

JeffCo Teachers Cross the Digital Divide

When JeffCo Public Schools adopted a guaranteed, viable curriculum for the 85,000 student district, they selected Blackboard Learn™ as their distribution method and gave teachers a reason to start learning online. As teachers logged in, they found more than just planning documents; they entered Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to hone their skills and share best practices with peers. JeffCo teachers have not only become online learners, they have crossed the digital divide.

The largest school district in Colorado, JeffCo Public Schools extends from Denver's western suburbs into the Rocky Mountain foothills with 85,000 students and approximately 12,000 teachers and staff members. The district's 150 neighborhood schools are located in urban neighborhoods as well as suburban and remote mountain communities. The district IT department and division of instruction have forged a strong partnership to integrate technology into instruction. "We have to meet the needs of a large number of students and staff across a range of time and space," said John Canuel, Executive Director, Educational Technology Services, Division of Instruction. "The only way we can do it is digitally."

Challenge: Raise the Comfort Level with Technology

JeffCo leaders knew that online learning was coming to education, not just as an alternative to school for a few students, but as an essential component of the educational experience for all. "[Our] job is to teach and support kids who are living in a digital world full of digital devices, digital information and digital communications," said Canuel. "It is not OK to teach students without using those tools."

During planning meetings, the schools' leadership teams focused on increasing the comfort level of teachers to the point where they use available technology in their



JeffCo Public Schools Quick Facts:

- + Jefferson County, Colorado
- + jeffcopublicschools.org
- + 85,000 students
- + 12,000 employees
- + 150 schools
- + Blackboard Learn™
- + Blackboard Consulting
- + Services

actual instruction. They found teachers were looking for reasons to go online – either to do something better or faster. “In too many cases, people roll out technology and then spend the next year or two pushing it or selling it or mandating it,” said Canuel. “We focused on building technology to meet a need that existed. That’s a very different strategy.”

As JeffCo’s Division of Instruction began planning the roll out of a guaranteed, viable curriculum, they needed a better distribution method than printing and shipping three-ring binders. And as they implemented the curriculum across the whole district, they also wanted teachers to collaborate both with each other and the developers. Thinking beyond traditional professional development workshops, instructional trainers wanted to have a way to follow up with teachers and encourage them to network as they applied new strategies to their practice. “We wanted common conversations,” said Canuel. “We wanted fifth-grade teachers to tap into a broad community.”

Solution: Blackboard Learn and Blackboard Consulting Services

JeffCo has been using Blackboard course delivery technology since 2004 for a virtual high school serving about 120 students. When key stakeholders created a vision for embedding technology in the learning process, they identified Blackboard Learn and Blackboard Consulting services as key components. By providing a place for teachers to network, collaborate and support the online distribution of curriculum, they hoped to create demand for online learning in traditional courses.

“With the Blackboard software implementation, we are putting curriculum online, real-time, all the time,” said Donald A. Jenkins, Chief Information Officer. “This technology tool has extended curriculum up and down the organization from those working on it to those teaching it. The Division of Instruction can now change it dynamically without reissuing binders. It positions us to be more agile in the way we deliver information to staff and students.” Instead of writing and distributing curriculum

content annually, curriculum administrators have the flexibility to write within one or two months, resulting in curriculum that can be refreshed with what’s new and is more responsive to classroom needs.

IT educational technology specialists worked closely with the Division of Instruction and Blackboard consultants to build an infrastructure capable of growing from 120 high school students to 30,000 students and educators. The team continues to hold monthly meetings to anticipate network and infrastructure demands. Today, integration with the enterprise directory allows staff members to sign in with the same username and password they use for e-mail. Snapshot conduits simplify the transfer of

information from personnel management and student information systems into the Blackboard system.

With the help of the Blackboard Consulting team, the stakeholders quickly discovered new ways to enhance their organization by leveraging the wide range of e-Learning capabilities within Blackboard Learn. “As we worked on the roles in the content, community and learning systems, light bulbs went off in the room,” said Canuel. “We were asking: how do we streamline communications? How do we rethink delivery of web based resources? How do we aggregate information and have widespread delivery? The Blackboard team] talked about potential and we talked about need. Together,

we discovered a totally different way of thinking about these things.”

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Chief Information Officer

Implementation: Addressing Unmet Needs

For JeffCo, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) became the foundation for success, the critical unmet need fulfilled by technology. A traditional PLC forms at a school site between teachers who share students or teach the same grade or subject. Often, that community extends across the district to only second-grade teachers or high school math teachers. However, regular face-to-face meetings are not feasible across such a large

district and e-mail communications can be overwhelming. Community engagement technology from Blackboard provided a way to bridge both the time and space gap for district-wide PLCs.

