

Creating Courses, Sharing Content and Improving Communication

Calcasieu Parish Public Schools in southwest Louisiana has learned to leverage technology to improve efficiency and productivity across the district. As the sixth-largest public school system in the state with an enrollment of over 33,000 students, the district first looked at Web-based communications and learning management platforms in 2000 as a means of addressing the online learning needs of a small group of students in their schools. With an eye on improving student achievement, Calcasieu also wanted a technology platform that could leverage expertise throughout the district to create courses, share content and facilitate communication within the community.

Calcasieu also knew that effective communication is the cornerstone of effective education and was in need of a technological solution that would provide communication and collaboration tools across the district. School websites were becoming popular with parents, but they also required extensive staff resources to maintain and perform effectively. Complicating matters, they also wanted to bring master teachers and new teachers together to reduce isolation and share best practices without affecting classroom time. And because accreditation processes

and the Baldrige Quality Program were making more demands on teachers' tight schedules, they felt an online solution could save teachers time by reducing the need for face-to-face meetings.

Initially funded with Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) money to offer courses for gifted or special needs students, Calcasieu began using Blackboard software in 2001. According to Sheryl Abshire, Ph.D., Chief Technology Officer, adoption of Blackboard technology was "not a revolution, but an evolution." They started by enhancing

Quick Facts

- + Blackboard client since 2000
- + Student enrollment: 33,000
- + Faculty and staff: 4,500
- + 59 schools
- + 1,800 courses and 75 communities online
- + 4,000 student Blackboard users
- + 2,000 faculty Blackboard users

existing processes, and as faculty and staff became comfortable, they took ownership of the system to enhance their own productivity. In time, they realized that the Blackboard platform had a much broader application as a district communication, collaboration and curriculum system and began a strategic rollout across all aspects of process and learning.

An e-Learning Explosion

Calcasieu chose to slowly roll out Blackboard technology through the eLearning Program. However, as more and more teachers became trained in the system, the suppressed demand for a communications and learning platform resulted in a usage explosion. Today, every Calcasieu teacher uses the Blackboard system, with more than 60% using it to communicate with parents. Parents have general access to school Web sites and about 10% of students log in to access their courses. All students, parents, and teachers have access to important content and communications through the Blackboard platform. Whether it is the nursing staff sharing documentation between schools and parents or elementary teachers developing a complete standards-based curriculum with courses and a repository of teacher-created, teacher-approved content, Blackboard software has become essential to the work of the district. It is working because the technology department provides the budget, support, and training while every district department contributes time, resources and dollars. "The faculty and staff have ownership," says Abshire. "They know that this is their project. We provide Blackboard technology as the platform to facilitate the work that needs to be done."

Blackboard solutions have become an anchor for communications and content for the district, helping the district maximize human resources and increase learning opportunities for students and employees by more efficiently distributing and developing resources as well as reducing meetings and travel time. "There is mentoring and coaching going on," says Abshire. "A brand new English teacher working on her certificate

"Adoption of Blackboard technology was not a revolution, but an evolution."

*Dr. Sheryl Abshire
Chief Technology Officer*

gets knowledge sharing from the 20-year veteran at the top high school. New teachers get the benefit of the master teachers' experience, and the master teachers get the benefit of the fresh new ideas."

Distributing Development

The automated role-based design and the ease of use make it possible for one person to manage and maintain the platform with development of courses, facilitation of communities and content management distributed appropriately to

departments, schools, or other groups. "Every teacher has a master professional development plan that they move through as a Blackboard course," according to eLearning Coordinator Kim LeBlanc. "Once a teacher or principal has taken the training course, they have a Blackboard site started for their class or school."

Each Calcasieu department develops their own curriculum and training in the Blackboard system. The district has developed over 50 courses that are available state-wide and offer quality training on everything from technology to curriculum development. Tracking participation, logins and involvement in the courses and surveys provides clear accountability and enables departments to modify and adjust training as needed. The majority of courses continue to be used and reused with minimal effort. The district finds that online professional development ensures a certain quality and consistency of effort. "We know what they've covered and what they've mastered," says Abshire. "All of the information has been delivered in a concise and consistent manner. Online professional development is an engaged learning model for educators and adult learners who have to continually grow and master their skills."

