



CASE STUDY

A Credential That Defines the Role: How the CETL® Shapes K–12 Technology Leadership

When Steve Ouellette stepped into a technology leadership role at Westwood Public Schools in Massachusetts in 2010, he knew something was missing. Ouellette began his career as a math teacher and department head before becoming the interim (and eventually permanent) technology director. Like many K–12 technology leaders, his path didn't follow a single, clearly defined pipeline. His responsibilities were real and expectations were high, but he felt the need to achieve credentials to validate the role.

At that time—and in many districts still—there was no shared definition of what a K–12 technology leader should know, be responsible for, or be held accountable to.

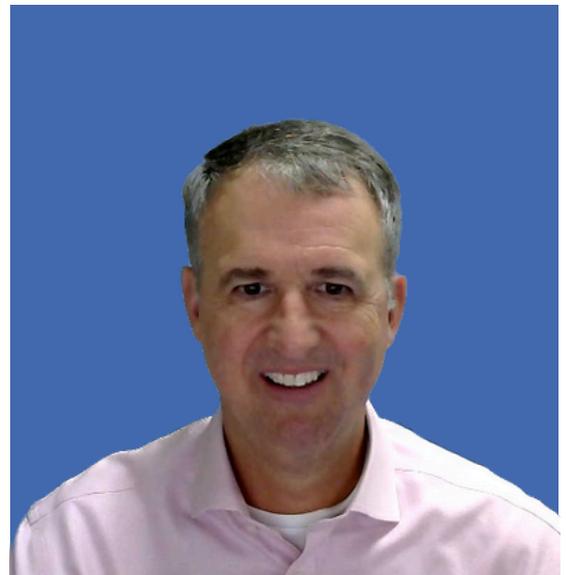
“I learned about CoSN’s Certified Education Technology Leader certification after seeing the CETL acronym on a colleague at another district’s email signature, so when I heard that our statewide CoSN chapter offers a CTO clinic course that prepares you for the CETL exam, I signed up,” says Ouellette.

Designed around CoSN’s Framework of Essential Skills, CETL assesses leadership across instruction, operations, policy, and strategic vision—the full scope of responsibilities the role now demands.

In 2018, Ouellette became CoSN’s 500th CETL. “It was a badge of honor that added credibility to my being in this role,” he says.

In 2019, he was recognized onstage at CoSN’s national annual conference. “In my speech, I made sure to thank the 499 who came before me.”

“It was a badge of honor that added credibility to my being in this role.” –Steve Ouellette, CETL®, Technology Director, Westwood Public Schools, MA



A Role Without a Roadmap

The evolution of the K–12 technology leader has been anything but linear. Bill Stein, who has worked in educational technology since the early 1990s, has watched the role transform from technical support to enterprise leadership.

“In the beginning, there were no tech directors, no policies, no vision,” says Stein, director of information systems at Metropolitan School District of Mt. Vernon, Indiana. “You fixed computers.”

As the internet expanded and technology became essential to instruction, operations, and compliance, expectations changed. “Leadership became necessary; you had to have a vision,” says Stein.

But the people stepping into these roles came from vastly different backgrounds—some deeply technical, others rooted in teaching and learning. Without a common framework, districts often relied on individual background and experience rather than a shared standard for leadership readiness.

For Stein, becoming a CETL was a way to understand what the role should include. “When I studied for the CETL, I realized there were parts of my job I didn’t even know I should be doing...FERPA, COPPA, CIPA, data management. I became more self-aware.”

“Leadership became necessary; you had to have a vision.” –Bill Stein, CETL[®], Director of Information Systems, MSD of Mt. Vernon, IN



Did You Know?

- To date, **more than 900** education technology leaders, in school systems and other education organizations around the world and in companies serving those education organizations, have passed this rigorous program and earned their certification.
- **More than half** of CETL[®]-certified educational technology leaders hold cabinet-level positions within their education organizations.

Validation, Not Just Preparation

Four years ago, Melissa McCalla, chief technology officer (CTO) for Pasadena Independent School District (ISD) in Texas, learned about the CETL from her peers at a state-level meeting. “Other CTOs would ask if I had gotten a CETL,” says the former instructional technologist. “I didn’t even know what it was.”

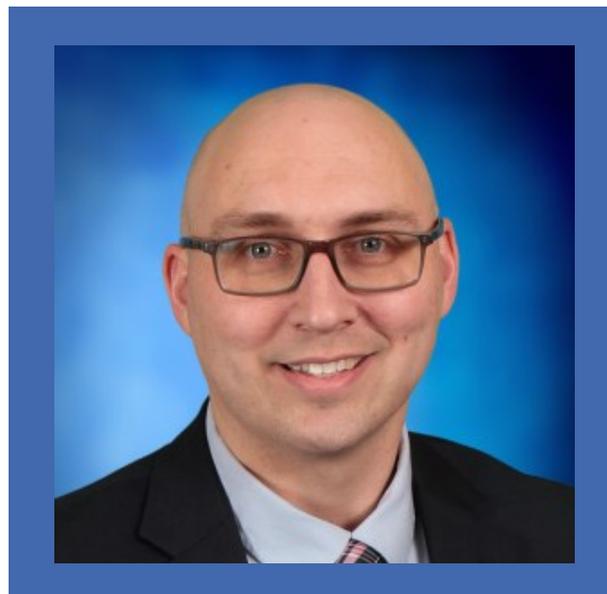
After her state CoSN chapter held an informal review of the CETL, she studied with an accountability buddy and they both became CETLs in December 2025. People told her that because she was already in the role, some parts of the exam might feel easier, but McCalla says it was still nerve-wracking. “You really dive deep into the standards,” she says. “Now I recommend it to my staff who want to grow. It’s a great way to bridge gaps and understand the role.”

