

For Immediate Release

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. ISA KAFTAL ZIMMERMAN

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Image Attached (“TourGraphic1.1”)

Dr. Isa Kaftal Zimmerman recently visited Howard-WinnCSD where she had the opportunity to tour the Crestwood K-8 and High School campuses. While there, on Wednesday, Sept. 16, she observed and spoke with many administrators, educators, as well as students. [Photos courtesy of Howard-WinnCSD]

HOWARD COUNTY, Iowa (Sept. 21, 2015): Dr. Isa Kaftal Zimmerman, founder of IKZ Advisors, LLC, a science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) consultation and information center based in Boston, Mass., recently traveled to Northeast Iowa where she arranged her schedule to visit Howard-Winneshiek Community School District, touring campuses, observing classrooms, and speaking with administrators, educators, and students. Throughout her years in the education sector Dr. Zimmerman has worked as a teacher, superintendent, and principal. She currently serves on the Governor’s STEM Advisory Council in Iowa and Massachusetts. While at Howard-Winn Dr. Zimmerman took time to discuss in a one-on-one voice recorded interview some benefits and challenges regarding the integration of technology in the classroom, speaking from her own personal experiences. Her interview follows.

Q. Talk about your background and the experiences that you’ve had in regard to integrating technology into education...

A. I started using technology in the early 1970s. My husband who is a physicist said to me one day, “You need a computer.” Of course in his department they were ahead of everybody else – so we bought me an Apple, and I’ve been an Apple user ever since.

00:33 I’ve served on two Apple advisory councils and I was telling John [the superintendent at Howard-Winn] that I didn’t get paid, but they paid my way to California a number of times, and the person in charge of the Superintendents Association in Massachusetts (MASS) said to me, “You’d better talk to the legal office of the state to see if there’s any conflict of interest.” So I called them, and they told me that potentially, because I was the chief purchasing officer and I was buying Apples for the schools, which most schools in those days were doing, so I wasn’t unusual, but nonetheless there I was going out to California.

01:15 The Ethics Commission lawyer said, “You have two choices. You can either ask Apple to send the School Committee the check to cover your expenses and then they can give you a stipend, or you can stand up in front of a town

meeting.” Towns in Massachusetts have a town meeting form of government. I thought, “That is the most ridiculous thing – you don’t put yourself out in a Town Meeting unless you’ve got everything lined up, and this didn’t seem like a smart move.” The School Committee said, “Of course, we love it that you go out there because you help us to get some good stuff,” so that’s what happened. The School Committee received the funding for my travel expenses and then issued me a check in that amount.

02:02 I was telling John this morning I saved Apple quite a lot of money because they showed us a proposed form factor for a new desktop – I won’t describe it because we were under confidentiality agreement –that I thought would be very inappropriate and problematic for junior high school students, which was the target audience. That is the reason they have advisory committees to [say] things like, “Don’t do that.” “Do that.” “Here’s something you should be doing but you haven’t thought of.” That was sort of the first layer.

02:43 The second layer was, with the help of the Executive Director of the MASS, I started the Superintendents’ Technology Task Force in Massachusetts and about five or six other superintendents joined me. And we began teaching superintendents about how important it was to have technology in their schools. We mounted the first professional development experience for superintendents; it was hysterical because we did some role play. We had a wonderful time putting it on and our colleagues said that was great. This goes back to the early ‘80s. We put on our own conference after that to get superintendents to come and see what was going on in technology. And then I convinced, with the help of a few other people, the Massachusetts affiliate of ISTE – International Society for Technology in Education, which is a not-for profit organization to join forces so that we only had one conference, mounted by MASS and MassCUE (which is MA’s ISTE affiliate). This is a Fall Conference we mount together, which actually occurs in October at Gillette Stadium. The next one is in late October.

04:04 I think I was one of the pioneers, certainly was the person who got other superintendents interested. Some of the younger folks, a couple of women as well as men, got involved and the rest, as they say, is history.

Q. Was this in the ‘Apple IIe’ processor days?

A. This was in the “Apple IIe” processor days, and then I had what was called the “Big Mac” – that square Mac. It came with a padded carrying case that you could buy separately.

04:49 I remember distinctly that MassCUE, the organization that the school IT people belong to which I already mentioned, invited me to come and give a talk at their fall conference. I had just gotten the computer and nobody had seen that computer. I had about 15 people in the session – all of them instructional technology specialists – we were all trying to figure out what we could do. So that was the first [computer] I took around [in a semi-portable manner]. I’ve had every Apple model, I think, that’s been made.

Q. What do you think is the biggest change that you've seen through the years, from the first Apples to what we have now?

A. The whole access and the mobility issue. When I think about the fact that the early computers were big clunky machines, even though they were called "desktops" they were heavy and to take them you had to do what I did, put it in the car and go somewhere.

