



CASE STUDY:  
**DEERFIELD PUBLIC  
SCHOOLS' DIGITAL  
TRANSFORMATION**

Fostering a culture of  
change to move schools  
forward



**SUPERINTENDENT: DR. MIKE LUBELFELD**

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**J**ust six miles west of Lake Michigan, nestled in a confluence of suburbs north of Chicago, Ill., is Deerfield Public School District 109. Weaving together a variety of affluent communities, Deerfield carries a legacy of high performance, with a mission statement of "Engage, Inspire, Empower." And it recently embarked on a fundamental digital transition for its learning environment that will carry it into the future and beyond.

**LOCATION:** Deerfield, IL

**STUDENTS:** 2,973

**RACE/ETHNICITY:**

White (87%), Asian (5.1%), Hispanic (4%), African-American (0.3%), Other (3.5%)

**FARMS\*:** 1.2%

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

Many superintendents inherit the challenges of their predecessors, which can stymie their visions for a school district. But when Dr. Michael Lubelfeld became superintendent of Deerfield Public Schools in 2013, instead of seeing a horizon filled with red lights, he saw green.

"I came here at a pretty cool time for change," he said. "It's like a dream for a superintendent."

Lubelfeld's administration benefited from inheriting the legacy of several fiscally conservative leaders who wanted to ensure the district had the proper foothold to make change. He was given a mandate from the community to invest in growth and change for the district.

Deerfield's coffers were flush. District leaders had successfully balanced budgets for 15 years. Curriculum adoptions for textbooks had been frozen, freeing up assets for a transition. And more than 25 longtime teachers had retired. In addition to that, Deerfield's funding source is unorthodox. The school system is able to fund 92 percent of its districtwide operations using local property taxes. As a result, for the past decade the district has been able to invest the state aid that it receives into its capital construction budget.

The funding situation in Deerfield in 2013 afforded it a foundation to invest in change, and Lubelfeld and his team were preparing a vision for the future that would soon blossom.

## WHY MAKE THE DIGITAL LEAP?

Lubelfeld saw digital transition in school districts as an inevitability. Districts that weren't capable of adapting to the needs of students, preparing them for 21st-century careers, would quickly become irrelevant, unable to meet the demands of their communities.

"I choose to see the world through the lens of the students," Lubelfeld said. "I want to live in the present and change in the present, but the lens I look through is their future."

By the time Lubelfeld arrived, the will for digital transition had already risen to a chorus across all levels of the district. As a result, he didn't have to do a lot of convincing. However, even though district leaders at Deerfield believed in the benefits of adopting a 1:1 device initiative, there was no technology plan to bring the dream to reality.

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To kick off Deerfield's 1:1 initiative, Lubelfeld's team began its "Innovation Grant Process." They gathered 40 teachers who were given devices to use in their classrooms as a test bed for taking 1:1 districtwide. These educators were given training for the devices, blogged about their experiences, and recorded video tutorials that their peers would later rely on during their own digital education journeys.

"Teachers who wanted to explore, experiment, or take a risk were able to do so. The experience was extremely successful," said Lubelfeld.

Based on the experimental group's results, a student-teacher team recommended to the school board that Deerfield go 1:1 in 2014—a directive they ultimately complied with.

At the same time the Innovation Grant Process was under way, Lubelfeld launched an investigative task force to make recommendations on how best to innovate in Deerfield. The task force came back with some hefty requests. It advocated converting aging classrooms—such as the district's 12 science labs, and all home economics and computer labs—into labs that could transform education in Deerfield. Such rooms would be replaced by STEM labs and communication media arts labs.

These concurrent efforts resulted in the 2014–15 school year kicking off with a number of tremendous changes:

- A commitment to going 1:1
- Overhaul of professional development
- New devices
- Reconstructed science labs, with a plan to create more

The newly redesigned learning spaces have since provided students with meaningful learning experiences, where students regularly collaborate, communicate, and think critically and creatively to develop new ideas and solve real-world problems, said Marcie Faust, Deerfield's director for innovative learning.

"Our STEM labs and communication media arts exploratory labs give students ample opportunities to practice these success skills in nonthreatening learning environments that celebrate failure as part of the learning process," said Faust.

The new labs have also provided flexibility to the district's STEM learning options that they could not have offered before, said Dr. Brian Bullis, principal of Caruso Middle School.

"The beauty of these programs is their ability to evolve and innovate along with the world around us," he said. "As students continue to advance their skills, our teachers are able to add additional layers to their learning experiences."

