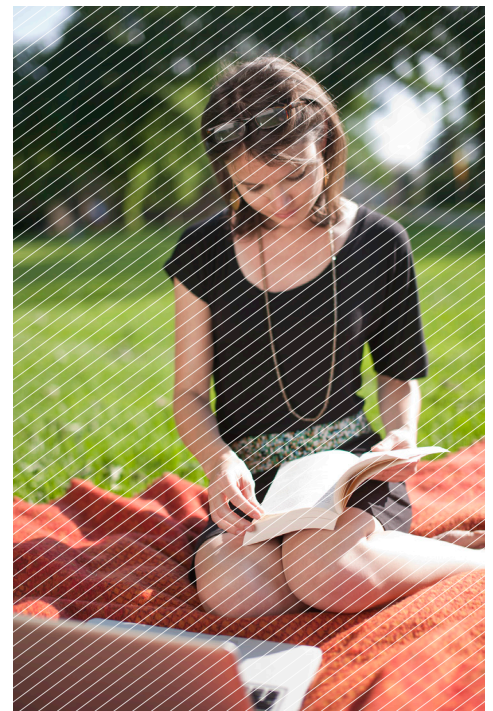


Florida K12 Schools Succeed with Blackboard Collaborate

For several years, many K12 schools and districts in Florida – both face-to-face and virtual – have been on the leading edge when it comes to effectively utilizing instructional technologies. While many K12 schools have, as a result, enjoyed improved learning outcomes for their students, others have realized significant cost and time savings. But recently, by utilizing Blackboard Collaborate, several virtual and face-to-face schools across Florida have enjoyed both.

Pinellas County Public Schools

Serving students along the central Gulf Coast, the Pinellas County Public School District spent the latter half of the 2000's trying to find a means of saving money and time by offering a streamlined platform for providing professional development for the teachers within its district. Pinellas County spans 280 square miles and is considered to be the most densely populated county in Florida. With a total of 95 elementary/middle schools, 17 high schools, and 8,084 full-time teachers, the district struggles annually to offer enough professional development opportunities for all stakeholders. In the past, many teachers from the 74 elementary and 22 middle schools attended professional development training sessions by driving to a central location, which in some cases required a single participant to drive up to one hour round-trip. The Pinellas County School District began to realize it was spending too much taxpayer revenue on mileage reimbursement and time-out-office incurred due to teachers traveling across the district to attend these sessions at in-person meeting sites. But Blackboard Collaborate came to the rescue.



Nobody had to buy gas and no one had to drive an hour to a meeting. Think about it. That saved some people two hours of travel time in one night.

Laura Ruscetta
K-8 District Science Staff Developer
Pinellas County School District

Laura Ruscetta is a K-8 District Science Staff Developer working for the Pinellas County School District. When not writing science curricula for the district, she works to design and facilitate virtual science professional development sessions several times every month. Laura started utilizing Blackboard Collaborate in 2009 out of an increasing need to offer science professional development trainings more frequently at a lower cost to the Pinellas County School District. By eliminating the need to drive to a training site, the school district saved thousands of dollars in terms of lost productivity and distance traveled.

"I had one teacher tell me, 'This is amazing. I can attend a professional development session with my shoes off in my own classroom while still learning the same great content,'" Ruscetta says, "Using Blackboard Collaborate for live online professional development has been a very positive experience for not only myself but everyone else involved." Laura has been able to offer a large variety of professional development sessions that included data analysis, nonfiction reading strategies, New Generation Sunshine State Standards (NGSSS), and content development in the area of science,

Ruscetta recalls one particular meeting in the Spring 2011 when teachers from about 50 schools attended one of her virtual sessions. They were all able to look at one document at the same time and "nobody had to buy gas and no one had to drive an hour to a meeting."

"Think about it," she says, and then smiles. "That saved some people two hours of travel time in one night."

Ruscetta has also authored an action research study that outlines the impact of offering live online professional development opportunities compared to in-person training sessions. Her research supports the initiative of collaboration between a district Science Staff Developer and educators from across the district working in various grade levels and content areas.

"Cross-curricular conversations among teachers in the district are a positive outcome to foster collaboration and a sense of purpose towards the facilitation of science content. The implementation of a new professional development module will remove teachers from their comfort zones and move them towards a global technology mindset for both themselves and the students that they teach," Ruscetta finds.

The School District of Clay County

The School District of Clay County serves on average 200-300 students both full and part-time each year in a Hospital Homebound program. For years, these students were served in their homes or hospitals by certified Clay County teachers with a one-to-one ratio. The School District of Clay County employed several full-time teachers to travel throughout the very large district daily to teach these students.

