

DIGITAL PRINCIPAL OF THE YEAR JOANNE GLENN ON TEXT TO SPEECH FOR PASCO ESCHOOLS



Digital Principal of the Year JoAnne Glenn from Pasco eSchool discusses pivoting, accessibility, literacy support, supporting language learners and their families, the effects of a pandemic, content in thin course cartridges and ReadSpeaker text to speech.

ReadSpeaker: To begin with, could you tell us a little bit about Pasco eSchools and your role there?

Joanne: My role, aside from just launching the program and being responsible for day-to-day operation, is really to be a strategic thinker in our district, and so I look for opportunities for virtual instruction to help solve some of the challenges that we have. In the wake of the recession, we were a way for students to have access to courses if a specific course couldn't be offered at their school site. We were a way to make that opportunity available to students if there were insufficient enrollment numbers or limitations on the allocations in the subject area. We are a strategy for helping our districts cover classes when certified teachers can't be hired, and we are also a way to expand college coursework opportunities for students. We are able to make sure that the highly qualified and certified teachers that we have can teach college-level coursework and are accessible to all students throughout our school district.

ReadSpeaker: So it sounds like what your school covers can ebb and flow in terms of adding new courses and that sort of thing, and obviously the number of people utilizing it.

Joanne: Yes. It's a little bit of a challenge for our district and for my team because we very much are subject to the whims of teenagers and to local conditions. So if we're in a situation where we are struggling to find teachers locally in a subject area, then we are often a way to expand the pool of teachers because my teachers don't necessarily have to be local. I can use folks who live around the state and even sometimes outside the state to provide certified

teachers in hard to staff subject areas. Sometimes I joke with my staff that we're sort of like the elastic in the Thanksgiving pants, if you will, we kind of expand and contract to meet whatever the needs are, and I try to attract teachers who hold multiple areas of certification so that my people are the constant. But the teaching assignments that they have kind of ebb and flow with the needs of the school district.

ReadSpeaker: How long would you say that you've been using text to speech?

Joanne: We've been using text to speech in our program for probably about 7 or 8 years. We began to be more intentional about assessing the accessibility of our online courses at about that time. We were aware that we had students with a variety of needs, whether they have required special education accommodations or where we have pockets in our school district with a high concentration of students who are English language learners. So again, we knew that students needed to take an online course for graduation, and we knew that often we were the only school that offered some specific courses in our district. We really felt a sense of responsibility to make sure that the technology wasn't a barrier for our learners and that our doors were as open as they could be so.

Using a tool like text to speech allowed us to support the needs of students who needed or learned best when text was read aloud, and we also found along the way that students who were just struggling readers who weren't identified for specific support appreciated the opportunity to have text read to them to make sure that they were comprehending all of the material.

ReadSpeaker: So it's a good accommodation. What would you say made you decide to use the ReadSpeaker Suite of Tools for text to speech versus another competitor, and would you say that the implementation support was what you were expecting or better?

Joanne: We as a school district had relied heavily over the last probably 20 years on Mac technology, and so there were some programs that we tended to turn to just naturally to read text aloud but they did not integrate with our learning management system.

ReadSpeaker: Which learning management system do you use?

Joanne: We're a Canvas district and have been for eight years. One of my tech folks happened to be at Instructurecon and visited the vendor hall and struck up a conversation with some members of the ReadSpeaker team at that event and came back and said I really think we should take a deeper look at this specific

tool because it will integrate with the learning management system. Meaning that it would be able to do a better job of reading all of the content and the online courses. And in looking at that and then with the rest of the team and my special education staff members, we also were impressed with the number of languages that it could translate to. **We saw some additional ways that it could support populations of learners just above and beyond the students who have special education accommodations.**

It was also super easy to plug in. My tech team really is very conservative around the number of new tools they recommend or really allow us to adopt because it becomes problematic for them to support them if they don't work well. **But my tech guy who first encountered ReadSpeaker at Instructurecon likes to say that he doesn't actually know your tech support number or how you really get help and that's a good thing in his book because he hasn't had to look that up very often and that's a great thing. It means that he can set that tool and forget about it.**

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ReadSpeaker: You made a good point that to add text to speech isn't necessarily just for those that need accommodations. It's a universal tool even for those that have had to pivot to online learning because of local conditions, which can just be exhausting being on screen all day. It's a good alternative to kind of mix that up. Would you say that you utilize the tool differently now versus pre-COVID?

