

District 158 technology director earns educator award

By Madhu Krishnamurthy, Daily Herald reporter, February 25, 2014

Seeing children's faces light up as they explore the world of education through technology is the best reward, said Marisa Burkhart, director of educational technology for Huntley School District 158.

Burkhart's work implementing technology in the classroom and training teachers how to use it has earned her the 2014 Illinois Computing Educators "Educator of the Year" award.



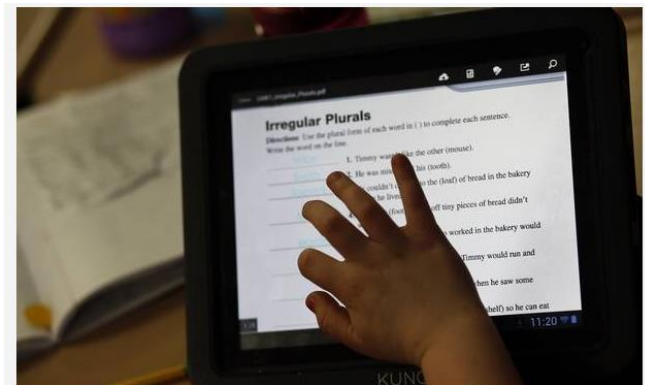
Marisa Burkhart, director of educational technology for Huntley School District 158, works with third-grader Alexa Brown, 9, on her tablet. Burkhart has been named the Illinois Computing Educators "Educator of the Year."

Brian Hill | Staff Photographer

Burkhart is in her fourth year as the district's educational technology director. She has been instrumental in helping District 158, a unit district with more than 9,000 students, create an online instruction/learning program at Huntley High School and implement one-to-one learning with tablets for students in some elementary and middle schools, said Mike Moan, chief academic officer.

The district is in the second year of implementing the program — 3,200 tablets are currently in use in four schools. The plan is to provide tablets for all students from kindergarten through seventh grade by next fall, and subsequently all students up to 12th grade, Moan said.

"I don't think anyone goes into education for recognition," said Burkhart, 34. "It's exciting to be recognized for the work that we're doing. We are allowed to dream big and go for it. We really are doing some different things here."



Students in Joanna Malinger's third-grade class at Martin Elementary School in Lake in the Hills use tablets for classroom work and also get to take them home after school.

Brian Hill | Staff Photographer

Each year ICE selects a teacher and a technology administrator for the award. Paul Solarz, a teacher at Westgate Elementary School in Arlington Heights School District 25, was the second winner. Burkhart and Solarz will receive the award at the opening General Session of the ICE State Conference, running Tuesday through Friday, at the Pheasant Run Resort and Convention Center in St. Charles.

Educators are nominated by colleagues, teachers, students and school administrators for outstanding contributions to the integration of technology and the improvement of teaching and learning in their school or district.

“Marisa is phenomenal,” District 158 Superintendent John Burkey said. “She has been very instrumental in helping to lead both our blended learning program in the high school and tablet initiative at the elementary school (and with) the digital conversion. It truly would not have happened as well as it has without her. She works very closely with building principals and teachers. She really helped teachers make the change to working in really digital environments.”



Marisa Burkhart, director of educational technology for Huntley School District 158, has been selected to receive the Illinois Computing Educators “Educator of the Year” award. Burkhart previously taught eighth-grade science at Marlowe Middle School in Lake in the Hills.

Brian Hill | Staff Photographer

Roughly 100 students participated in a blended course at the high school with both face-to-face and online components in the first year. Today, nearly 1,300 students take at least one blended learning class, Burkey added.

“Had it not gotten off the ground successfully, it would not be where it is today,” he said. “We are really changing the way kids learn. She really understands how technology can change learning for the better and she helped support teachers to make that change.”

Burkhart previously taught eighth-grade science at Marlowe Middle School for six years. She is an active member of ICE and has presented at local and state technology education conferences. She also has hosted more than 20 visits from school districts nationwide interested in learning more about the blended learning environment.

The tablet initiative is Burkhart's primary focus and she spends a lot of time training teachers in groups and one-on-one, though now she has a team of instructional technology specialists helping her with the implementation. “The biggest challenge really is change,” Burkhart said. “Change is hard for anyone.” Teachers get comfortable teaching a certain way and it's a challenge breaking those habits and implementing a new digital curriculum, she added. Students, on the other hand, are far more comfortable using technology in the classroom, Burkhart said.

“What fascinates me about it is it opens up options for kids that weren't there,” she said. Burkhart said though children have an intuition about technology, they don't necessarily know how to use it for learning. That's where she comes in. “Being able to really help them use it for learning is fascinating to watch,” she said. “They have the world at their fingertips now.”