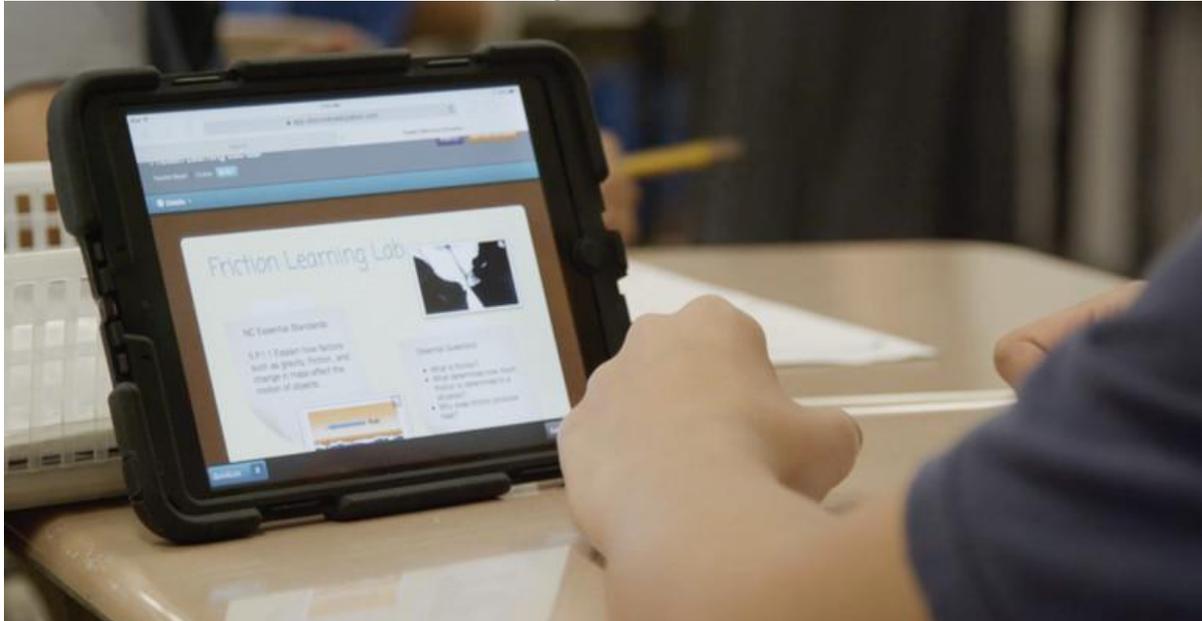


# District Leaders:

## Focus on Content First, Tech Second

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**Categories:** [District Administrators](#), [Education](#), [Insights and Conversations](#)



Much has been written about districts and schools “going 1:1,” issuing tablets, computers, or other electronic devices to every student. As the quantity of devices in the hands of students grows, many leaders like me believe these changes cannot succeed without supporting transformative change in student learning experiences. Namely, I’d like to see a focus on content first, tech second. It is far more important to enhance learning via high quality content and instructional transformation than it is to simply replace a pencil with a tablet and hope for the best.

There are numerous recent blog posts in the wake of #pencilchat on Twitter, where educators and others discussed the popular “pencil analogy” regarding technology in the classroom. The points made (no pun intended) in this discussion are varied, but an important theme emerged that I feel warrants attention: simply putting a pencil in a child’s hand won’t make them a great writer. However, if you give a student a pencil coupled with powerful, meaningful content and exceptional instruction from an energized and committed educator—a great writer may just emerge. When that occurs, is it the pencil or the content that deserves the credit?

As Andrew Marcinek writes in his book, [\*The 1:1 Roadmap Setting the Course for Innovation in Education\*](#): “Technology is more than just ‘Computer Class;’ it is a literacy that must be threaded throughout the fabric of a school. In a 1:1 environment, you’re preparing students to be responsible citizens of the physical and digital worlds. But it’s easy to get overwhelmed with devices; you have to have a plan for technology that keeps learning at center stage.”

Marcinek’s point regarding keeping the focus on learning cannot be lost in the rush to embrace ed tech as a panacea. Though I am a strong advocate for instructional change as the catalyst for a substantive change in student outcomes, content is as important as instruction in the classroom. Content is curriculum, content is resources that support curriculum, content is the “what” being taught in our classrooms.



In the recent era of No Child Left Behind, accountability has been “king.” Many who advocate for the Common Core State Standards or other Learning Standards believe content is “king.” I believe that transformative instruction combined with exceptional content is “king.”

In the 1:1 Transformative Learning Environment era, it is incumbent upon leaders to insist on a new instructional focus. One that is student-centered with supportive, rich, and dynamic content. We must also be certain we are teaching actual digital content, rather than merely digitized content. Simply taking a standard textbook and making it available as a PDF is not digital content—it will not transform our schools or help students achieve.

True digital content is accessible on the myriad device options in classrooms and supports progressive instructional practices that focus on the student as the driver. Digital content changes, updates, and links to real people and current events as they are happening. Textbooks are decades old in many places, making content outdated and stale. Tech books and truly digital content is updated, revised, refreshed, and real. This allows for and supports a concept of content rich and instructionally fresh approaches to learning.

These devices are often revolutionary. But a device does not magically create innovation, nor does a device magically increase student engagement. What we need are devices deployed in an environment rich with dynamic content and full of engaging instruction. Only then will we produce outstanding results. I see it every day and my aim is to support every classroom’s transformation into an engaging, motivating, challenging learning space for our nation’s most precious assets – our children!



**About Mike Lubelfeld**

Mike is a public school superintendent who believes in the writings and messages of Michael Fullan, Thomas Sergiovanni, John Maxwell, and others in the field of leadership. They give clear guidance in areas of leadership like culture building, relationship building, servant leadership and effective change agency. Mike finds great value in both the boardroom and in the classroom as all decisions for his superintendency are based upon what’s best for students. Conscious of the impact on staff as well, his aim is to cause enough disruption as needed to move the “organization’s needle to the right” on its transition and transformation into becoming a highly disciplined school system whose focus is on excellence at all levels. The motto Engage, Inspire, Empower is alive and well in this superintendent.