Joanne: Absolutely. We in Florida were a little bit of an outlier because we began planning for instructional continuity nearly a month before any of our surrounding districts. We began thinking about what would happen if we needed to close and take inventory of our content, our tools and really try to make the best decision about how to support a system and 77,000 students and nearly 5,000 staff members.

One of the interesting things was that we really felt that the webReader portion of **ReadSpeaker not only was a solid tool for us, again to support special education and English language learners, but also we had to really bring on almost 40,000 elementary school students. Knowing that we could use that tool to read aloud text to them because many of them are developing readers who haven't quite hit the balance from learning to read to reading to learn, we felt like that was going to be an important piece of what we could offer our families.** We recognized that we were going to encounter parents who weren't used to supporting online learning, or working from home or supporting multiple students learning at home. So the ability to have young learners have the screen read to them so that then they could engage in

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ReadSpeaker: You mentioned that with language learners, sometimes the younger generation or their parents may not speak English that well. So a tool to have something read aloud to them when they may be in a home that doesn't have English as a first language might also benefit them to stay on par or ahead while they're learning from home. Would you agree with that?

Joanne: Absolutely. When we realized that this plan was going from the idea stage to implementation, it was the Friday before spring break and we had

already dismissed classes in our schools. I mean we literally got a call from our education commissioner at 4:30 on Friday afternoon. So our ability to send home things like heritage language dictionaries, all of that was gone because the kids had already boarded the bus and they were off on spring break.

Many of the strategies that we use in our school buildings are very people-centered. We have resource teachers and instructional assistants who help provide translation support and work with our classroom teachers to close the gap between what we call tier 1 instruction, the instruction we're providing all students, and the needs of the other students. When we thought about students who are learning from home we realized we were not going to have those two primary tools that we use in our classrooms every day. **So having technology that could help close that gap, that could translate to their native language and have that turn on and off, and then a tool that could allow us to read in the target language, English, would give us a better opportunity to make that instruction possible.**

Then our people who know the needs of the students and know their learning styles could follow up with support using tools like zoom and additional supplemental pieces. But it gave us a good feeling to know that that very first exposure they were going to have to this new way of learning, that turned out to last the rest of the year, would have the tools embedded that could make that learning accessible. They were not an afterthought; they were very much with us the whole way through.

ReadSpeaker: Would you say that some of that would be one of the reasons why you chose to implement ReadSpeaker across the board? From what I

understand, you pick and choose your third-party vendors to be system-wide or county-wide. What would you say was one of the top reasons you decided to have ReadSpeaker as one of those few vendors that implemented across the board?

Joanne: Well, **it was again the ease of use.**

Because eSchool is pretty large anyway before COVID, we were serving literally approximately 20,000 students a year through our program.

We knew this tool worked, we knew that it was reliable and we knew that it was a single tool that could meet the needs of a variety of learners. It wasn't a piecemeal situation where we were taking this tool for this group and this tool for that group. **Because it has become an ingrained part of my virtual school's way of thinking and planning,**

it seems natural to us to extend that. When we reached out to ReadSpeaker to talk about the fact that we were developing this plan and we wanted to ask if they could and were prepared to scale up for going to 3 times the size. Potentially the tool would be hit with a lot more users. It was not going to be three times the number of users actually using it. It was more likely to be 20 times the number of users because of so many elementary students and a much broader cross-section of our students.

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The telling thing was just a complete lack of hesitation on ReadSpeaker's part. Other partners in different aspects of our operation really needed to go back and think about whether they can handle that demand because it was becoming clear that this was going to be something that was going to be a national situation. But ReadSpeaker didn't hesitate. They said absolutely go for it, install it at the root level, do what you need to do to make this

work for your system, and that was really reassuring when we were considering all of the different aspects.

