability to learn and share resources with her peers. Together, they supported one another through their own digital transitions, and learned from the successes and mistakes of others.

"These relationships are imperative in the work as we support each other, share resources, and learn together. While at the Digital Consortium meetings we visited schools who are living the work," she said.

Gilmore advises superintendents in need of guidance to seek help from peers and associations like AASA.

"Ask a lot of questions, take teams to visit, and learn, learn, and learn. I would also suggest finding great business partners who want to help your students succeed," she said. "Providing students with engaging, relevant, innovative, and personalized learning experiences is our mission — it takes some courage, but isn't that what leadership is all about?"

Discovery Education is the leading provider of digital content and professional development for K-12 classrooms worldwide. For more information about Discovery Education's services and initiatives, visit www.discoveryeducation.com.

Established in 2014, the AASA Digital Consortium was created to support school district leadership in the areas of innovation, creativity and technology. For more information, visit www.aasa.org/DigitalConsortium.aspx.