

Online PreK-12 Educational App Evaluation Service



Karen L. Mahon, Ed.D.
CEO

Based in Tyngsborough, Mass., Balefire Labs, Inc. is a provider of tools and services that foster a child's learning & achievement. Launched in 2013, the online service provides parents and teachers objective evaluations on PreK-12 educational apps based on rigorous, scientifically-validated criteria, so they are confident they are choosing products that are most beneficial for their children. It is the only service available that uses objective criteria and makes its evaluation process transparent to parents and teachers so they have peace of mind.

Balefire Labs, Inc. accepts no advertising dollars or third-party vendor payments for reviews.

Interview conducted by: Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOCFO Magazine

CEOCFO: Ms. Mahon, what is the concept at Balefire Labs?

Ms. Mahon: More and more we are seeing mobile devices being used in schools. When those mobile devices arrive, the next question teachers are faced with is now what? The concept of Balefire Labs is that we use a science-based approach to help teachers quickly and easily find the best educational apps to use with their kids on those mobile devices in classrooms.

CEOCFO: How are you able to make it quick and easy?

Ms. Mahon: We have gone through the research literature looking at what helps students learn the best, instructionally. There is about 60 years' worth of research literature describing experiments with instructional design and usability design features and showing which of those features are most critical for producing student learning gains. We have created a rubric based on those scientifically-validated features. We evaluate apps for math, science, English, language arts and social studies for levels pre-k to 12, all according to this standard rubric. The fact that we evaluate all the apps in the same way then allows us to display the results in a consumer report-style table where, at a glance, teachers can see which apps meet more of the quality criteria than others.

CEOCFO: Has a similar service been tried in the past or are there services now that offer either something similar? Have did you come upon this new idea?

Ms. Mahon: There are some other services that do evaluate educational apps, but they all use a more subjective approach. We mostly see people describing apps they like, but the reasons they like them run the whole gamut of possibilities, but the ones we most frequently see are that they believe kids will have fun using the apps or the apps are visually attractive. Moreover, they don't evaluate in a way that allows teachers to compare and contrast apps directly to one another. We are the only service that has this standardized set of science-based criteria by which we evaluate, so we are pretty quickly becoming known as having the most rigorous standards for quality in the industry.

CEOCFO: How does the education community find you?

Ms. Mahon: They can find us through our website – www.balefirelabs.com. We are also on Twitter, Facebook, Google+, Pinterest, Learnist and LinkedIn. In addition, we do a number of education technology conferences. Finally, we participate in as many edtech startup community activities as possible, particularly in the Boston area, where we are based.

CEOCFO: Are there particular subjects that get more attention? Are there areas that are perhaps not getting attention you feel they should?

Ms. Mahon: That is a great question. We have reviewed more than 1,700 apps since we launched last August, and what we have found is that there is pretty good coverage and pretty reasonable quality for Pre-K to 5th grade. Then when you get into middle school and high school, not only are there fewer apps that are really instructional (i.e., providing direct instruction and not just an interactive textbook, simulation or reference tool), but also, of the ones that *are* instructional, the quality tends not to be as good. I think there is a real opportunity for app developers that want to build strong instructional apps to make a splash in that middle school and high school range.

CEOCFO: *With the criteria that you are using, how big a factor is ease of use and novelty in addition to the learning portion? How are all factors evaluated in the methodology?*

Ms. Mahon: We have seven different criteria that are based on the instructional design and learning aspect of apps and five others that are focused more on usability. It is a major part of what we evaluate, so we are looking at things like whether or not there are simple instructions to help learners figure out what to do (that may be text-based or some kind of image that appears on screen). Is the use of the screen and sound relevant to what the kids are doing? Oftentimes, we see apps that have very cluttered screens with cartoon characters or make noises that are not related to the actual learning task, which can be very distracting for kids. We evaluate that piece of it. We are also looking at whether the reading level that is included in the app is appropriate for whatever age level the app targets. It is not uncommon to find apps for early elementary kids with text included that is well above what kids that age are able to read. It is definitely a big part of what we are concerned about. To what extent can the kids use the apps independently, from a usability perspective, and be successful?

CEOCFO: *What have you learned from your previous experience both as an educational psychologist and instructional designer involved with tech startups? What lessons have you learned that are applicable and have been helpful for you at Balefire?*

Ms. Mahon: Lately it's seemed to me like the things that I learned before starting this business pale in comparison to what I have learned since starting this business! In my role at Balefire labs, I wear just about every hat in this business. Prior to starting this business I had a lot of expertise around the instructional aspect and product development. For example, I authored the list of criteria that we use because I was familiar with the research literature. I know how to read those studies because of my background in educational psychology, so that was something I could already do. Coming into this business, though, I had to learn a lot more about marketing, sales, operations, legal, financial and all these different areas that prior to this I just wasn't as involved in. I think my own expertise in instruction prior to this is what let us kick Balefire Labs off and what let us understand the challenges teachers have in finding and implementing really good apps with their kids in the classroom. Since then, however, I have had to learn about running a business and how to grow it.

“The concept of Balefire Labs is that we use a science-based approach to help teachers quickly and easily find the best educational apps to use with their kids on those mobile devices in classrooms.” - Karen L. Mahon, Ed.D.

