

Superintendent 2010: A Day in the Life

By Larry Leverett, Ed.D.

When I look back at the late 1990s, one of the big differences I see between then and now is that today we clearly work in a world where anyone and everyone is or can be a student, and where every student who wants or needs access to hardware, software, and the Internet can have it. This change has come about because market forces have made these basic tools so affordable, because making sure students have access to the educational resources of the Net has become a national priority, and because so many people want to learn about so many things. The Net -- and people like the teachers in my district and many of our community partners -- have gotten very good at providing such learning resources for students.

Technology is now so pervasive, reaching virtually every home community through a variety of pathways -- TV, cable, satellite, the phone system, radio wave. There is a multitude of ways in which students -- and anyone else - can connect to and access great learning resources and pursue their educational goals, anywhere, anytime.

All of this has dramatically redefined the work of the superintendency and presents challenges that are new to my colleagues and me. My central focus has shifted from a concern about what goes on in school buildings to a focus that encompasses the entire community and the e-village that connects children, youth, and adults to a vast array of e-learning possibilities. The educative function is now widely dispersed and supports access to learning opportunities in schools, at home, in community-based organizations, and in the workplace. The territorial issues of charters, vouchers, tuition tax credits, and publicly funded independent schools that began to emerge in the 1990s as threats to traditional public education have taken on a new significance. In fact, my superintendency now requires me to provide leadership for a system of schools that are mostly self-managing entrepreneurial-oriented cost centers. Presently funding laws at the federal and state levels have removed much of the distinction between the "old" public school system and the one that now includes most of the alternatives that were previously viewed as threats. The tenacious battle about national standards has resulted in fairly rigorous standards that now apply to virtually all publicly funded schools. As the superintendent in this "new" system, I am largely responsible for managing a standards-based accountability framework that all of these loosely connected schools are responsible for. This market-driven system of publicly supported education provides the education consumer with unprecedented information in the form of electronic "ticker tape" reports on various indicators of student outcomes, school or e-learning source quality reviews, and promotional materials. From my office, virtual or physical, I can now easily access information that allows me to focus on a variety of school quality indicators. The ability to isolate neighborhoods using my geographic information system, specific "community of interest" learning teams, as well as individual student profiles has sharpened my capacity to make focused inquiries concerning student progress toward standards.

All of this has redefined equity and access issues. From a technology standpoint, the "digital divide" we used to hear about in the 90s has been re-invented from a hardware and Internet access issue to one of penetrating the environments for children and families that have spent the last century on the fringes of the benefits more affluent, advantaged families have enjoyed. Unfortunately the achievement gap between "haves" and "have-nots" has not been eradicated. Poor children, children in rural settings, and children arriving in our country from the battlefields and abject poverty of their homelands still remain at-risk; and neither schools, nor e-learning have made significant progress in closing the achievement gap. In my superintendency I have been challenged to address this new generation of access and equity issues. I am required to re-think ideas about how to develop parent and community involvement strategies that can breakdown the barriers of race and class in the e-world context of education and workplace. I find myself seeking new ways to connect poor and marginalized families to the resources of education that have suddenly become more like the air they breathe than the schoolhouse they once went to. Building the social capital of these families to take full advantage of e-learning will be a major challenge that we must meet to ensure that all children have the opportunities to learn that are so richly available in the world of e-learning.

The place in which education occurs is far less important today. We have broken the chains of the antiquated paradigm that relies upon the schoolhouse as the a priori place in which education happens. Interestingly enough, the physical structure we call "school" has experienced a renaissance. In some places it has become a true community learning center, open from early in the morning to late at night, and has become a place for children, youth, and adults. The shift from lock-step grade structures, 42-minute periods of fragmented discipline-based instruction to a more dynamic, personalized, interdisciplinary learning experience has occurred. Education is now a year round, anywhere, anytime enterprise no longer confined to the six-hour school day and 180-day school year so dominant in the last century.

The superintendent has become increasingly concerned about bringing "high touch" into the "high tech" world of e-learning. The fear of children and youth becoming totally "wired" and not connected with others has caused for further struggle to build communities of human interaction that nurture the development of socialization and emotional support that people need to be whole. E-learning contexts have not replaced the need and value of social interactions that grow out of school friendships and participation in clubs and extra-curricular activities. The schoolhouse is still an important place in our community for young people to come together to learn and experience the socialization needed to prepare for adult roles in a knowledge-based society and workplace that will largely depend on the capacity to work in teams. The community learning centers we are now developing will enable learners to explore non-academic interests ranging from music and arts, philosophically-oriented Socratic seminars on a wide range of interests, physical fitness and wellness education, as well as workshops organized around crafts, spirituality, and hydroponics. In some places these community learning centers have become places for people young and old to congregate for a variety of community-building purposes and social activity.

"High-touch" in a "high-tech" environment has become a public engagement challenge for our time. Superintendents are now challenged to think about new ways of engaging the public. The reliance on "Back-to-School Nights", traditional PTAs, and parent conferences, and an occasional phone call from the school when Hakim or Maria is in trouble are no longer viewed as the primary means of involving parents or the public in the affairs of schooling. Teacher-parent conferences do still happen, but they don't happen as frequently in person. Teachers have much greater responsibility to stay in touch with parents and others throughout the now year-round school year. Our staffs of teachers and other professionals now use a range of information and communications technology to support the educative process. Parents have 24-hour access to information that includes individual student reports, availability of synchronous and asynchronous tele-conferencing, and reports that give comparative information about how their children are faring in a standards-based learning environment. One of the outcomes that I enjoy best is the replacement of the traditional school board meetings with a variety of electronic tools that provide opportunities for citizens to have voice in the policy-making process.

