Technology chief leads staff and students into the digital age

The Newsmakers series is beginning the 2013-14 school year with a look at the recent reorganization of five key areas that report directly to the superintendent. This week, we feature the Technology Unit, headed by Jhone Ebert.

By Anthony Springer Jr., CCSD Communications

If dealing with the systems that run all 38,000 Clark County School District phone lines, ParentLink and daily access to the Internet reads like "lions and tigers and bears" from the classic Wizard of Oz film, thanks to Jhone Ebert shouldering the load that makes work easier every day.

As the district’s new chief innovation and productivity officer, Ebert is responsible for transforming the district’s online and blended learning initiatives for students and most of the district’s 38,000 employees. She also guides the development of data management processes that enhance teacher and administrators’ ability to make informed decisions.

A former math teacher, Ebert rose through the administrative ranks in her more than two decades with the district. After teaching stints at Ed Von Tobel Middle School and Green Valley High School, she served as a teacher on special assignment, director of magnet schools, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction and most recently, chief technology officer.

Ask her if she misses the classroom and she'll tell you she never left.

“I will always,” Ebert began before correcting, “I am always a teacher. I still tutor students if they need assistance on the High School Proficiency Exam. That is being an educator, teacher and mentor. That is always very important to me. Working in my role right now, everything we do right now is aligned to supporting teachers in the classroom.”

Ebert got the technology bug in 1997 as a teacher on special assignment. At the time of her appointment, InterAct was brand new. Ebert was tasked with training teachers on the new system’s capabilities as well as assisting with instruction on Claris Works and
Microsoft Works. She later received a masters in instructional technology from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and her career was off to the races.

“There have been many opportunities with the Clark County School District because of our growth, for growth!” she says of her career progression. “I wouldn’t say I had my eye on advancement.”

Though ascension wasn’t always in the cards, Ebert’s position allows her to merge two passions: education and technology.

“The core of my beliefs is that education is the great equalizer of all. That means a lot to me because I’ve been afforded my opportunities because of education. Having an aligned system that supports our core mission of student achievement, that’s what I think about each and every day.”

One new project that particularly excites Ebert these days is Virtual High School and the Academy of Individualized Studies. No longer a solely distance education site, Virtual High School and the Academy of Individualized Studies became a degree granting institution in 2004. Learning outside the traditional classroom wasn’t something Ebert envisioned when she started working with technology in the 90s.

“Back in ’97 if you had asked me if we’d start a virtual high school, I’d have said, ‘What are you talking about?’”

Last year, Virtual High School graduated 54 students and enrollment is up 37 percent this year, Ebert said.

The customized learning environment is beneficial for students with unique schedules or those who want to move faster than the traditional classroom allows.

“We see a trend with students and families who want more control over their time,” Ebert said. “In a virtual environment, if a student wishes to work on algebra one five hours a day, they can. Each course is structured and is set up like a regular class.”

In addition to helping those who want to move faster with their studies, Ebert also believes Virtual High School has a role to play in helping students who need more time to grasp material. The online format, she says, is one way the district can save valuable instruction time and help students.

“Traditionally, we’re on an 18-week schedule,” she began. "If we can give some students 22 weeks instead of 18, they might learn all the material, earn a passing grade the first time and not have to re-enroll in a remedial class for another 18 weeks. Changing education from seat time to educational competencies—what we want our
students to know and do at the end of the day sometimes means going faster, but sometimes it means going slower.

“We can extend the time. Instead of giving them a non-passing grade at 18 weeks, wouldn’t it be better to give them four more weeks and a passing grade?”

With technology playing a role in every aspect of life these days, what better place for students to learn the proper use of technology than school?

“Technology is the new pencil,” Ebert said with a laugh.