**Details**

| |
|---|
| How to Keep Educators at the Forefront of Classroom Decisions - Bonus Episode with Renaissance |
| In this episode, Dr. Gene Kerns, Vice President and Chief Academic Officer of Renaissance, joins for an eye-opening conversation about how to use EdTech in formative assessment to take meaningful action with the data. Tune in to hear about Renaissance's "See Every Student" brand transformation and how they combine assessment, instruction and insights — all while keeping teachers at the heart of classroom decisions. |

**Show notes: https://classtechtips.com/2023/06/11/classroom-decisions-bonus/**
**\*Classroom Decisions**

**Introduction**

| |
|---|
| Hello there and welcome to today's episode of the Easy EdTech Podcast! If we haven't met before, my name is Monica Burns. I'm a former NYC public school teacher and I've been out of the classroom for a few years leading professional development for teachers, and writing about all things EdTech on my blog ClassTechTips.com

You might be used to joining me on Tuesdays for new episodes of the podcast, and today is a special bonus episode in partnership with Renaissance. I'm excited to bring you another special bonus episode on a Sunday.

Before we jump into today's episode, a quick reminder — you can head to my website classtechtips.com/podcast for all of the show notes and resources from today's episode, and if you're listening to this episode on a podcast player like Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or Google Podcasts, you should see a link in the description that you can click on as you listen today and it will take you to all of the resources I mention. |

**Promotion/Reminder**

| |
|---|
| This episode is sponsored by Renaissance. As a leader in education technology, Renaissance is committed to providing educators with insights and resources to accelerate growth and help all students build a strong foundation for success. |

**Today's Intro**

| |
|---|
| Today's episode is titled "How to Keep Educators at the Forefront of Classroom Decisions - Bonus Episode with Renaissance," and I'm excited for you to hear this conversation with Dr. Gene Kerns, Vice President and Chief Academic Officer. We talk about one of my favorite topics – formative assessment and EdTech – and specifically how to take action after collecting formative assessment data. You'll also hear about Renaissance's "See Every |

Student" brand transformation and how the company combines assessment, instruction and insights—all while keeping teachers at the center of classroom decisions. Let's jump into the conversation!

**Episode Transcript**

Monica Burns:

Welcome to the podcast. I am so excited to chat about this topic of how the right technology can help educators really see every student. But before we jump into the conversation, would love for listeners to learn a little bit about your role in education. What is your day-to-day look like?

Dr. Gene Kerns:

Awesome. Well my name is Gene Kearns. I have the pleasure of serving as the Chief Academic Officer at Renaissance. I am a third generation educator, so we always like to say in our family, it's in our blood and around our dinner table cuz there's a lot of us. So even though I, you know, I spent my time teacher administrator central office I've been with Renaissance now I'm going on my 17th year. So you know, but to me it's still teaching. For me as the Chief Academic Officer, if I'm in the office. It's a lot of watching the journals, what's going on in education, particularly looking for pain points that schools are feeling new research about what's the most effective thing I, or most effective approach. I'm really into pedagogy and instruction and just making sure that what we're doing is solidly grounded in research. And if I'm on the road you know, I'm usually working with audiences. So a lot of administrators, associations, conferences, keynotes, customer briefings, all those types of things. And, and generally what I'm just sharing with them is what I found when I was reading and researching when I was back in the office.

Monica Burns:

Well, today we're talking about how to keep educators at the forefront of classroom decisions and instruction. And so as you were talking about your experience right, in the past and right

now, I'm so excited to hear your perspective. So, you know, what challenges are educators currently facing when it comes to making decisions about their classroom and their instruction?

Dr. Gene Kerns:

Yeah, I mean, I think obviously, you know, the recent events of the world have kind of magnified things, but, you know, I think sometimes we, we lose perspective. We get so focused in on just the last couple of years. One of my mentors is a fabulous researcher. His name is Dylan William. He's kind of the driver of all the formative assessment research. And he said, now wait a minute. We're all concerned about this covid impact, but if you looked at what the average classroom looked, let's just use fourth grade as an example. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. So we, we know from NA data, we know how fourth graders performing. If we said, if you looked in the doors of an average fourth grade classroom, what would that look like? Well, we can tell you what a median score is. We can tell you what the range of scores is.

