Al Kingsley of NetSupport: "Collaboration"
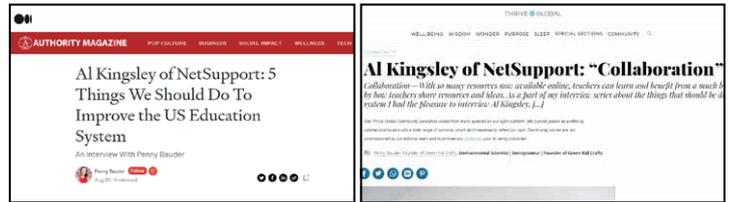
Thank you so much for doing this with us! Our readers would love to "get to know you" a bit better. Can you share the "backstory" behind what brought you to this particular career path?

I started my career in finance but, very quickly, found that the advent of tech in business was something that interested me more. So, I moved into the software industry and ultimately became the head of a software company. In parallel, I got involved in education because I had children myself and thought the best way to support our local schools was to roll up my sleeves and get involved! That interest grew, and for the last 25 years, I've worked in both schools and the technology space — learning the lessons from one side and being able to adapt and deliver solutions from the other.

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you started your career? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?

I'm not sure there is honestly one that stands out, but it's fair to say the ones that you remember most in life are where you have been convinced one path is the right direction to take, only to find out after listening to others that you need to reflect and revise your plan. Ultimately, that's a life lesson in business: if you employ great people to work with you, you need to listen to them.

Are you working on any exciting new projects now? How do you think that will help people?

The last 18 months have been a catalyst for change. We reflected on the role of our technology, as any good organization should do, and identified a gap in terms of providing seamless delivery of "remote" classroom instruction with our current, locally focused solutions. We worked hard on developing our new classroom.cloud

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solution that provides a continuity of learning experience, irrespective of location. That mindset of one solution which can be used anywhere is key to usability for schools.

Can you briefly share with our readers why you are an authority in the education field?

I'm in a very fortunate position to have spent the last 30 years working across both the education and corporate sectors, so I'm able to bring those two perspectives together. I have 20 years' experience in school governance leadership in the United Kingdom, and I'm chairperson of a board that focuses on providing the best support and opportunities for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). In addition, I've spoken at events around the world on the role that technology can play to benefit students' learning experiences and outcomes. I recently published a book, My Secret #EdTech Diary, that is getting a lot of attention in the United States and the UK. I've also been on a constant series of podcasts and guest appearances talking with educators about the intersection of education and technology.

Ok, thank you for that. Let's now jump to the main focus of our interview. From your point of view, how would you rate the results of the US education system?

I suppose the best answer is that it depends on what scale you are using.

You can measure graduation rates, or your measure can be student "success" on standardized assessments, which is how we rate one country against another — but education is about so much more than that. For me, it all comes down to: are we doing enough to help the next generation be better than the one before it? In some respects, we're succeeding, while in others, we're letting them down.

Can you identify 5 areas of the US education system that are going really great?

I would say the top areas are:

- **Career and Technical Education** — There has been a more positive perception of CTE in recent years, which is heartening because not everyone is bound for a college education. Students completing CTE programs are better prepared for the world of work after they graduate from the K-12 system, and even if they matriculate into a 4-year college or university. CTE has done an excellent job of broadening the definition of what Career and Technical Education means. Today, CTE reflects high tech careers and skills as much as it does industrial skills; it reflects the ladder of skills from understanding a concept to having the practical skills to apply to work or education.

- **Student voice** — Teachers and administrators are increasingly recognizing the need to include students in all aspects of the

learning process and provide more opportunities for them to be heard. We see this with our company in the interactional nature of how teachers engage with their students. When they have a classroom management system like NetSupport in place, teachers can involve students more and encourage those who might be shy to interact with their teachers and peers.

- **Flexibility** — COVID has forced schools to completely revamp what a classroom looks like and how it should operate. We're seeing a lot of resilience, adaptability, and positive changes as a result. Again, the right technology tools help teachers to be flexible and adaptable, but the credit goes to the teachers on this one. Teachers were forced into the position of having to be flexible and many of them did an excellent job adapting what they had been given to a model that worked for them and their students.

- **Collaboration** — With so many resources now available online, teachers can learn and benefit from a much broader community. I am encouraged by how teachers share resources and ideas.

Can you identify the 5 key areas of the US education system that should be prioritized for improvement? Can you explain why those are so critical?

For me, one of the most important things we see — not just in the US but worldwide — is the constant struggle between expectations of acquiring knowledge and a desire for our young people to acquire the skills that set them up for their career pathways and lifelong learning.

Like many countries, the US still doesn't focus on measures of success supporting and encouraging student skills and confidence over the long-entrenched grading of acquired content. The real measure of success is a happy, confident person who has the skills to make their own decisions, challenge, research, and apply knowledge. Growth in Career and Technical Education and STEM programs is evidence that educators and parents want their children to gain confidence and critical thinking skills over rote

memorization of facts. Yet, even STEM education sometimes gets misconstrued to mean a chemistry class or math skills rather than the ability to break down a robot and then rebuild it into something new.

We also need to look after the mental health of both staff and students, especially after the last 18 months of a global pandemic that will probably continue to restrict our ability to interact with each other. We need to boost digital citizenship education to empower students to make their own decisions about keeping themselves safe online. We have the ability and knowledge about how to break the 'school-to-prison' pipeline and yet we are stalled by jurisdictional issues, perceptions and stigmatism. Yet, we know what many of the issues are, so surely it is not outside of our capabilities to change things.

How is the US doing with regard to engaging young people in STEM? Can you suggest three ways we can increase this engagement?