The existence of pervasive online e-learning tools that drives anytime, anywhere access to learning experiences is the chief factor that forced curriculum and instruction changes that we have been struggling to make for the last 25 years of the 20th century. Students come together regularly in "communities of interest" teams to explore topics that cut across the boundaries of subject area disciplines and engage in exploration of real life problem solving through interacting with learning facilitators and experts from across the globe. Nearly 80% of their active engagement in learning experiences occurs through online modalities in home or community learning centers that are neighborhood-based. The remaining 20% is facilitated in teams formed around communities of interest that interact with the highly trained learning facilitator.

Fortunately, the superintendent is less concerned with the technophobia among educators that prevailed over the last twenty years. Now, my colleagues and I are faced with a new set of human resource issues in finding and developing this generation of "learning facilitators". In fact, the teaching and learning process in our e-learning-oriented facilities is staffed by a diverse group of professional educators and technical persons. We now focus much more intensively on how to use the tools of e-learning to get resources to our students wherever they are, whatever their interest. We are focused on finding new ways for us and our learners to interact with these tools and to design assessment processes that determine the extent to which the interactions lead to real learning. It is no longer enough to know how to use a search engine to merely

get a question answered. It is no longer sufficient to find a site that answers questions, but to build e-learning experiences that will open up the world of classical history, mathematics, sciences, and the arts that could lead to intense study of areas from the classics to archeology to language and linguistics. The measure of impact in the standards-based e-learning environment will be centered on the extent to which these electronic pathways result in clearly defined achievement and assessments related to certification, degrees, advancement, and career options. Finally, teaching has regained an important status in our society and people who fill these well-compensated jobs are respected for their knowledge, wisdom, and ability to manage a far more complex learning environment. They are working with students as on-line mentors, facilitators of "community of interest" learning teams, connectors to world-wide resources to enrich real-life explorations of learners, and have the time daily to interact with teams of teachers, technologists, and subject matter experts. An interesting thing about teaching in the early years of the new century is that it has become a profession that is much more open to nontraditional providers. In my district I have a staff that includes people with backgrounds in law, environmental science, communications, business, and faith-based professions. Unfortunately, we are still experiencing difficulty in finding people who accept the special learning challenges of working in very remote or very poor urban communities. However, the national service movement that provides significant financial incentives for people to elect serve in these learning contexts, and the advances in accessing high-quality personnel through online resources has opened up some new possibilities for improving the opportunity to learn.

How would I describe my own role as superintendent in the e-learning world? The distributive nature of e-learning has forced me to be more concerned with learning organizations that are much more diverse in structure and purpose than the school systems I led during the 20th century. The "old school district" idea of buildings, teachers in classrooms, and placebound constraints on where learning occurs is no longer my reality. It has been replaced with the virtual school district that must respond to an anytime, anywhere-learning context that includes responsibility for a variety of publicly funded schools. I remain concerned with issues of quality, access, and equity but now am faced with new dimensions to these age-old challenges. I have abandoned the "old school" idea of the superintendency as a hierarchical leadership role. It is now one that encompasses the concept of virtual e-learning environments and a network of learning organizations that are loosely coupled and require a vastly different approach to leadership and the delivery of supports that were not common to my experiences as superintendent in the old system of schools.

I am a visionary, a mentor, a resource supplier and learning broker, an entrepreneur, a community builder, and a leader to a diverse group of learning facilitators, all rolled up in one. My typical day might include an early morning scan of quality indicators and achievement data during breakfast at my kitchen table. This would be followed by a virtual visit to a community learning center to participate in a teleconference with students, staff, and community members assessing student work products generated by a "community of interest" learning group. Electronic communications have dramatically reduced the number of face-to-face meetings that take people away from their primary roles as supporters of teaching and learning. The scope of my responsibility has expanded to include leadership and accountability for the variety of publicly funded e-learning and community learning center resources now within my geographic area. The day would include interacting with a local group of leaders of faith-based organizations and recreational specialists to explore expansion of our "high-touch" initiatives. Crowded into the schedule would be a focus group targeting a specific population of learning facilitators, students, and parents to receive input on the human genetics module developed by an e-learning vendor based in South Africa. I have also been involved in reviewing bid specifications to upgrade our network to Internet 6, using the newest Ipv8 protocol to accelerate the movement of video and audio streams between our community and Pacific Rim locations to 70 megabits per second. Finally, at the end of the day, I might find myself participating in a groupware decision-making forum on the equity and access issues that remain important in our knowledge-based society.

And finally, because technology has shown no signs of slowing down, I am very likely to be found before the flat-screened monitor in my home office taking an online course in the evening to keep abreast of the research and best practices concerning the superintendent's role as the chief learner and teacher in the world of e-learning. I am not quite sure how my preparation in the 80s and 90s has prepared me for my role here

in 2010. However, I am sure that the overused phrase, life-long learning, has taken on new meaning as the demands for me to have greater expertise in diverse areas has become my reality.

Email: Larry Leverett (Larleveret@aol.com)