Dr. Gene Kerns:

And by using that information, what we would then see is that in the average fourth grade classroom, there would be an eight year spread in performance. So some kids below the fourth grade level, some kids, and, and that's the reality that existed before covid. Now what did Covid do to that? It made it a little bit worse. It probably added maybe another half a year, maybe a year at the very most. But you can see what I'm saying about the perspective is prior to this, we were dealing the fact that teachers have kids all over the place. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. Yeah. The recent events made that a little bit worse. But at the core, the challenge is in the average classroom, most teachers have kids all over the place in terms of what they need and where they are. And it doesn't take a whole lot to connect the dots to then realize how challenging that is to deliver on,

Monica Burns:

You know, I can of course speak from my experience as a classroom teacher and seeing those wide range of student needs. And you know, I think what you mentioned is really crucial to our conversation today, that there are challenges that teachers have faced for some time. Right. And there may be an acceleration or a bit of a widening in terms of what that looks like. But when it comes to the decisions that they're making and how they're addressing the challenges in their classrooms, some of these things have been there for, for a while. So, you

know, our focus here, our conversations on the podcast are often around the integration of technology and what's possible that might not have been possible in the past. So I'm excited to jump into this idea of how the right technology can help educators truly see every student, you know, what can EdTech do that wouldn't be possible Right. Without technology access.

Dr. Gene Kerns:

Yeah. Yeah. I mean, and I think we've all, you know, we've all been on that, that trend. I think a lot of things are just really coming together right now. I mean, you know, ed tech's not new mm-hmm. <Affirmative>, but I think EdTech is really moving into a period of maturity right now. So you know, I I think of a just of example from my, my own background. I mean, I had the same math teacher for four years in high school, which is weird cuz it was a big high school. But think about what, like checking homework tended to look like, and I'll date myself in the early 1980s. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>, well that was my teacher going up and down the row with her grade book kind of spot, checking a few things to see what we did. And I, I'm sure she chose one or two items that she thought were really indicative of.

Dr. Gene Kerns:

You know, did you master, did you not? But all she could do was just scratch the surface about what was really happening and it was a gross waste of her time to go up and down the row there. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative> in contrast, now it's really easy for technology to get feedback on every single item a kid responded to. So one, we're not wasting our time by going up and down the rows with, you know, a little grade book and trying checking on things. And then two, it gets rolled up and aggregated so that we can really see exactly how kids are doing. So I think we're, you know, when we talk about, you know, seeing every student, we're taking quantum leaps forward in that, you know, going back to what we said before, the range is so wide that that makes it that much harder to see all the kids in where they are. And teachers want to see kids and they want to respond to their needs, but the first step in being able to do so is to get the accurate picture of where the kids even are.

Monica Burns:

And that depth of understanding and just the efficiency aspect, sometimes we toss that efficiency aside, like, no, we need that time in order to do other things. Right. So just getting that deep picture of student understanding, being able to capture information in a way that frees up our time as an educator to make different decisions throughout the day. You know, I

often talk about formative assessment at workshops or at conferences, you know, traveling around and, you know, one thing I like to come back to is there's no point in collecting data. We're not gonna use <laugh>. So yes, we are, you know, really if we mean what we say, right, that we wanna capture this information and use it well then we have to, you know, really have a depth of understanding and the time to even act on that. So, you know, I'm curious, you know, what you are seeing in the research, right? In the academic aspect that I know you're deep into as well as in, you know, classroom settings, you know, how can schools and districts really keep teachers at the center of those every day, right. And all the time Yeah. Classroom decisions.

Dr. Gene Kerns:

Well, and I wanna go back and magnify something you said about formative assessment is only formative when the information from the assessment is fed back into the system to make a change <laugh>. So it's not just about collecting it, you gotta do something with it. Yeah. You know, I think this whole idea, I mean, at Renaissance we talk often about keeping the teacher at the center. Now before we even talk about what that looks like, we gotta acknowledge that that's not everybody's perspective with technology. There's a lot of technology that really tries to like replace the teacher in, in many, many ways. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. So I like to start with people. Like when, when I'm talking about what we're doing, I wanna start at a really, really high level about what do you believe technology ought to do? Like, what should it do? What should it not do?