That sense of validation resonates strongly with leaders who entered the role from nontraditional paths.



“Now I recommend it to my staff who want to grow. It’s a great way to bridge gaps and understand the role.” – Melissa McCalla, CETL[®], CTO, Pasadena Independent School District, TX

**“I knew that strategic planning, financial reviews, and legislative compliance would be part of the job.”
–Stephen Barnwell, CETL[®],
Director of Technology,
Schertz–Cibolo–Universal
City ISD, TX**



Preparing for the Job Before the Job

Steven Barnwell earned his CETL shortly before moving into the director role. “I knew that strategic planning, financial reviews, and legislative compliance would be part of the tech director’s job but seeing them up close before stepping in made all the difference,” says Barnwell, director of technology at Schertz–Cibolo–Universal City ISD in Texas.

He credits CETL preparation with helping him avoid being blindsided by regulatory changes. “If I had walked into compliance updates without that background, it would’ve been earth-shattering,” he says.

Tom Ingram, director of information technology for Escambia County Public Schools in Florida, had a similar experience. He earned his CETL 12 years ago, just as he started in the CTO role. “I felt pumped up. Being a CETL gave me an extra feeling of accomplishment and let me know I had the knowledge and skills I needed to be successful.”



**“Being a CETL gave me an extra feeling of accomplishment.”
–Tom Ingram, CETL[®], Director
of Information Technology,
Escambia County Public
Schools, FL**

The Power of Community

While the CETL is an individual credential, many leaders emphasize that its real power lies in community.

Kari Murphy, CTO of Deer Park ISD in Texas and a CETL holder since 2017, describes the collective momentum that forms around the certification. “Even though I had acquired 3 degrees along with 4 teaching certifications, a principal certification, and a superintendent certification, becoming a CETL is the pinnacle tailored for the educational technology profession. Many of my colleagues from other districts were doing it and I’m competitive, so I went for it.”

Murphy has since helped run CETL preparation clinics, guiding cohorts of aspiring leaders through the process. “We walk through Mike Daugherty’s book, *Certified EdTech Leadership*, talk through real issues, and bring in other CETLs,” she says. “You don’t do this alone.”

Indeed, study groups, state CoSN chapters, mentorship programs, and accountability partners are critical supports.

“Studying with our statewide CoSN chapter solidified our connections,” says Barnwell. “All of us have become CETLs and we stay in touch and meet up throughout the year. I wish more people moving into this role knew that you don’t have to do it alone.”

**“Becoming a CETL is the
pinnacle tailored for the
educational technology
profession.”**

**—Kari Murphy, CETL[®],
CTO, Deer Park ISD, TX**





**“If CETL is the aspirational credential for EdTech leaders, that’s what I’ll achieve.”
—Chantell Manahan, CETL[®],
Director of Technology,
Metropolitan School District
of Steuben County, IN**

A Unifying Standard

For Chantell Manahan, director of technology at Metropolitan School District of Steuben County in Indiana, CETL represented a shared understanding of what the role means.

“I’m an educator,” she says. “We understand degrees and certifications. If CETL is the aspirational credential for EdTech leaders, that’s what I’ll achieve.”

When she took on the CTO role, she knew she had gaps and that the CETL could help fill them.

“It helps unite us, regardless of background,” she says. “We come together in agreement on what this role entails.”

That unity matters in a profession that sits at the intersection of instruction, operations, compliance, and innovation.

“This job is different from the private sector,” Manahan says. “We’re affecting teaching and learning every day. There’s a higher purpose.”

More Than a Certification

For many CETLs, the credential has reshaped not only their careers, but how districts view the technology director role.

Stein now requires future successors to already have or pursue the certification.

“Being a CETL elevated the importance of my position,” he says. “I was put on the superintendent’s council with the rest of the team, making decisions and recognized at a board meeting. It’s improved my career.”

About CoSN

CoSN is the premier professional association designed to meet the needs of K-12 EdTech leaders, their teams and other district leaders. CoSN provides thought leadership resources, community, best practices and advocacy tools to help edtech leaders succeed in the digital transformation. CoSN represents over 13 million students and continues to grow as a powerful and influential voice in K-12 education. CoSN.org

About the CETL® Program

The CETL® program is the only program available to education technology leaders that bridges technical knowledge, understanding of the educational environment, leadership and vision, and the management of technology and support resources needed to integrate technology across the curriculum to advance student outcomes.

The CETL® credential is a true measure of today's education technology leaders, identifying those who have mastered the framework skills and knowledge needed to bring 21st-Century skills to schools. The CETL® program is also a professional development tool that can be used to guide education technology leaders' study of learning technologies. This certification requires satisfaction of eligibility criteria, the passage of a rigorous multiple-choice exam; adherence to a Code of Conduct; and recertification process every three years.

For more information, visit
www.cosn.org/certification or email
certification@cosn.org

