

## Interview at the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education



In April 2009, Sandy Kelly and Gerri Fegan had the privilege of sitting down with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's Commissioner, Dr. Mitchell Chester and Dr. Julia Phelps, Associate Commissioner for Curriculum and Instruction. This was a significant step for MSLA in that they have generously provided us with communication that we have not had in years. We are so pleased to work with the Department as they restructure their curriculum efforts. We thought our members would like to get to know a little bit about these two leaders of Massachusetts education.



This is a transcript of that conversation.

**Kelly:** We met almost a year ago when you first came on, and I think since that time you've probably had a lot more time to develop your philosophy and thinking on school libraries. We're really excited that you were able to see the Learning Commons at Chelmsford High School, an amazing vision for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning. What have you learned about our school library system?

**Chester:** I had an interesting experience last week. I was a respondent on a set of papers that were commissioned to study the High School of the Future in Philadelphia. The High School of the Future was developed jointly by the district and Microsoft and is at the end of its third year of existence, and the High School of the Future was designed to provide students in Philadelphia with a technology-enabled, paperless, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills-oriented, project-based education. So the concept of library there was paperless: not a place-bound spot, but rather technology-enabled access to information and I was actually very concerned about what I was seeing in this school. I don't think that there had been very good thought toward curriculum. I thought there was a confusion of ends and means, the means became the ends. Let's not have any paper, let's have lots of technology, let's make sure this is project-based, and so I think this is a cautionary tale about this notion of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and technology. We need a good model of curriculum that does not set up 21<sup>st</sup> century skills as a competing with content, but rather we need to be clear about what it is we want students to do with the content they learn, and I am a believer that students need a strong, broad, liberal arts education, and that you can't solve problems without content knowledge.

You can't communicate persuasively without some knowledge of content. You can't think critically absent knowledge of what you're thinking about, and certainly, critical thinking, persuasive communication, and problem solving are all included in the notion of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, but they don't exist outside of content. I think we need to be careful about this notion.

**Kelly:** So your vision of your school of the future does have a library. It has both paper and electronic sources, and someone to teach kids how to evaluate that information and think critically.

*The increasing access to information ...brings a concurrent responsibility for schools to help youngsters learn how to evaluate, assess sources of information, bias and objectivity in information, and the ethical use of that information.*

*~Dr. Mitchell Chester*

**Chester:** It's very hard to imagine a school at this point in time that's absent of books and reference materials. Now, having said that, I think that more and more the kinds of reference materials that folks from my generation grew up with are increasingly accessible through online mediums. I still have a dictionary and a thesaurus, a hard copy dictionary and thesaurus, that's over my desk and I grab

them periodically when I'm composing. Now those – they're the kind of reference that's easily accessible online, but I'm a creature of habit, so having said that, it's hard for me to imagine a paperless environment. I am aware that more and more young people are experiencing less and less paper in their hands, but I am a believer that young people need to leave our schools with good literacy skills: reading, writing, speaking, listening, with strong math background, with knowledge of both U.S. and world history, big ideas in science, the arts, not just visual, but performing and music. I am a believer in a broad liberal arts education for our young people and it's hard for me to imagine that kind of an education delivered solely online. I think you need people-to-people interaction.

**Kelly:** So our kids are digital natives where we're immigrants and we still like paper in our hands. Kids are growing in an environment where many adults think everything's there to Google. There's nobody teaching how to access the dictionary and thesaurus online. They just think everything is in a Wikipedia or Google and it doesn't need to be evaluated. I tell my kids, "I'm teaching you digital ethics because your parents can't teach you that. They teach you manners, but not how to access this information and use it ethically."

**Chester:** I think you're exactly right. The increasing access to information the digital medium provides brings a concurrent responsibility for schools to help youngsters learn how to evaluate, assess sources of information, bias and objectivity in information, and the ethical use of that information. I think those are critical. In regards to libraries and media centers, a key question for schools is the

degree to which skills of evaluating, assessing, and ethical use should be taught separately from content areas.

