



Michelle Murphy's Wi-fi on Wheels

By Christine Spicer, editor of *Viewpoint* magazine at Point Loma Nazarene University

A commendation from the President of the United States was a wonderful encouragement, but Michelle Murphy worked to improve her school district's technology not for accolades but for students.

Training and Experiences

Michelle Murphy was a graduate of Point Loma Nazarene University and became a teacher for 14 years in the Hesperia Unified School District before serving as the superintendent of the Rim of the World Unified School District. Prioritizing students' needs and working on their behalf has been a hallmark of Murphy's career.

"I think that Point Loma was the best years of my life," she said. "The classes prepared me for education for sure, and the internship program where we went back to Point Loma while we taught part-time was an awesome experience to get support. I have always been a lifelong learner, and it was part of that experience. Point Loma set some of those foundational goals I had for myself."

After teaching, Murphy became an assistant principal for three years and a principal for eight. During that time, she opened two schools, one from ground up.

“It was a unique experience,” she said. “Most people don’t get that opportunity.”

When Murphy became the director of elementary education in Coachella Valley, she was assigned to start an iPad program for the district. She also went back to school and became a foundations trainer through Apple Academy, and she earned her CTO (chief technology officer) through California Educational Technology Professionals Association (CETPA) technologist certificates. She was the Coachella Valley District’s chief technology officer (CTA) for three years—one of the few women to occupy that role for a district. During that time, she helped implement a number of innovative approaches to helping students connect digitally.

Because of Coachella Valley’s high temperatures and physical layout and because the district is in a high-poverty area (100 percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch), many students did not have internet access at home. To address this, Murphy helped put in place several programs, including “Wi-Fi on Wheels.” The program placed routers on school buses, enabling students to do homework while commuting to and from school. The district also parked five Wi-Fi-enabled buses in various locations throughout the region where internet access was unavailable, including in mobile home parks and in rural areas.

“It was a really great thing to help kids,” she said.

Wi-fi on Wheels

Wi-fi on Wheels garnered national attention as an innovative approach to bridging the technology gap between students with home internet access with those without. But this was not Murphy’s only creative approach to empowering student learning through technology access. She also helped purchase 18,000 iPads and routers through a technology bond. She helped place Apple TVs in every classroom and launched a tech center to support teachers in the classroom. Importantly, Murphy and her team also trained teachers to effectively use the technology. The team also ensured that students learned about digital citizenship, internet safety, and cyberbullying, among other technology-related topics. The students’ devices were well protected with cases, and loss and damage to devices were minimal.

Hard Work Pays Off

In 2014, President Obama offered the Coachella Valley District a Congressional Commendation for their work. In 2015, Murphy was named one of the Center for Digital Education’s Top 30 Technologists, Transformers, and Trailblazers. These awards complemented Murphy’s two Administrator of the Year recognitions and her 2010 National Distinguished Principal, California, finalist status.

Murphy’s emphasis was never on her own accolades. She said, “I just love learning, and I think that if I can learn technology, anybody can.” “And kids should have equal access to technology. Especially in public education, it should not be the haves and have-nots. Getting the technology in the hands of those students who didn’t have access was really important to us.”

Murphy also helped share the story of what her district accomplished with others, so more kids could benefit. She has spoken around the country about Wi-Fi on Wheels, and she wrote an article about what every superintendent should know about technology.

She has also had the opportunity to speak about women's roles in technology and to inspire girls and women to engage with tech. In her current position as a superintendent, she is still in a role where women are underrepresented. Nevertheless, Murphy feels that leadership of women in both technology and superintendency has been a challenge worth experiencing.

In 2019, PLNU was pleased to present Murphy with the 2019 Alumnus of Point Loma Award.

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