Due to time and money constraints, the county was forced to look at new and innovative ways to serve the students without sacrificing student achievement.

"We were challenged, and our county answers challenges head on," said Linda Schriver, ESE Technology Specialist. "We needed to cut costs but at the same time we refused to sacrifice the quality of our program or student achievement."

Enter Blackboard Collaborate.

To accommodate these students with various physical and mental health issues, and to save the district time and money, Clay County turned to Blackboard Collaborate web conferencing to eliminate driving time and gas reimbursements. During the 2010- 2011 school year, from inside a refurbished old house, four instructors reached students across the county. The areas of social studies, reading, science, English, and math were taught via online help sessions and open office hours. The Hospital Homebound students could

also watch archived classes to accommodate their treatment and other unique schedules. Some even took virtual field trips to the Kennedy Space Center while others participated in their brick-and-mortar class discussion boards.

The success of the Home Connections program can be measured in the numerous emails and phone calls from both students and parents who are pleased with the quality and new-found flexibility. As one mother of a terminally ill student described in a phone call, "The wonderful world of Blackboard Collaborate has changed my daughter's quality of life."

The district quickly realized that, although it's only in its infancy, the virtual Home Connections program succeeds in not only saving the county money but in improving the quality of life for its students. As of June 15, 2011, the district had served 250 students with only four teachers and all but 50 had returned to their home schools with passing grades.

By saving so much time and money, the success of the online Hospital Homebound program even led directly to the birth of Clay Virtual Academy, the county's brand new, entirely virtual, school, which opened its doors in August 2011. Clay Virtual Academy fully accommodates the Home Connections program and also houses the county's virtual students, almost 500 strong.

"We owe a lot to the humble beginnings of our Home Connections program. Our foundation was built on the heartfelt stories of our Hospital Homebound students and despite the virtual world that we find ourselves in, we never forget the human touch that is needed in the field of virtual education." says Schriver.

Florida Virtual School

In addition to seeing improved student outcomes as well as time and money savings, another Florida school has seen its own benefits from using Blackboard Collaborate in a unique way – for online, school-wide events.

The Florida Virtual School (FLVS), an entirely online K12 school that serves students throughout the United States, has long been considered one of the best – if not the best – K12 virtual school. And with the creativity shown by its Student Activities staff, FLVS's hallowed reputation remains safe.



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While most schools primarily use Blackboard Collaborate for instruction, help, and meetings, the always-innovative FLVS has found value in using the collaboration software to foster student relationships through a variety of live online student activities. In fact, in its 2010-2011 school year, FLVS employed Blackboard Collaborate for more than 40 school-wide events including author chats and book discussions, and cultural events such as a week-long Hispanic Heritage Festival, the African American Read-in, a Chinese New Year Celebration, and a full-scale Science Fair.

Trained to be moderators, student leaders offered peer tutoring in every academic subject and provided informational sessions for students on topics ranging from online learning orientations to the use of technology tools such as Web 2.0 applications. In addition, ten student clubs used Blackboard Collaborate to conduct monthly meetings and club activities, and the student newspaper staff met weekly to produce the school student newspaper.

Student ambassadors have become proficient in the use of moderator tools in Blackboard Collaborate, allowing them to easily communicate with their classmates not only throughout Florida, but throughout the entire United States.

"The impact of the use of Blackboard Collaborate for collaboration is evident in the increase of student participation in academic-related activities and club membership," says Jeff Murphy, Director of Student Services.

Florida Virtual School saw an increase from six clubs to 12 within two years, and student membership grew from approximately 200 students to nearly 1,000 students within that same period.

Student club members assisted and produced many of the school-wide event presentations, in some cases planning, creating, producing, and presenting sessions that were entirely student-driven. Thousands of volunteer hours were logged by students using Blackboard Collaborate in the 2010-2011 school year. Students surveyed after attending a peer tutor or information session showed over 90% satisfaction with the experience and anecdotal data revealed that students felt attendance “enhanced their experience and contributed to their successful completion of coursework.”

“More than 20,000 students attended educational activities in Blackboard Collaborate to augment course content and reinforce concepts being learned in every academic subject area,” says Cindy Knoblauch, Student Activities Coordinator.

More than 400 sessions were offered for tutoring, orientation, and technology support. An increase in collaboration and communication skills learned through Blackboard Collaborate activities has directly correlated to the use of Blackboard Collaborate by teachers to provide direct instruction, collaborative activities, writing and reading workshops, and social opportunities for online students. Blackboard Collaborate has also provided students with a tool to practice leadership skills including presenting, public speaking, problem solving, and decision-making.

Improving student outcomes. Saving time and money. Fostering more meaningful connections between students. Florida and Blackboard Collaborate are onto something.