Dr. Gene Kerns:

And at Renaissance, we believe that learning is an inherently social as an inherently social thing. The teachers are absolutely the center. So what we like to say is we are always focused on creating technology that supports teachers, not supplement them. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative> and, you know, we're all, we're all fascinated now with ChatGPT and what's it gonna do and everything like that, <laugh>. But I was listening to it one the other day about it, and it was about counseling, like people who were in a crisis moment and one group had actually like, gotten rid of all their people on the phone lines and they were turning it over to a chatbot and they were talking about all the things that like, oh my gosh, do you realize that in this crisis moment people don't want some kind of generic response, Hey, to feel better about this, go read these links.

Dr. Gene Kerns:

Well, that's a different setting. But I think it's the same kind of thing. The heartbeat of a school is the relationship that teachers have with kids. And what we are trying to do is to build technology that again, supports that help, you know, collect all the information for teachers so that they can spend more time with kids, serve up a list of resources so that when kids are trying, or when teachers are trying to plan lessons for that wide variety of kids, it's as efficient as possible. Teachers, I think in their heart, they don't want technology to take over their classrooms. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>, they want it to take over the burden and the behind the scenes and the drudgery and the paperwork so that they can have that much more time actually with the kids. That's why they went into teaching. And it's that kind of space that we are focused in on, you know, what is the best use of technology?

Monica Burns:

And that's such an important reminder as we're having these big conversations around artificial intelligence and, you know, new things that, you know, we, I know I was chatting just yesterday with a group of educators about how we can like hold all of our feelings around <laugh> these new technologies at the same time, you know, but it does come back to right, what are we really trying to do here? What are we really trying to accomplish over the course of the school day, over the course of the school year? You know, and I, this gets me into, you know, the next question I wanted to ask you, which is around Renaissance's, "See Every Student" brand transformation, because it's, I mean, the core of what we've been talking about so far. So can you tell us a bit more about this and, and just what it entails?

Dr. Gene Kerns:

Yeah. So we are, we've gone through an absolute complete brand, brand transformation. The, the tagline of which is "See Every Student" mm-hmm. <Affirmative>, and I think we've already established that's the challenging things when kids are all over the place. But I think what's so important for people to realize what we are going through is you know, we've had other brand transformations. I mean, people change their brand, they change their logo, they change their colors and that kind of stuff. For us, this round of this brown brand transformation is the outward manifestation of a whole lot of work that's been going on behind the scenes. You know, I told you I started here, you know, 17 years ago I started at a much, much, much smaller company with a much, much, much narrower focus on what it was doing. We have been growing and growing and maturing.

Dr. Gene Kerns:

I mean, we've had eight acquisitions in the last five years. We're probably now the most widely or the, the largest interim assessment provider in the English speaking market. And it's not just assessment, but it's practice there. So this rebranding of our company is kind of letting people know that, particularly with a series of very, I mean, and like I said, eight, eight acquisitions, that that's huge. Mm-Hmm. Yeah. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. And it's not just that we're on a buying spree. Every single one of those was very strategic because it added something. So we are rebranding ourselves because we're stepping into the next generation for our company where we are just bigger, broader, more mature and more capable than we've ever been before. And so that brand transformation, again, is the outward manifestation of a whole lot of growing and hard work that's been happening behind the scenes.

Monica Burns:

And I know for folks in the ed tech space like myself who've been watching, right, all of this happen right? As all of those different pieces that, like you said, you're, you're pulling together, right? And then as part of this, you know, underneath this umbrella of the c every student brand transformation, it's been really fascinating to watch all of these components come together. And of course, you know, alongside a conversation like we're having today around just what's possible when it comes to giving teachers the agency to do what needs to be done, you know, in a classroom setting. So, you know, how does Renaissance combine kind of all of these pieces that we've talked about, the combining the assessment, the instruction, the insights to support student learning to see every student?