05:58 It's amazing, the difference between having limited access to having total access. In the beginning Apple was very focused on schools so they developed software for schools. If you had a problem they helped you immediately. Every state had its own Apple people, and of course, in Boston we have a lot of Apple people, some of whom I still speak to these days. Now Apple has a worldview. It's not just about education anymore. In fact, they're moving into business, there's this big trend – a push to bring Apple into business where PCs have been king. That's a big change.

06:50 Actually I worked with another company, and I won't mention the name because it ended up being a kind of a negative experience, but a non-Apple company – a big one. This is an international company, which wanted to get into the education marketplace, and I met some of the leadership at a conference in New York and they said, "Would you be willing to work with us?" And I said, "I'm agnostic. Come on in." But they really didn't understand how to work with educators and they didn't understand the importance of immediate response, because if you've got a group of kids and suddenly the technology fails you have to have a backup plan. I eventually said to them, "I'm really sorry but this is not going to work out." They were really angry at me. They took all of their machinery, which is fine because we didn't want it at that point. ...

07:59 I've been quite involved from the very beginning, at least in Massachusetts. And then I've been fairly active in ASCD (the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development), which is an international, instruction-oriented organization with membership from all of the different stakeholder groups. I tried to get them to move into the then current technology level, which they finally did, so that's been exciting. And now, we're doing "unconferencing": usually the morning is a digital presentation. Then people in the locations, wherever the unconference is being downstreamed, can decide what they want to do with the rest of the day.

09:02 In the unconference we just mounted this spring, we beamed-in two speakers from California. The session went to all of the northeast affiliates of ASCD – each in the state. New York had five sites; Massachusetts had one site; New Jersey had one site; Rhode Island had one site– and so we beamed them in and we could ask the presenters questions. They answered questions from all of the affiliates. Then we had lunch on each individual site, and after lunch we decided what kind of discussion we wanted to have – what the topics were. So we chose the topics, and the presenters stayed on so we could ask them questions. At the agreed upon end time we said, "Thank you very much,

Goodbye, [etc.]" That was an unconference. Basically we controlled half of it and half of it was beamed down to us.

Q. And so was that kind of a newer technology?

A. I wouldn't call it a technology. I would call it a newer "format". Because the technology wasn't that complicated given today's connectivity capacity, it's really downstreaming and interacting – through the net naturally.

Q. Talk about some of the ways in which technology can be used to impact curriculum for kids...

A. Right now a big focus – and it's always been a focus, but it's been harder or easier to do depending on what the technology can provide – the focus is on meeting individual student needs. So tailoring, or personalizing – people use those two words interchangeably – and what the technology enables is that you're not dependent entirely on a teacher's knowledge, or a teacher's access to information or a teacher's control.

11:15 Teachers need to be "in the classrooms" – or whatever the space ends up being the learning environment of the future, because you do need someone to provide focus and counsel, and you need someone who can help students to think about things that they may not be able to think about themselves. But access to information, in the old days it was only the teacher who could give you access. Or the library.

11:43 In fact I was telling this story the other day that when I was in high school in New York if I was doing my homework and I suddenly found something I didn't know and my encyclopedia didn't have it, I'd have to wait until the next day to go to the school library or the public library in the afternoon after school. Now I Google it. I could, if I were that kid again, get the information immediately so it wouldn't be a mystery overnight, until the next day and until I could ask my teacher.

12:24 You can decide what you want to learn within the parameters that the school sets up, or the teacher sets up. John and I have been talking a lot about changing the physical structure of schools. But I reminded him that in the 60s, and he's younger than I am, but in the 60s, I taught in a very, very experimental school in Newton, Massachusetts, and we could create our own spaces then – in the 60s. All of the walls in our wing of the building were moveable walls. We could get 10 kids together in a pod, and 20 in another space if the teacher wanted to have a "class." The notion of changing the environment is not new. Now [though] it becomes a little easier with the technology, because you don't have to worry about having a bookcase that you can use for reference books and to provide privacy. You can just use your device.

Q. What are some of the stigmas that you think come with integrating technology into education?

A. I don't see them as stigmas. I see them as challenges.

13:43 First of all, teachers need to be very comfortable with the technology. They need to be very comfortable losing a little bit of control over every minute of the lesson. Teachers need to think about and figure out –with help; they don't have to do it on their own – how to use the technology so that it's productive and so that you don't waste time and the kids don't get into trouble going to wrong places. I remember being superintendent when I was asked if I wanted to have a filter put on the Internet for my schools' use. At the time I said, "Yes," because we really didn't know what was out there. And a friend of mine, who's retired now, was a teacher of history. She once Googled (a long time ago) something like "Alexandria" – thinking she would get Alexandria, Egypt, and got Alexandria, a prostitute. It was a story like that, that made me think, "Let us control what kids can get into in our system."

