Leading through Advocacy
An Interview with ISTE CEO Don Knezek

Don Knezek shares his thoughts on ISTE's burgeoning focus on advocacy.

By Chris Stephenson

Subject: Advocacy, leadership, ISTE

Audience: Administrators, technology coordinators, technology integration specialists, technology facilitators, teacher educators, library media specialists, teachers

Standards: *NETS•T* V; *NETS•A* I (http://www.iste.org/standards/)

In the United States, a debate is raging about the nature and future of education, a debate that is having profound effects on teachers and students because it has also become the impetus for major funding decisions. For educational technology, this debate has engendered an unprecedented demand for quantitative research supporting our understanding of how technology improves student learning. For educational technology associations, however, it has also created the need for commitment to a new kind of leadership: leadership focused on getting out the message to those making the decisions, leadership at a national level.

This is the second of three articles based on interviews looking at various levels of educational technology leadership and leadership development at ISTE. The first interview with Dr. Leslie Conery examined the need for educational technology leadership and looks at various ways ISTE, as a membership organization, fulfills this need. This interview with ISTE's Chief Executive Officer, Dr. Don Knezek, examines current trends and issues in educational technology and ISTE's role in advocating for educational technology at all levels.

Although Don took on the role of CEO in April 2002, he has been involved with ISTE for many years. Beginning in 1989, he served on ISTE's Accreditation and Professional Standards Committee and has held positions on ISTE's Board and Executive Board and on the organization's Conference Committee. Since 1999, he has served as director of the organization's National Center for Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers to Use Technology (NCPT[3]). Don earned his PhD in educational administration from the University of Texas at Austin, where he was a fellow in the Co-operative Superintendency Program. He holds certificates in public school administration at the superintendent, mid-management, and supervisor levels and as a teacher of mathematics, physics, and computer science. He has been an advocate for high-quality education throughout his career.

Q&A

L&L: Over the past few years, it is clear that ISTE has begun to place increasing emphasis on political advocacy as a way of addressing serious issues in education technology. Is this so, and if so, why do you believe this is necessary?

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Don: It is definitely so. We believe that advocacy and education are the critical pieces if we are to maintain the gains we have made so far with technology. In some ways, these gains were windfalls. It was not because the community or education in general was smart about how to attract people to technology and encourage them to experiment with using it well. Rather, it was a wave that swept society, and we were fortunate enough to benefit from it. Right now, however, there are other priorities for education and education leaders, so to demonstrate those gains educational technology provides in positive ways to policy makers, the entire community has to get smarter and better organized and be able to deliberately lay out realistic expectations and documentation that those expectations can be achieved. This must take place at all levels of government.

L&L: Do you see similarities in what needs to be done at those levels, and also do you see areas where they differ in terms of the ways ISTE needs to approach them?

Don: It is somewhat challenging under the current administration, but I believe it is entirely possible to become a resource to the administration and to elected officials, so that when there are tough decisions to be made concerning educational technology, ISTE can have a presence in Washington, D.C., and become the "go to" association for information. This is a little more difficult now than

at other times in history, and even efforts to reach decision makers at the national level seem to be a little more constrained or less productive than in the past. As a result, the most effective way to reach elected national officials right now is within their constituencies and in their home offices. It is also clear to us that if you work with people at the state level, they can be effective not only at that level, but they can also work as ambassadors to the federal level. Although we know that the federal government can have considerable influence on education across the nation, we also know that every state has impact on the schools within its boundaries. As an organization, we need to look hard at our strategies and make sure that we are being efficient and working in areas with potential impact. This is why you see ISTE's advocacy efforts expanding both in breadth and intensity.

L&L: At the U.S. federal level, what would you say are the major pieces of legislation that have had the most impact on educational technology—in either positive or negative ways?

Don: Some of the impact has been from legislation and some from programs for funding. The E-Rate has had a major impact on connectivity. It clearly demonstrated what federal policy can accomplish, especially when it is backed up with funding. With the program and funding in place, it took three to four years to connect all schools when it was look-

ing like a decade-long process. There has also been legislation encouraging the funding of programs such as Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers to Use Technology, the Technology Literacy Challenge grants, and the Technology Innovation grants. These grant programs have stimulated fairly widespread change and have made a significant difference. The decision to selectively enforce the No Child Left Behind legislation has in some ways backed the agenda off on educational technology, but the legislation itself was quite strong.

L&L: Are there important initiatives coming up of which educators should be particularly aware?

Don: The Higher Education Act, which is being reauthorized, probably this year, is one we need to be concerned with. And, right now states are looking at what it means to be certified as a teacher, administrator, or other educator. I think educators need to be involved in this discussion. If other teachers believe, as I do, that it takes at least some level of competency with modern tools to be highly qualified educators, we should make sure that this is translated into legislation at the state level.

L&L: What role do the concerns of your members play in determining the focus of your advocacy efforts and how does ISTE determine what those concerns are?

Don: Our target is to definitely improve how we represent our constitu-

An Update on ISTE's Current Advocacy Efforts

By David Tortorelli,
Director of Policy & Government Relations, ISTE

As Don mentioned, ISTE has been increasing its advocacy efforts since opening its Washington, D.C., office in June 2002. We've got a lot of initiatives in the works, but here are a few of the most important.