Dr. Gene Kerns:

Yeah. So I mean, that's, that's really, like I said, we're, we're kind of making it over the ridge to like a completely new horizon. So 17 years again with the company one of the major growth factors for our company was the, the evolution of our star assessments. So we've been really mm-hmm. <Affirmative> investing in assessments. But, you know, I always tell people sometimes assessments unnecessary evil. There's nothing about assessing that really grows kids. It's only when assessment is good enough, reliable enough, fast enough, and efficient enough that it tells the teacher what to do for a kid that makes a difference. And so let, let's just use a couple of the acquisitions that really allowed us to like then go to the whole new level. So we've had great data, great data on what kids need in terms of skills, what the next

step would be, but a minute you show a teacher a list of skills and say, this is what the kid needs or the group needs or the class needs, any teacher worth their salt's gonna say, and do you have anything I can use?

Dr. Gene Kerns:

Yeah. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative> to work with that. So about two years ago we acquired Nearpod which is an instructional platform library of lessons. It's the perfect piece to bring in. So now at back to school of last year, we launched a star to Nearpod connection mm-hmm. <Affirmative>. So that when a teacher has given a star assessment and they're looking at a list of possible skills, they don't have to like go into Nearpod and manually search for lessons. We've aligned it so that they can jump right from their assessment as a results right. Into a hand chosen lesson that they can use with kids. And then of course in Nearpod, you know, you do the lesson, you get feedback, there's your formative piece on how the kids did. And if, let's say I, I chose a lesson, the kids didn't do so well, now they can go back into star and then do mapping to prerequisite skills, which our customers been asking for for years.

Dr. Gene Kerns:

So here's a skill, kids struggle with it, what are the prerequisites to it? And not only see what those are, but then be directed directly to lessons in Nearpod that support those. So that's just one example when we talk about, you know, ecosystem which, you know, we're not the only ones that use that word, but to me, an ecosystem is about the products in the portfolio of a company interacting with one another in a synergistic way where one plus one should be more than two if the developers got it right. And in the case of that Star and Nearpod connection, I was doing a briefing for customers about a month ago in California with a G 80 educators there. And we talked about that, and they applauded <laugh>, you know, you've got it right if people, you know, applaud about some new product feature. So with that one, it's a home run.

Monica Burns:

Yeah. And just, you know, I, I've been a super fan of Nearpod for, for quite some time, a Nearpod pioneer and love all those, the resources that they have. And you know, what you mentioned is such a great reinforcement of seeing every student because it's not just about gathering the information, which is a crucial component of it, but also using those insights strategically and setting up busy teachers for success with that to, whether it's sending out a

self-paced Nearpod lesson to students, right. Or having that nice list of, you know, what we need to get done before we can move on to this next piece. So even just supporting something like differentiated instruction, which can feel very overwhelming when you have a wide range of student needs. You know, I love that example, you know, that you shared. So, you know, I'm curious as we're, you know, thinking towards the summer, thinking towards the back to school season, you know, is there something that you are particularly excited about or, or watching closely or just kind of have front of mind as, or we're talking about really giving teachers everything they need for a successful school year?

Dr. Gene Kerns:

Yeah, I mean, again, all of these things are coming together for us. So that stars and Nearpod connection is, is just the beginning. More fabulous things coming. Again, you know, when you say ecosystem, in my mind I get, I mean, and if you close your eyes, you can get the picture to a coral reef, you know, like all of those animals swimming around and it's vibrant and it's alive. And again, we're not the only ones that talk about ecosystem, but I think where a lot of people don't finish the conversation is saying, in a true ecosystem, things interact with one another. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>, they are related. And again, I look for synergy. The, the, the one plus one can be more than two. And, and I think that's really where EdTech is right now. And that's why so many companies are combining or forming partnerships.

Dr. Gene Kerns:

We live in a world where our own personal technology is interconnected. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>, where it brings things over. You know, our, our goal is to delight customers to do something they didn't expect to happen that was positive for them. So in a world where all of that is happening from technology for our own per personal uses, why would we not expect the same things to happen in the classroom? So, you know, I hope particularly given, you know, the pressures that schools have faced and the, you know, historically low morale levels of teachers mm-hmm. <Affirmative>, there is no more critical time right now for anyone to be speaking about keeping teachers at the center and minimizing the drudgery and the paperwork so they can maximize time doing the things that brought them into teaching in the first place. And it's exciting to work on that and to just really kind of get into the day-to-day of what a teacher's doing and make it fun and dynamic and connected and delighting.

