



How Technology Can Transform Student Achievement:

An Interview with
Dr. Michele Hancock

In July 2010, Michele Hancock, EdD, became the 14th superintendent of the Kenosha Unified School District (KUSD), the third largest Wisconsin school district, with 42 schools and a student population of almost 23,000 students. She arrived with a strong vision to improve student achievement by adjusting educational methods to harmonize with the new global knowledge and service economy. Her first efforts were to establish a new transformation plan to ensure all students and staff are proficient in information, technology and media literacy to be successful in the global community. Dr. Hancock was one of 10 superintendents in the United States to receive eSchool Media's "Tech-Savvy Superintendent Award" in 2012. *Our Children* talked with the former teacher about the progress of technological transformation at KUSD.



Our Children: Dr. Hancock, how has education technology changed since you began your career?

Dr. Michele Hancock: I began my career in education using a typewriter to write papers, a ditto machine to copy papers, encyclopedias for research, chalk and chalkboards to present information to students. To say we've come a long way is an understatement. Today, education technology enables us to communicate 24/7, have access to unlimited information, and offer opportunities to make students the center of all learning. Education technology serves as leverage for personalizing the learning for all students that is immeasurable, borderless, and instantaneous.

OC: How have educators adapted to new technologies over time? Students? Parents?

MH: As with any new method or material, educators vary in their speed and ease of use regarding technology. Typically, once they are skilled in utilizing a new technology and see the benefits for students, they are very enthusiastic practitioners. Students easily adapt to new technologies because they are the digital natives. At KUSD, students now have access to a collaborative online learning platform called My Big Campus, as well as student Google e-mail addresses. Parents, however, are more cautious. They want to be assured that teachers will still work with their students. KUSD invests in parent training on how to use the internet and online safety, mobile digital devices for classroom instruction, and online learning resources.

OC: What are some of the innovative ways schools are using technology to improve learning? Specifically, how is KUSD using technology?

MH: Our online curricular resources include Everyday Math eSuite; Scholastic programs Read 180, System 44, and Fastt Math; Compass Learning skill building and credit recovery; Think Central language arts journeys; and Rosetta Stone and Tell Me More world language programs.

As I mentioned, we have an online collaborative learning environment using My Big Campus, as well as online subscription library resources, with a large, tailored collection for students and staff use, including Atomic Learning and Learn 360.

Technology tools include Promethean interactive boards and handheld devices; document cameras; iPads, writers, readers; 1:1 environments at Washington Middle School, Indian Trail High School and Academy, and English language learner students at specified locations.

We also have Kenosha eSchool (K-12), and asynchronous online learning at the secondary level (**see sidebar**). Our online assessment programs are NWEA-MAP and Next Generation assessments for 8th grade proficiency and teacher proficiency in information and technology literacy.

OC: What are your goals for technology development and use at KUSD in and outside the classroom? What will it take to reach those goals?

MH: In our transformation plan, Strategy B under Goal 1, Improving Student Learning, says that we will ensure that all students and staff are proficient in information, technology, and media literacy to be successful in the global community. Action steps to accomplish this goal include:

- Transform school libraries into learning centers (21st century media centers).
- Provide formal and informal professional development on safe, legal, and ethical usages of digital information and innovative uses of current and emerging technologies.

- Expand e-school opportunities that may extend to middle school.
- Establish an online collaborative learning and working environment for all students and staff.
- Develop more opportunities for students to connect with local, national, and global communities through the use of technology resources and tools.

Some of these goals have already been met. We actually exceeded the goal of expanding e-school opportunities this year with the addition of elementary school students. However, to reach all of the goals KUSD has outlined will require continuously seeking and applying for education grants, realignment of existing funds to support technology, and committed staff to use technology as a tool to engage and empower students.

OC: What role do you see parents and PTAs playing in the technological future of their schools? How can they help? How can they get trained? How do they get involved with the actual learning taking place through these new tools?

MH: It has been amazing to watch the transformation of our parent groups this past year. Principals have been guiding discussions and transforming parent group goals to be focused on enhancing the learning opportunities for their children through and with technology. Many of our schools have taken advantage of a Promethean matching-dollar purchasing program for PTAs. I think events like our Academic Showcase and newspaper articles addressing technology spark the curiosity and interest of our parents. Workshops are offered at the school and district level to train parents on various facets of technology. Parents get involved by participating in districtwide and local school events highlighting the use of technology, including back-to-school events, open houses, academic fairs, parent conferences, student performances, and so forth.

OC: What sparked your interest in applying technology to K–12 education?

MH: As a person who loves and engages in new learning experiences, I find that technology serves as a catalyst to transform education in ways that meet the diverse needs of learners in profound ways. This is not just professional, but personal for me. Observing my granddaughters' use of technology to navigate their world in productive and positive ways inspired my interest.

OC: Are there special applications you can envision for special-needs classrooms? For pre-kindergarten?

MH: There is no question that technology allows us to more easily personalize learning for all of our children. Online programs and resources offer alternative lessons, adaptive assessments, and tailored activities. The tablet application market has exploded with learning apps for both pre-K and special-needs areas. You can find learning apps that are categorized for all age levels and for all special-needs areas, including autism.

OC: You worked in the Chicago Public School system. What challenges do you see for urban school districts with regard to technology?

MH: Some of the challenges are: 1) 21st century resources for professional educators—we must introduce connected teaching into the educational system; 2) access—the infrastructure must include people, processes, learning resources, policies, and sustainable models supported by

broadband connectivity, servers, and management systems; and 3) assessment—using technology-based assessments involving multiple stakeholders to determine better ways to measure what matters for diagnosis during the course of learning.

OC: Cost is certainly a factor in getting the latest and greatest. How do you advise schools to address that challenge?

MH: Cost will always be a factor; however, KUSD has found success in advising leaders to think beyond cost. We have encouraged them to seek outside funding sources to acquire devices and create community partnerships to assist our families with access challenges. A can-do attitude has encouraged and supported building leaders to think differently and creatively. Effective choices on how dollars are allocated in schools are critical.

From a district perspective, we ask the important questions when purchase requests surface. We don't buy technology just to buy technology. Student learning is at the forefront. We ask what is it that we want students to be able to do and then what is the most effective and cost-efficient way of making that happen.

OC: What has been most helpful to you in putting together a plan for KUSD, and what would you recommend to other superintendents who are interested in being proactive toward our technological future?

MH: People are our most valuable resource. Working with stakeholders who are dedicated to providing students with the best opportunities in a global economy is key. Take an in-depth look at your district policies, processes, and financial resources, and question everything. Ask “why” and “how can we do it better” to encourage all stakeholders to challenge the status quo.

The Wisconsin eSchool Network

The Kenosha eSchool, an online charter school, opened to Kenosha high school students in 2007 and serves both full-time and part-time enrollments. The charter was expanded in the fall of 2011 for grades 6–8, and in May 2012 for grades K–5. The Kenosha eSchool and more than a dozen other Wisconsin school districts are members of the Wisconsin eSchool Network. This nonprofit consortium provides quality assistance, structure, and shared resources to all consortium members. It also offers local control of programs to best suit the needs of each district. Kenosha-area students continue to benefit from an ever-expanding online program, which includes new courses and flexible scheduling options that meet their needs and interests. Distance learning across Wisconsin school districts is possible through the eSchool Network, and each member district is required to provide a network instructor for predetermined courses. Each district, depending on availability and interest, is thus able to supplement their in-district offerings with potential openings from other districts. For example, Kenosha has provided “seats” with their Spanish teacher in exchange for “seats” in other network courses, such as psychology courses with a teacher in Madison.