In addition to redesigning many core learning spaces, the district purchased Apple iPads for

kindergarten through second grade and Google Chromebook laptops for third through eighth grade. Along with the new devices, the district invested in classroom training and professional development to support its digital transition and bolstered its teacher resources with Discovery Education Techbook, a digital textbook series from Discovery Education, a leading provider of digital textbooks and curriculum-based digital content for K–12 school districts.

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Lubelfeld said access to these new teaching resources were a way of freeing educators from rigid adherence to pacing guides. Techbook brought Deerfield a valuable support for their science and social studies classrooms and also helped educators make the pivot toward inquiry-based learning.

"We told our teachers, 'Here are the new Illinois Learning Standards, and we're going to support you with a number of learning resources, including Science Techbook and Social Studies Techbook,'" he said.

Techbook can help transform 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.

In Deerfield, Techbook has saved educators time in finding vetted materials to use in classrooms and has become a lynchpin for powerful science and social studies instruction, said Dr. John Filippi, principal of Shepard Middle School.

"So often staff search for materials online, but it takes a great deal of time for them to vet the source. Not only does using Discovery provide a good source, but it saves teachers time because we know it has already been reviewed by Discovery's team," said Filippi.

## SUPPORTING 1:1

When Lubelfeld arrived as superintendent, he said all levels of faculty had expressed concern with how professional development had been conducted in the past. So he tasked his administration with discovering what was needed to steer its PD back on course. Part of that process was partnering with Discovery Education's Professional Development, which hosted professional teaching and learning conferences with experts like Toni Robinson, who worked hands-on with teachers to help them understand the best practices around digital education. The depth of these PD offerings graduated along with the educators, from introductory courses in the first year to smaller, more advanced courses in the second year.

"Discovery Education really helped guide our PD with usage data, and they worked with our administrators when things weren't favorably received. Their coaches spent full days with particular teachers to dive in and understand how to best help them," he said.

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But throughout these turbulent changes across the district, Lubelfeld said what he has valued the most is the establishment of an organizational culture that can sustain what is working and repair what is failing in the school system.

"This focus on culture has allowed everything else that we have done to be impactful and meaningful," he said.

To help steer these cultural shifts, Deerfield district leaders use analytics to measure the health of its school culture. On the first day of school, all employees weigh in on 15 dimensions of culture, such as pride, quality, and recognition—data points that are gathered using a survey tool called INSIGHTeX. These reports go back to the district level, where they can be aggregated to determine the overall health of the district culture or be

analyzed down to the school level to ensure that every faculty member is aware of their strengths and weaknesses. The data helps inform how the district's faculty prioritizes their professional development throughout the coming year.

The district also administers a similar survey to students to gauge their engagement with classroom materials, with categories aligned to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

"It's so important that we capture what the student voice is, in terms of understanding the impact of our work," said Lubelfeld.

"When stakeholders have a seat at the table, feelings of satisfaction and pride increase exponentially," said Filippi.

"The inclusion of student and teacher voice has led to a monumental change in culture where everyone feels deeply valued and respected within the District 109 learning community," said Faust.

## TAPPING THE POWER OF YOUR PEERS

Reinforcing accountability across the district was a value instilled in Lubelfeld during the leadership courses he attended — initially from the Illinois Association of School Administrators (IASA), and eventually from AASA, The School Superintendents Association. AASA offers a two-year leadership development course, in addition to a national certification program—both of which Lubelfeld utilized to broaden his understanding of where his district needed to be.

"AASA has been instrumental in supporting us. These courses opened my senses to other styles of leadership and other experiences, and also allowed me to grasp the common problems faced in districts across the country," he said. "I've made professional colleagues and friends and have developed networks, all of which help me understand what else is happening out there."

Lubelfeld is also on the advisory board AASA's Digital Consortium, which has allowed him 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.

From these experiences, Lubelfeld began to understand that the culture of relationships is paramount when it comes to building successful district leadership. He encourages all superintendents in need of guidance to seek out their local chapter of AASA.

"Reach out to superintendents in AASA," he said. "We may be very busy people, but every superintendent is going to return a phone call from another superintendent in need. This job does not need to be lonely."

Lubelfeld is also a co-moderator of #SuptChat, a monthly conversation about critical issues about public education. The hour-long program occurs on the first Wednesday of each month, beginning at 8 p.m. (ET).

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*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](http://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](http://www.aasa.org/DigitalConsortium.aspx).*