Monica Burns:

Now all of those pieces just feel so important all the time, but especially now. Yes. As we think about what everyone is tackling. And so I'm really excited to dive further into these resources to see some of these new connections for people who might have been very familiar with Renaissance Right. A decade ago just to see, right. What's happening now. So where can people connect with you and the team? Where can they learn more about your work and, and what's happening with this initiative and beyond?

Dr. Gene Kerns:

Yeah, I mean, you know, it's all easy Renaissance.com for our website, for anybody that's international we have an international site as well, they can link over to that. But let me, let me throw out one that I think is so cool and it's for every school. Cuz some people might say, I'm not a customer of Renaissance. So one thing, one thing can do for me, if folks go to Renaissance.com/focus-skills with a dash between those two words. What we did when Covid hit was we made the learning progressions that we have built. So we, we literally have a state level learning progression for every state in the US one for England as well, we made them publicly available. And so people go to that website Renaissance.com/focus-skills with a dash between those two words. What they can see is a list of the most essential skills for progress in reading and math across all the grade levels to the standards of each state.

Dr. Gene Kerns:

And again, I think that's so important. I, you know, we've known for years that we've been given more educational standards to cover than we have time in which to cover it. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative> one estimate was we've been given 19,000 hours of content and 11,000 hours in which to do it. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative> teachers are always making decisions there. What that list says to teachers is, among everything possible you could do, here's the stuff that matters the most. And a teacher walked up to me, it was one of the first conferences you remember when we finally got, came back out out of our shells in Covid. I was in Pennsylvania at the ASCD conference there for the state. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. And a teacher walked up to me and she said, I want you to know that focus skills changed my life.

Dr. Gene Kerns:

She said, I was overwhelmed. I, how are we gonna do all this? There's too many skills, too many things. But when I sat in your webinar and you explained these are the pieces that are gonna get the biggest growth she's like, I said, okay, I can do that. You just took the, that wide

feel that was overwhelming and narrowed it down to a subset of things that I could then prioritize. It's, it's things like that that make the difference. It's those insights that teachers need when they're feeling overwhelmed to say, let me narrow your focus down onto what's gonna matter the most and what's gonna make the biggest difference for your kids. And so we, we put all those out there during covid that was kind of our contribution. It's about a million dollars of intellectual property that we just threw out into the world. But it Renaissance our mission is to accelerate learning for all. And it wasn't just our customers. And we decided that if, if that's our mission, we needed to walk the walk, not just talk the talk. And so we, we put that out there for everybody. So that's a really great place for someone that is not a Renaissance customer to kind of begin to see what is it that we have and what is it that we offer.

Monica Burns:

That's fantastic. And I'm gonna make sure to link out so that anyone is listening right now, can click and explore and find all the things that we talked about today. Thank you so much for carving out time to explore Oh, thank you. And share this initiative with the listeners. And like I said, anyone who's listening now can click and explore and learn a little bit more after today.

**So let's make this EdTech easy with some key points from the episode...**

Use data to hear from every student.

Take action based on this data.

Put focus skills front and center.


Remember, you can find the shownotes and the full list of resources from this episode on

classtechtips.com/podcast including all of the ways to connect with the team at

Renaissance.

**Promotion/Reminder**

Again, a big thank you to our sponsor for this episode, Renaissance. To learn more about Renaissance, please visit www.Renaissance.com.

**Outro**

If you are listening to this podcast on Apple Podcasts or Spotify, or another favorite app, don't forget to hit the "Follow" button. When you follow along with the podcast each new episode will download for you automatically so you don't miss a thing. And if you have a moment and are feeling extra helpful today, please leave a rating or review for the podcast. It helps other educators find this podcast when they are searching for topics like EdTech in their podcast app. Have a great week and check back on Tuesday morning for next week's new episode.

**Episode Resources**

- Follow Renaissance on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#), & [LinkedIn](#)
- Check out Renaissance's "See Every Student" [recent news release](#) about the transformation
- Renaissance's [Focus Skills](#) Resource