Each person is automatically assigned a primary PLC, based on their role in the HR system (second-grade teacher, secondary math teacher, principal, counselor, assessment coordinator, etc.). So when a second-grade teacher logs in, he or she sees the appropriate curriculum, maintained by the district instructional staff, as well as appropriate links to resources. Discussion boards lead to deeper thinking and actual applications of strategies. Tabs at the top of the portal provide easy access to e-mail, saved content, professional development and HR information. Instead of searching Web sites designed for everyone, individual users have fast access to content and peer groups most relevant to their role. "With the PLCs, teachers are using a common curriculum and a professional development model where they can lean on all of their peers," said Canuel. "That's become an incredibly powerful tool in our district."

Some communities, such as the one for school principals, are closed, but most are open for self enrollment. For instance, a second-grade teacher considering a change to fourth grade might join the fourth-grade PLC. If that teacher decides to actually make the move, the system is automatically updated. But PLCs are not just for teachers. School assessment coordinators use them to collect information, post guidelines and access training. Informal PLCs also have been created around interests such as book clubs and study groups.

Results: Rapid Adoption and New Demand

When roll-out began, the district provided very little direct teacher training on how to use the Blackboard system. Instead, they trained principals and Blackboard Building Consultants (BBCs) within the district on accessing the curriculum using Blackboard software. These site experts then trained teachers at each school. Project Manager Ann Smith described the adoption rate as "somewhat overwhelming." No one expected so many people to catch on so quickly. Thousands of people log in at almost any time of day and even on weekends. Teachers tell the instructional coaches that they use Blackboard technology because everything they need is in one place and it saves them time.

Principals are using school-based PLCs to build consensus and engage more people in discussion. They may start a

conversation in a staff meeting, than move it to the PLC to give more people time to reflect and respond. Jill Montoya, Online Professional Development Coordinator, estimates that about 60 percent of staff interacts on school-based PLCs.

Montoya has seen the rate at which the district trains teachers increase dramatically through the use of Blackboard technology. Traditional workshops often did not reach capacity, but now teachers have easy access to a training calendar and registration is just a click away. "Now, they are taking our courses and learning with a JeffCo lens," said Montoya. "When we cover a concept or strategy, we go out and videotape a teacher who is really good at that strategy. We put those clips online for others to see." More than 1,500 teachers enrolled in one of 15 online courses offered in the first two years and every course generates long waiting lists within 24 hours after registration opens.

Many traditional courses have incorporated technology and use online PLCs or courses to follow up on strategies learned in the face-to-face training. "Teachers not only learn new techniques and apply them to their classrooms, they then reconnect with their peers to ask further questions and share success stories," said Montoya. "This model of professional development taps into a more constructivist teaching model. Teachers are not just learning from instructors through direct instruction; they are also responsible for their own learning and walk away with 25 other ideas from the collaboration."

Instructional leader and large group meetings have changed as well. Instead of dividing into small groups for discussion before moving on to the larger group or posting minutes that are rarely read, the group uses laptops at each table to capture the real-time discussions. The Blackboard discussion forum then gives everyone an opportunity for further communication. As a result, when participants return to school, they have the ability to post new thoughts and revisit concepts.

Later, an unexpected support challenge arose for the IT team. Since the system must be available to users anywhere, anytime, the district began a program that outsourced technical support during off hours. Any questions regarding curriculum or policy still come to the district, but the third-party provides immediate system support. Previously, the district help desk had supported users only during school hours, but now supports users 24/7, 365 days a year and during the heaviest usage period - from 10pm to midnight.

Next Steps: Crossing the Digital Divide

Teachers and school districts across the country struggle daily to connect with the “digital natives” who attend their schools. JeffCo teachers, however, are crossing this digital divide by complementing their traditional teaching approaches with online learning centers.

Helping teachers become online learners has also created an unprecedented technology demand in the district’s classrooms. Montoya says, “Using the Blackboard system to stay in touch with staff members and participate in professional development opportunities has made many teachers comfortable using technology in front of students.”

In 2008-2009, the district added all high school students to the Blackboard system and gave them an option to take online courses. As one example, Algebra 1 students enrolled in face-to-face courses also have access to online lectures, presentations, notes, interactive demonstrations and live chats. Moving forward, Canuel predicts that every JeffCo course will feature an online component.

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Jill Montoya
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