

Creating a Digital Learning Environment

Using Technology Tools to Individualize the Learning Experience

Outlining the Goals

Ashlock's approach started with identifying the changes that would need to be made. One of the first things that she realized was that teachers in her district were having trouble meeting the individual needs of students. Their classes were big, and students had very different interests, skill sets, and background experiences. Digital learning solutions provided an answer to individualizing the learning process.

Once they had identified the need, Central Unified's strategy focused on these three basic elements:

1. How to effectively support student learning
2. How to build adult capacity so they could meet the needs of the students
3. How to create a culture that was focused on literacy and learning

Redefining Learning

One thing that helped was focusing on the transformation as a change to a whole digital learning environment, as opposed to only the implementation of a digital curriculum. The district focused on

altering not just the textbooks and methods of receiving information, but also the kinds of questions the teacher asked and the desired end result for the students. Instead of just knowing that a historical event occurred, for example, students could explore the reasons why it occurred, what factors were involved, and any other examples of similar events.

Ashlock's goal is to find ways to generate thinkers and problem solvers. "No longer is it memorization of information or procedural ability to solve a problem," she says. "It's about, okay, now I have to get behind the wheel of that car, take all that knowledge that I have, and do something with it." She points out that the idea of America was based on the assumption of an intelligent, educated populace making decisions for the good of everyone. That's why it's so important to equip young people to make sense of things and determine what is true and accurate today.

She's excited that the new technology tools are helping close the experience gap for the students in her district. Having varied ways of diagnosing, prescribing, and testing what students learn means that it's much more possible to find learning methods that work best for each individual.

Focus on Teachers

A majority of the teachers in the district had

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been trained in methods that emphasized complying with rules and following procedure, which meant that many weren't comfortable with the outside-the-box thinking that digital learning requires. Because of this, professional development to build the adult capacity to do things differently was at the top of Ashlock's list.

"We firmly believe the teacher is an integral part of [the digital transformation] process," Ashlock says.

“The teacher’s ability to identify student need, strengths, and interests, to help guide them in how they approach things, is critical. We do have fully digital curriculum, but we really believe in the power of the teacher and that relationship between the teacher and the individual learner as a motivator and a way to meet the needs of that particular student.”

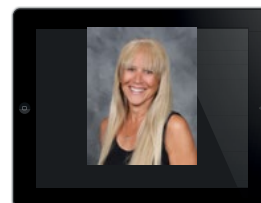


Getting Started

To districts beginning the process, Ashlock offers this advice: take the time to spell out what you are trying to accomplish first. The goals and vision need to be identified before the best way to achieve those can be found. The clients of a school district are, of course, the children, so their needs should be first and foremost.

Ashlock is proud of the job her district is doing and thinks it will eventually lead to a new age for students in the classroom. She sums it up in a few words: “We’re working towards equipping them to be adults who are thinking, meaning-making, and innovative in solving the problems that face our communities today.”

Dr. Laurel Ashlock is the Chief Academic Officer/Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services for the Central Unified School District in Fresno, California. The district serves over 15,000 students, with two-thirds living in rural areas and 38% English learners. Since many of these students don’t have access to the technology and resources they need at home, Dr. Ashlock began taking steps toward supporting them at school as soon as she arrived at Central Unified eight years ago.



For the complete interview with Laurel Ashlock, visit learningcounsel.com