14:56 We still had the capacity to alter the filter if the teacher wanted access. We used to have acceptable use policies that kids and parents would have to sign. It's much more open now, so the challenge is making sure the kids are using their time productively, making sure that they're going to reasonable sites. A friend of mine who's rather a famous technologist and consults with Fortune 500 companies, when he presents, he often includes a piece about that... It's kind of what my friend found out about when she Googled "Alexandria". There are sites that look like they are really about Ancient Egypt, or about World War II, but in fact the site turned out to be a Nazi propaganda site.

To me, that's one of the challenges. The other challenge is, even the young people who understand technology beautifully, what a lot of them don't know is how to use it to teach. Or, how to use it to help kids learn. To me that's another challenge.

Q. Talk a little bit, along the same lines, about Wiki pages – Wikipedia – do you think there needs to be some education about how to use it?

A. Absolutely. That's what I was implying before.

17:05 Everybody needs to know how to use sites properly. There's a lot more plagiarism going on – adults as well as kids. I think we need to teach them that even though it's on the Internet, if they're taking a paragraph, they need to put quotation marks around it and give credit, and if they're paraphrasing they still have to give credit. They don't have to put quotation marks, but they have to say, "According to X, teaching is a noble profession." I actually would probably put that in quotation marks, although I don't think I know who actually said that first!!!

Q. What do you think are some of the biggest challenges that you've seen, maybe back to your original days in the 70s with Apple – what were some of the biggest challenges with getting the devices into the schools?

A. Two things immediately come to mind: they're expensive. One of the reasons a lot of people bought PCs in the beginning is that PCs were cheaper than the Apple products. Apple products have always been more expensive.

18:06 I need to tell you a funny story. I had a school committee member, in the last community when I retired from K-12 and went to higher ed., who once said on public television, because School Committee meetings were televised, "Dr. Zimmerman I don't understand why you're buying Apple products. They're going to go out of business." And I said, "Mr. ----" – I won't tell you his name – although probably that tape is somewhere, I said, "I don't think so, but if they do I am sure someone somewhere will buy the platform." Every once in a while I feel like sending him a little note saying, "Remember what you said in public?"

18:48 So, you were asking me about challenges... Apple is expensive, and because they supported schools so much and because I think they're easier to use, although now of course it's different, but then they were easier to use, they were better for schools. In addition they introduced some new reform every six months, or a new computer every year, and schools just can't afford to keep turning over their computers. Those were major problems. I think they have good designs, I have an Air and an iPad, they're aesthetically pleasing. I like the light color. The PCs often were black; Apple used beige to start with and then went into white and black, and I think the lighter color is more pleasant in a classroom than black boxes. Recently several of the PC manufacturers produced computers [that] look and behave like Macs.

Q. What do you think are the best aspects, even in today's age, with bringing technology in for the kids?

A. I mentioned the access to information, which the student can direct and control. I [also] think the use of visual media. I remember using slides – the little 35 mm slides, then filmstrips, then 16 mm film and overhead projectors– all of which were great in their time, but what we have now is so much better. ... Friends and teachers would comment on the length of skirts, which reflected the era. It's all laughable now, but at the time it was more than we had before so it was fine. Even at that time we knew it wasn't the way it should / could be. As things evolved they basically evolved to better conditions than previously.

Q. Is there anything else you would like to add?

A. I'm delighted to be here. As I mentioned earlier, John and I have been trying to arrange a visit. I've been listening to him now for how many years – five years or so, and he's got some strange ideas, but I think they're okay. [Laughter]

22:24 Because I'm no longer on the ground I like visiting schools since it's the only way to keep in touch with what's going on. Things do change and are changing, so this is great. I come from Massachusetts, which as I said yesterday at the Governor's STEM Advisory Council meeting, "In Massachusetts, if it isn't invented here, forget about it!" So if it isn't invited in the Commonwealth, or the town, or village, or city that you're sitting in, it is usually not adapted. ... There's a lot of duplication of effort and one of the things that the Advisory Council, actually both in Massachusetts and here [in Iowa] are trying to do, is to prevent unnecessary duplication because it's a waste of scarce resources – time and money.

23:16 Also, if people keep repeating what others have done before, there are going to be gaps where nobody has tried to do any thing. Usually the gaps represent the hardest targets and that's probably where we need to spend a little time, because if they're hard there's a reason why they're hard and so we need to help make them a little easier so people can have access.

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Howard-Winneshiek Community School District (Howard-Winn CSD) serves portions of Chickasaw, Howard and Winneshiek counties in Northeast Iowa, including the communities of Cresco, Chester, Elma, Lime Springs and Ridgeway. The district currently serves more than 1,100 students and covers 426 square miles, making it the third largest district – by landmass – in the State of Iowa. Our vision is to discover, develop and expand passions, creativity and strengths. Our mission is to prepare and empower our students to think creatively, serve, contribute and succeed locally and globally.

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