It's clear that I love the concept of STEM but not only for the letters and subjects it represents. STEM is a larger concept conveying that knowledge is assimilated best when students can see that it's relevant and useful. STEM subjects present a multitude of opportunities for project- or challenge-based learning that is hands-on, and where students can see the tangible results of what they are working on. Combining theoretical and practical elements to produce something real gives students pride in their achievements and helps them take forward that learning into the future. I'd love to see greater engagement and encouragement for girls and other disadvantaged and marginalized individuals towards STEM subjects, closer, more tangible links with business (and vice versa, their engagement in the classroom), and of course additional funding to help develop STEM projects and opportunities. One of my criticisms

about the school-to-prison pipeline — a greater emphasis on STEM and CTE — could break that cycle.

Can you articulate to our readers why it's so important to engage girls and women in STEM subjects?

Diversity is essential when we're talking about progress. We get further when there is diversity at the table, more voices and varied perspectives being heard. Women, minorities and the economically disadvantaged are still woefully underrepresented in STEM fields and, until that changes, we're not going to benefit as much as we could.

How is the US doing with regard to engaging girls and women in STEM subjects? Can you suggest three ways we can increase this engagement?

We see a lot of wonderful organizations, like Girls Who Code and GirlStart, that are focused on helping girls and women engage more with STEM subjects, which is very promising. If we want to continue increasing engagement, we also need to have:

- **Better representation in film, media, literature, politics and advertising** — Youth need to see themselves in these mediums, and the more we share stories of women in STEM, the more our young girls, and the disenfranchised, will be able to see themselves in those roles.

- **Female and Minority STEM teachers** — This ties back to representation at the most basic level. Historically, men have taught math and science, just as women have leaned towards ECE and elementary education. This needs to change, so that students have a female STEM role, or a person of color, as their model right in front of them.

- **Cross-curricular connections** — Incorporating STEM content into English, the Arts, and history classes benefits everyone, and it's something that teachers and administrators can accomplish through collaboration.

As an education professional, where do you stand in the debate whether there should be a focus on STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) or on STEAM (STEM plus the arts like humanities, language arts, dance, drama, music, visual arts, design and new media)? Can you explain why you feel the way you do?

I absolutely support STEAM over STEM because the most important thing is that our students have access to the broadest possible opportunities and can choose subjects in which they will excel. Fostering and supporting the Arts is critical for a wider set of skills and confidence. It is actually fundamental to the well-being of our community and society. The Arts are also part of that builder/creator mindset that gets to the heart of what the STEM effort is trying to achieve.

Many schools experiencing financial cuts have had to narrow the curriculum, with the Arts suffering most, which is a travesty when you consider their positive impact on school life. People always remember their performance in the school play or music concert, a great class theater trip, or when an artist came into school to deliver a workshop. They are the things that shape your school experience and contribute to your attitude about education you pass on to your own children. This is also where empathy and perspective develop. Learning to interpret what you see, and explain from the perspective of the creator, develops empathy. From a social perspective, this is vital. Furthermore, we know that a growing number of employers now say that empathy is at the top of their list for desired attributes.

If you had the power to influence or change the entire US educational infrastructure, what five things would you implement to improve and reform our education system? Can you please share a story or example for each?

Wow, that's a lot of power! In a nutshell, I'd implement a 10-year plan for educational reform that any change of administration would have to remain in place until the full shift was completed. Schools planning for the long term instead of short-term fixes would greatly affect the decisions being made. I'd look at how we train our teachers, what we currently expect of them, and how we can better support them with ongoing development — their mental health and personal growth. If we don't have those foundations right, we are not going to advance because teachers will burn out. It will become a dead-end profession. We significantly undervalue the role of teachers and their impact in our society.

I'd take stock of where we are now — what the problems are, what the successes are — and then make that fundamental shift I mentioned earlier, to stop grading students purely on how well they can remember and regurgitate facts. That means, of course, that we'd need to refactor the whole purpose of education to ensure we equip our students with skills for life, that they are purposeful and productive members of society, who can contribute their skills, continually acquire new skills, and apply that knowledge to their jobs and lives. Learning a bunch of seemingly pointless facts doesn't interest anybody, so we need to make learning practical, useful and relevant. We need to capitalize on students' interests to feed their desire to learn. We need to expose them to experiences, activities, and people in careers they might never encounter otherwise, and ignite the spark so they say, "I want to do that!"

Reform is a huge task, but without it we will be having the same conversations in five or ten years' time.

Can you please give us your favorite "Life Lesson Quote"? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?

I've shared this one a few times, but I do think it counts for a lot: "You were born with two eyes, two ears, and one mouth. Use them in appropriate proportions."

This is important because when you start off in your career, you expect that you will contribute all these ideas and plans and start delivering immediately. However, with experience, you realize that actually, you can't. It's all about teamwork and other people. The more you listen and learn, the more informed and valid your contribution will be when you do choose to make it.

We are blessed that some of the biggest names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US, with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch, and why? He or she might just see this if we tag them :-)

Whether working in technology or education (the two camps my feet are in), it's very easy to aim your target to the present and respond to what's needed right now. The more effective way, of course, is to look ahead, so that when you deliver, it's right on point. Someone who has always looked to the future, and still does, is [Ray Kurzweil](#). He's an inventor, entrepreneur, and a futurist that has been labeled by Forbes as the "ultimate thinking machine." He's the man behind some pretty significant advancements in technology: speech recognition, document scanning, and music synthesizers. For the last nine years, he has been working with Google on machine learning projects. Throughout his career, he's been developing technology solutions for functions that are not the "problems of now," but that instead, genuinely open up possibilities for the future. I'm not sure I agree with all his predictions, but it would be fascinating to chat with him!

How can our readers follow you on social media?

You can find me Tweeting here: [@AlKingsley_Edu](#) or order my book on [Amazon](#).

Thank you so much for these insights! This was so inspiring!