**Kelly:** They are totally integrated with teaching that's collaboratively planned. We've revised our Information Literacy Standards and devised an appendix based on national standards. We inserted the recommended technology standards from DESE, and put them in one chart, along with AASL's *Standards for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learner*. All those skills, ethics, and use of technology are in a school librarian's training.

**Fegan:** I agree with you completely; it appears that there is some level of "mythmaking" in the reputation of school libraries, that we keep having to advocate and defend and promote our positions. Certain districts just "don't get it." We're disappearing, becoming an endangered species because there is this myth that we are expendable. Do you have any insight as to how we can promote the use of 21<sup>st</sup> century libraries in our schools?

**Chester:** We're in a very difficult scenario right now and I'm very concerned that the impact of this fiscal downturn – that we're just at the beginning of it, that we haven't really felt it yet. We've heard a lot about it, but I am concerned that this coming school year, fiscal year 2010 and the year after, even more so, are going to be when we see the impact of this fiscal downturn, and in terms of school districts having to make decisions about what to cut and I don't think many school districts have many good choices to make. I think some of the areas like libraries, the arts, physical education, are all areas that we need to keep a vigilant eye toward, to understand the impact that these cuts have on the programs. I think I've said it to you before, and I've said to advocates to the arts, but I believe that in those areas, it's critical to show how to integrate those areas with the main stream subjects and not think about the library as a discreet event or class subject. And I say the same thing to people who teach the arts, to the extent that we can find ways to make them integral to the curriculum, we're in better

shape. Now that doesn't provide any guarantee or protection.

**Fegan:** No, it doesn't. I know that there are a lot of people who are very interested in hearing from you on this and I think we all agree. There are two different issues here. There is money and there is policy.

**Kelly:** I think there are administrators who get it, and there are administrators who just think the library is an extra, and in some schools it probably appears that way because they don't have a program or they don't have certified staff. Your school district that you live in [Winchester] gets it; that superintendent understands the value of school libraries. That's a model we need administrators to understand.

*... what we need to do is identify  
exemplary programs and  
showcase them.  
~Dr. Mitchell Chester*

**Chester:** Winchester is one of a relatively small proportion of school districts in this state which is not struggling fiscally right now. Fiscal definitely exacerbates this, no question about this.

**Kelly:** But you think the vision's there?

**Chester:** One of the things I am committed to is identifying examples of best practice, effective practice, practice that makes a difference, that brings high quality curriculum that's effective in helping students not only learn content, but learn how to apply that content, and we need to find those examples and make them accessible. I say this across the board. Let's find the schools that are succeeding with English language learners, ... students with disabilities, ...closing the achievement gaps based on race and ethnicity. Let's celebrate and highlight what they're doing. I'd say the same thing in regards to libraries because we've got schools and administrators in the state who have experience with library programs where they really weren't clear what value those programs have.

**Kelly:** This is probably the majority now.

**Chester:** So that's a problem, right?

**Kelly:** The problem is that good people are losing jobs. We want to make sure that they feel that there's support

**Chester:** Well, what we need to do is identify exemplary programs and showcase them and that's where Julia can be really helpful as we go forward in this regard. That's a strategy we need to use.

**Phelps:** That's something the Department could do in collaboration with your organization. We could send out an application process and let people nominate, and then review and identify those that we could showcase through any number of places: your conference, curriculum summits, readiness centers.

**Kelly:** We're revising our Model School Library Program Rubrics so there is a tool with which to measure.

**Phelps:** So that's where I know we've talked about being incorporated and having a separate framework. It's much to what you're saying about being integrated. I see the strength of the library media skills being integrated into those curriculums rather than being separate because that's exactly just what you said, Mitchell. They're using these standards around content and don't do anything in isolation. I use the library media center around a specific task when I need something, so they're not separate entities. I think that's a good place where we could collaborate and use each other's strengths.

**Chester:** Just to pick up on what Julia's saying: it's even more powerful if the exemplars of the use of library media centers are in the context of stronger literacy programs, stronger programs for English language learners ...

**Phelps:** Special Ed students...

**Chester:** ESL, to the extent where the entry point isn't the library media center, the entry point is a program that's making a difference for kids that a lot of people are struggling with, and here's the role that the library media center plays in that program.