CEOCFO: *What about the parents who are finding your apps. Tell us about that side of the plan and business?*

Ms. Mahon: We find is that most parents are really concerned about screen time for their kids. They want their kids to be using that time in the best possible way. We find that parents are interested in knowing what some apps are that they can give to their kids when they are riding in the car, for example, or when they might be at a restaurant for dinner and they want to keep their child occupied. They want to know which apps their kids will not only enjoy and have fun with, but will also teach them something at the same time. Parents want to feel good about the time their kids spend using devices. We help them with that.

CEOCFO: *Are teachers actively looking for better apps? Would they be looking more knowing that there is a place to get good information?*

Ms. Mahon: Teachers are really hungry for this information. They do not have the time to spend hunting through thousands of apps looking for something that targets the skills that they need it to target and works with the kids. They want a definitive source for this kind of thing. Right now there isn't anyone in the space that is the “go-to” reference tool. Ultimately, that is what we want to be. As I mentioned, we launched in August. Since our launch, our job has been not only to let teachers know about us but also to help them understand why our science-based criteria are so important. When we talk to teachers and we say something like “error remediation in an app is really important because you do not want to let a kid just keep making the same mistake over and over,” that really resonates with them. Many of the things in our criteria are things that teachers naturally do on a day-to-day basis: Things like giving one kind of feedback for kids correct answers and a different kind of feedback for errors. Things like adjusting the level of difficulty of activities depending on kids' performance. Teachers do that on a regular basis when kids are working in the classroom – they get things right, the teacher cranks up the difficulty level a little bit. We want to see that more of that kind of thing in apps, but right now it's still hard to find. I think the idea of teachers or school tech directors reinventing the wheel by establishing their own processes for trying to find good content is just not sustainable in the long term. It is too time consuming and it is too difficult to do in the time they have available, so our goal is really to be that one-stop shop for quick and easy access to information that will help them.

CEOCFO: *What might have changed with your offering since it has been available and you have received some feedback from teachers?*

Ms. Mahon: We changed one really big thing. Just last month we launched the ability for teachers to search for apps by Common Core State Standard. When we first launched the business last year, we did not have that capability built in. But

it seems like everywhere we went every teacher we talked to asked about Common Core, so that is something that we just went back and added. Now, teachers can search by the specific standard for the English Language Arts and Math Common Core State Standards.

CEOFCO: *Your offering was recognized as the best new product or service in the EdTech Digest 2014 Cool Tool Awards. Would you tell us about that?*

Ms. Mahon: First of all, we were just so thrilled to be considered in the category. There were a lot of very deserving startups on that list. To have been named the winner of that category is more than we could have hoped for. We are really excited about it, and we think that we have a solution that can help teachers save a lot of time and help schools save money. That is what this is about for us, and that is why we are doing this. I think the award is really nice icing on the cake.

CEOFCO: *What is your business model?*

Ms. Mahon: Our business model is subscription. We do not take any advertising or payment for reviews, which is how many of the other review services are structured. Instead, we charge a modest fee from the people we work for...educators and parents. We have individual subscriptions that are available for \$2.99 per month or we have site licenses, which are \$799 per year for elementary schools and \$1,299 per year for secondary schools.

CEOFCO: *Do you see much interest from the schools or is that still building?*

Ms. Mahon: I would say all of this is still building at this point. We're seeing more and more interest as we're working on getting the word out about our service. I think the fact that we are focusing on these very tangible aspects of instruction means that teachers get a great deal of information from us that they can use in implementation than they are able to get from anybody else in the market right now. We are hopeful, based on what we are seeing, that our growth in schools will just continue to build. The reactions that we have had so far have been very positive, and we really could not be any more pleased with the feedback we've received.

CEOFCO: *Put it all together for our readers. Why is Balefire Labs a company to watch?*

Ms. Mahon: The biggest reason is that we are solving a very real, everyday problem for teachers. They have these mobile devices, they want to use them with kids in the most effective ways possible, and we fill the gaps for them about which materials to use to accomplish that.

CEOFCO: *Final thoughts?*

Ms. Mahon: Our goal is to be as objective and non-biased as possible, which is the reason that we do not accept any payment for reviews or any advertising from developers. We want teachers and parents to know that we don't have a vested interest in how apps perform against our rubric. We don't care which products people spend their money on; we just want to help them figure out which products are going to be the best for the kids, ultimately. We think that's really important.

BIO: Karen is an Educational Psychologist and Instructional Designer with more than 15 years' experience in education technology. Karen was Principal Investigator and Research Scientist at Praxis, Inc., a Waltham (MA) ed tech startup that produced instructional software for children with severe and profound disabilities. While at Praxis, Karen successfully generated National Institutes of Health Small Business Innovation Research grants totaling close to \$4M. Other previous appointments have included Global Senior Manager of Learning Sciences at Mimio Interactive Teaching Technologies and Research Assistant Professor at the University of Kansas. Karen received her Ed.D. and M.A. in Educational Psychology from West Virginia University, her Product Management Certificate from the University of California, Berkeley, Haas School of Business, and her B.A. in Psychology from the University of California, San Diego.



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