Because what we essentially did was take the operation of our school and adjusted it to meet the needs of an entire system, and we have the support of a lot of district departments, but they were 100 percent leaning on us to guide them and say we're going to need this tool for this purpose and we'll configure things in this way because of this and this. They didn't second guess us so we had to get it right and knowing that we had a tool like ReadSpeaker, that we knew would work was important for us because we felt a big sense of responsibility. It was very nerve-racking to be calling the plays for the whole team as opposed to just the school.

ReadSpeaker: Now being one of the top 3 digital principals of the year, I would say that you have a lot of knowledge in this. What advice would you give those that are still looking to integrate text to speech into their educational platform? What should they be looking at? What challenges does text to speech really solve for them? I mean we've touched on a lot in terms of accommodations, in terms of English as a first language and that sort of thing, but what advice would you give those looking now to implement text to speech?

Joanne: I would say two things. The first one is to look for a company that will let you test their product in your instance. We've tried a lot of products in a lot of different areas in our program that didn't work as advertised. Salespeople will say whatever they need to say to close the deal. Something that stands out for us about ReadSpeaker was the company's willingness, from the beginning, to let us try it in our instance and with a variety of content. So there are a number of web reader tools or text to speech tools that cannot, for example, read third party content that comes in a thin common course cartridge. Because what we're really doing when you have a thin common course cartridge is that the content is really living on someone else's server, and it's being displayed in your learning management system. Some tools cannot pierce through that little bit of a veil in between and read that text, so that's important. We have a large number of courses that use content in a thin course cartridge configuration that were essentially invisible to other tools. **So rule one would be to ask other potential partners to prove that their product works not just on systems they control, because it'll definitely work on the systems they are configuring, but on your system with your users.**

The second thing is to look for partners that check-in and really aren't afraid to have some honest conversations about unmet needs or challenges. Not every partnership that we've had has been smooth sailing all of the time. Sometimes there are needs that maybe weren't a part of your purchasing decision but emerged because school systems are dynamic and virtual programs are dynamic. And so, companies that are **committed to talk to you at more than just renewal time and check-in how things are going. We have enjoyed that aspect of our collaboration with ReadSpeaker.** We haven't had huge technical issues or outages or things like that but **when there were feature requests that we had were things that we wish would work a little bit differently based on feedback that we got from our users, the ReadSpeaker team was there and took notes and work hard to help make upgrades and enhancements** over time, and we've seen that the way in which your tool has matured over the years and that's been really nice to see and that's not to say that every single item on our wish list has come to be. You've got a lot of people's wish lists but I will say that sometimes some of your other customers that come up with wishlist items that we hadn't even dreamt up yet.

ReadSpeaker: I think that's the mark of a true partnership. It is to have those conversations because it takes that feedback from those in the field saying, "this is what we really are seeing as a need, this is what's really working, this is what's really not and this is where we see a gap" and that partnership is what's going to make it continually be a productive partnership and a good partnership and so Joanne, I really can't thank you enough for taking this time to kind of do a deeper dive.

Contact us for more information or to set up a free trial for your institution



JoAnne Glenn

THE PRINCIPAL OF PASCO ESCHOOL IN PASCO COUNTY, FLORIDA

Ms. Glenn was voted the Pasco County district's 2020 principal of the year and has been recognized by the National Association of Secondary School Principals at one of three Digital Principals of the Year. The award focuses on school leaders' creativity in using new technology to advance learning.



Pasco eSchool serves students from grades Kindergarten through 12. For students in K-5, Pasco eSchool offers free enrollment in a full-year program featuring the best of tradition and innovation in education. Students and Learning Guides receive instructional support and guidance by highly qualified teachers and apply the latest technology for online learning. For 6th-12th grade students, students may enroll in Pasco eSchool as part-time or full-time participants in this program. Students co-enrolled in public, private, or charter schools, as well as students new to Pasco County, are eligible to apply for enrollment.

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