- ISTE recently completed a very successful Advocacy Day in Washington, D.C., where more than 150 educators from across the United States learned about educational technology policy issues and advocacy tips, then put their knowledge to work by meeting with their members of Congress on Capitol Hill. The key issues emphasized included increased federal support for educational technology programs that improve student achievement and advance professional development. The ISTE and CoSN Ed Tech Action Network was also launched on Advocacy Day. Available at http://www.edtechactionnetwork.org, this online resource provides the information and tools educators need to effectively communicate with policy makers about the value of technology in education.

- As ISTE's newly hired Director of Policy and Governmental Relations, I have been actively meeting with Congressional staffers about the need to restore funding for essential educational technology programs such as Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers to Use Technology and the need to fund the Ed Tech Block Grant at a higher level. Both of these programs provide important professional development support to communities that will result in better use of the technology already in schools. Meetings are expected to continue through the budgetary and appropriations process.

- Important Ed Tech policy and advocacy sessions will be held at NECC 2004 in New Orleans. Former member of Congress, Rod Chandler, will be leading a session on Monday, June 21, titled, "Make a Difference: Getting Education Policy Makers to Listen to You!" Attendees will learn inside tips for getting their message across to elected officials and receive a briefing about current Ed Tech legislative issues. Additional policy and advocacy sessions include "A Retrospective on 20 Years of Education Technology Policy" and "Evaluating Technology's Impact on Enhancing Education Through Technology Grantees." For more details, please consult the NECC program online at http://www.iste.org/necc/.

ency in our advocacy programs. Although we have a number of activities such as committees, special interest groups, publications, and meetings with our members at the National Educational Computing Conference (NECC) and state-level conferences, we can improve the structures and communication mechanisms that we use to gather information from our members and achieve better consensus about what our advocacy efforts should be. In fact, we have a new member initiative that will involve us being in the field and working with focus groups to ensure that we are giving our members that voice of advocacy that represents them. I think this is an area where you will see a significant improvement at ISTE

over the next few years. I think if you were to ask most ISTE members right now, they would allude vaguely to having a voice in Washington or maybe in their state, but I think in the coming years that will be very close to the number one reason why people are affiliated with ISTE.

L&L: Numerous times you have alluded to the importance of leadership for educational technology. What do you believe are the key qualities necessary for an organization to establish itself as a leader in educational technology?

Don: Clearly, for an organization to establish itself, it must have credibility and neutrality. You certainly have to have inherent knowledge, but you also have to be able to draw diverse groups together and to benefit from their expertise and elicit their opinions. Believing that you have all of the answers within your staff or your board is a dangerous thing. You also must be able to package and present information in a way that has impact. To be able to present the information you gather fairly and in an unbiased fashion so that it is clear that you have not sold out to a particular company, organization, region, state, or political party is the other critical piece in being an effective leader. Being able to interact with other networks and associations and organizations with credibility is essential.

L&L: You have mentioned the importance of individual leaders at the school and district levels. What kind of qualities do people who want to take on a leadership role at these levels need to possess?

Don: First they need to be learners who are able to listen and to communicate and who have an eye for true outcomes and assessing the impact of any innovation. It is also critically important that the leadership, the vision, the drive for the use of technology

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not come from any one individual. There must be shared vision, shared impetus, and shared effort. We know that our superintendents are usually in the last years of their careers, so you can have a wonderful leader and visionary in the superintendent's role, but if that vision has not been built from a common understanding and consensus that goes much deeper into the community, the efforts there are going to be lost. Leadership clearly is an inclusive activity when it comes to integrating technology across the system.

L&L: There are so many initiatives that ISTE is involved in and so many products that it produces. Is there a particular accomplishment of ISTE's over the last couple of years that makes you especially proud?

Don: Although they are just a tip of the iceberg, I think there are a couple of initiatives that stand out for me. First of all, the widespread adoption of the National Educational Technology Standards (NETS) by state departments is a key indicator that we have done something well. What I am most proud of, though, is that people understand that much of what ISTE does, we do not do alone. We do it as part of a partnership with multiple partners and everyone at ISTE understands and appreciates the importance of collaborative efforts.

L&L: Recently, someone was showing me a copy of your schedule, and Don, it was very scary. There must be something that is really driving your particular passion. What is it that inspires you to do what you do?

Don: The passion that drives me is maintaining the hope for a better life

and for self-improvement for as large a percentage of our students as possible. As you watch the trends, it is clear that technology is a part of the young learner's life. So what I believe about technology in education is that technology can allow us to use strategies that reach a much higher percentage of our young learners and reach them in an engaging way. To me, engagement in the education process is an indicator that this hope is still alive and healthy. And so, as you see teachers teaching, school leaders working on improving education, parents supporting education, and students engaged in the process, you have to believe that we have the potential to improve the lot in life for most of those students. I strongly believe that with technology, we can implement strategies that can reach more students and engage them in education to give them the potential for improving their lives. Because technology creates an environment that engages young people and brings tools that enable teachers to teach better, we have an opportunity to have more students engaged in learning and looking at self-improvement and hope for the long term.

Chris Stephenson is a doctoral student in the Teaching Leadership Program at Oregon State University's New School of Education. She is currently the Chair of the ISTE/ACM Computer Science & Information Technology Symposium and of the ACM K–12 Education Task Force. She has also served for many years as the Computer Science Review Chair for NECC and as a member of the Editorial Board of the Journal of Computer Science Education. *Chris has published numerous articles on computer science and educational technology and has co-authored several high school textbooks.*