**Phelps:** One of the things that we're in the next version of, all of our frameworks that we're looking at, is that they're not going to be the paper and pencil kind of things. We're talking about a searchable database. We're also hoping to have, behind each of those standards, resources. I would envision that, if integrating the research piece into the English Language Arts frameworks, that there might be a direct resource piece, so I guess I'm saying I can envision that it could be a possibility that it would make sense. Do I know specifically that, yes, these would be the ones that would be there? I think that's something that we could bring to the table and discuss as we're putting up those – because that's one of the things that we want those teachers to have – we want the vertical piece. We want teachers to be able to go in and search the frameworks by grade level, so they not only get ELA and math, but they get science and social studies, anything connected. We also want them to put in, "grade three research," and anything that would involve research would pop up.

**Fegan:** And literature as well.

**Phelps:** And literature! So we're looking at all kinds of ways to be resourceful to teachers that, as the technology evolves, we want to be able to, as Mitchell said, be right out there at the forefront of it.

**Kelly:** So is this your charge to do this?

**Phelps:** Curriculum and instruction – that's what we're working on right now. The Department has just received a federal grant for a significant amount of money to build our technology infrastructure.

**Fegan:** So this is Web 2.0 here? This is interaction from the part of the user? In other words, the teachers who would be referring to all this information would be able to tailor it?

**Phelps:** Exactly. In answer to your question, is that a possibility that there could be a link, that the library frameworks show up as a resource? Absolutely. I know we are looking at, in all of the frameworks, doing a literacy component. We're trying to build vignettes, and provide guidance, so again there's that cross-cutting -- that things are integrated so that it's not seen as, "I'm the math teacher, I teach only content," but there's an application piece to that. That's the vision. I've got this information, and we'll keep it at the forefront.

**Fegan:** What is your ideal experience in a school library? What do you expect to see?

*[In the library]... I expect to see adults, facilitating, asking open-ended questions, not giving answers, the teachers, the library media specialists... really stretching students.  
~Dr. Julia Phelps*

**Phelps:** I don't expect it to be quiet. I would expect to see adults, facilitating, asking open-ended questions, not giving answers, the teachers, the library media specialists, the paraprofessionals, whoever is there, really stretching students, that there's not a right way or a wrong way. I think that's where students really learn, where they create that understanding. It may be the quickest way to get to the answer, it might be that I would have gotten there or another student would have gotten there, but it's that they've created their own understanding. I do believe in that constructivist vision and theory of curriculum, of learning. We create our learning. We create our understanding. And it's only from those experiences that we have, so having students have a rich breadth and depth of experience is critical. They're not writing the same report, in the same manner, with the same process year after year.

**Kelly:** Fifty facts on fifty notecards ...

**Phelps:** Yeah. That's when true learning happens, when we create an understanding. And, Gerri, you know this from the experience we had in Amesbury, I had an intellectual understanding of curriculum, but it wasn't until we actually created curriculum that I had a real understanding of that theoretical piece. You've heard me say this, "head knowledge" and "heart knowledge." I had that head knowledge, but the twelve inches it traveled to my heart – that's where the real learning was – that's where I understood curriculum. It was when I had to get in and do it, I had to muck around and it was, "I don't know what to do next." We mucked around and we found something that worked. And you know, I think that we as educators need to give kids the opportunity to muck around. I think teachers are afraid to do that.

**Kelly:** I think that part of it is that they don't think they have time. That's what I keep running up against.

**Phelps:** I think that was something I've experienced first-hand -- that breadth of information, and that all of the revision work that's being done right now, we're talking about depth. We're talking about what are the essential standards, what are the core standards because, when we look at what happens internationally, we know that they go deep and they go longer -- longer days and longer years and they go to school on Saturday. Not only do we go wider, but we go shorter. We've got two things that we've got to tackle, but I really do think that that's where you have to integrate. In order to go deep, you have to integrate. You can't do things separately. You really have to do it together.

**Fegan:** And we have to have people there to integrate it.

**MSLA thanks Dr. Chester and Dr. Phelps for sharing their thoughts with us. Comment on this article on the MSLA listserv.**

Read about the "School of the Future" <http://www.microsoft.com/education/schoolofthefuture/>