



The CTO: your strategic partner

by Frankie Jackson and Alice Owen

The CTO is the chief technology officer, or the highest-ranking technology leader in a school district. They have a range of titles, e.g. CTO, chief information officer (CIO), director of technology and others. They come from a variety of backgrounds, including technology, information systems, instruction, administrative and business. As technology demands in school districts have increased with each passing year, the role of the CTO has transitioned into a critical, strategic position in school business. Here are just a few examples.

- 1. Enterprise-level systems synthesizer.** If your district has implemented technology systems that won't "talk to each other," you'll understand how critical it is for the CTO to think at the enterprise level before any system is implemented or facility is built. Technologies are a synthesis of complex systems with interdependent operations. Successful implementations require alignment and integration of data. CTOs must see the district with X-ray vision and understand how the district works as a whole. Otherwise systems fail.
- 2. Visionary strategist.** Superintendents expect the CTO to shape the district's vision because technology is the underlying foundation that supports all programs. CTOs must envision the potential for how the world will exist, then build systems and networks to lead the district's transformation. Being a visionary isn't enough. The CTO must be a visionary strategist who maps out plans to support the district's vision, clearly communicate and articulate the value, then influence others to buy in and ultimately get the work done.
- 3. Instructionally centered enabler.** Students, parents, teachers and instructional leaders are the ultimate customers of the district. Because CTOs are critical enablers of education, they are expected to ensure all modes of technology access and services are available 100 percent of the time, whether it be family mobile apps with real-time grades, attendance reports and homework assignments, or online classroom websites and instructional resources.
- 4. Transformational change agent.** Triggered by new technologies, weather disturbances, cybersecurity attacks or emergent social issues, disruptive events happen. CTOs must be capable of making transformational changes quickly and, at the same time, managing the risk. The entire district operation is now in the hands of the CTO, who must act with a sense of urgency, remain calm, think through all the repercussions, then quickly create action and cause change.
- 5. Forerunner of innovation.** Technology is about innovating and finding ways to automate and improve. It's common for CTOs to be innovators; what's changed is that CTOs are expected to be forerunners of innovation, to see a space that others can't see, or reimagine things that are already there and find new ways to improve.
- 6. Supporter of instruction and administration.** From the district level to the device level, tentacles of technology affect everything and everyone. CTOs don't take care of just one organizational unit, they sustain all of them. CTOs must be strategic in assuring all students and staff are served equitably in a safe environment.
- 7. World-class service provider.** Stakeholders expect world-class technology service. What could be more important than educating our kids and serving our staff? To deliver, CTOs must understand the critical aspects of managing the performance of a technology organization. They must possess two strategic assets: leadership and a framework to improve performance.

The strength of skills demonstrated by your CTO will increasingly affect how your district operates. The skills that previously got technology leaders a seat at the table aren't the skills that will keep them there. You can help your CTO be more successful by understanding their role and providing your support.

FRANKIE JACKSON, RTSBA, CETL, is an independent chief technology officer helping education technology leaders build world-class technology teams, systems and services so they are ready to focus on what matters most. She is a national trainer for the CoSN Certified Education Technology Leader (CETL™) program, Texas K-12 CTO Council board member and chair of the Leadership Advisory committee.

ALICE OWEN, Ph.D., CAE, CETL, is the executive director of the Texas K-12 CTO Council, the state chapter of CoSN. She has served as CoSN board member, developer of national training, and chair of the Certification Governance Committee for the CoSN CETL™ certification program.