A shared repository with district-wide, role-based access to information helps reduce management and development costs. "This is life beyond the piece of paper you can't find," says Abshire. In fact, the "paper" she refers to is always available online from any network connection, but instead of printing and faxing, Calcasieu staff

are learning to post once and use many times from anywhere at any time. The technology department posts handouts and tutorials for just-in-time learning, and the curriculum department can easily update curriculum guides and lesson plans. Study groups use the content repository to post documents for discussion and the collaboration tools for discussion. "Teachers have time to reflect and tools to collaborate, breaking down isolation," says Abshire. "There were people in schools who did not know each other before these study groups."

According to Kim LeBlanc, an elementary comprehensive curriculum course, developed by teachers and curriculum consultants, has more users than any other Calcasieu Blackboard course. Abshire says that's no surprise. "Our elementary teachers have built a master content collection of resources that are totally aligned with state standards that rivals anything in the country," she says. "It was created by teachers for teachers." The entire repository is meta-tagged so teachers simply enter a grade or subject area to pull up resources and worksheets that have been juried and approved. Blackboard reporting tools allow the team to monitor what's being used and make more available in the system.

Responding to New Requirements and Opportunities

The flexibility of development and ease of distribution makes it possible for the district to respond quickly to new requirements and training on emerging technologies. When new federal law required that districts receiving eRate funds make children and parents aware of online safety practices, Calcasieu developed an online course outside of the traditional curriculum. "We're making sure we are compliant and that the information is really digested," says Abshire. "It is not just a teacher telling her students or the school sending home a flyer

"When teachers collaborate during online courses through the Blackboard system, they learn to facilitate collaboration with their students and help develop 21st century skills."

Kim LeBlanc
eLearning Coordinator

to parents. We will have hard documentation that people have reflected on and interacted with the information."

A new technology course helps teachers learn new tools while engaging in project-based learning as part of their professional development. Web 2.0 courses highlight technology tools such as blogs, wikis and podcasts. "Our teachers and principals experience the tool, create it, and use it with kids," says LeBlanc. By collaborating during their course, they've learned how to facilitate collaboration with their students and help them develop 21st century skills such as compare and contrast, higher order thinking and problem solving.

Spreading District News and Sharing Expertise

As the largest employer in the parish and a community leader, Calcasieu Public Schools System plays a critical role in connecting the social fabric of the parish, and Blackboard solutions have come to play a key role there as well. "Blackboard provides a PR tool for our district," says Abshire. The Blackboard branded portal feature allows principals to build their school Web site and provide access to learning, community groups, and content for teachers as well as parents and students. In 2005, when Hurricane Rita hit, the parish was evacuated and schools closed for 34 days. No matter where teachers were, they could use the Blackboard system to communicate with parents, students and colleagues.

Calcasieu uses Blackboard community engagement technology to promote informal learning and sharing through professional learning communities for principals, school accreditation preparation and review, Baldrige Quality training and discussion groups, school-based study groups and the technology department help desk. A New Teacher Academy community helps each cohort of new teachers stay together during

their first three years and work with mentors. District leaders responsible for the academy have access to the communications and progress captured in the system, making it possible to evaluate and improve the program.

The Future of Learning

Calcasieu's eLearning Program continues to grow by helping more teachers advance through their professional development master plan and develop more ways to leverage Blackboard technology. Teachers who only use Blackboard sites to communicate with students and parents are encouraged to take the tool to the next level and have students post projects or use creative tools for more reflection and participation online.

The district is also looking at how to expand opportunities for students to use Blackboard software for online learning courses through the Lake Charles Boston Learning Academy. During tough economic times, distance learning makes better use of teacher talents without sacrificing learning options for students. And blended and fully online distance learning classes make it possible for a highly qualified teacher to deliver a course in a specialized subject

area to students across the district without traveling or teaching under subscribed courses. The district is particularly interested in offering advanced math and foreign language to rural schools that have a difficult time attracting specialized or highly qualified teachers. Laptops, headsets and webcams put the teacher face to face with students using Live Meeting and the Blackboard platform for real-time and 24/7 course access.

As Abshire explains, "Blackboard solutions are now a part of the learning culture of the district." As district leaders and teachers consider new programs and ways of to improve student achievement, they naturally think of the Blackboard platform as a tool to facilitate their work. And the Calcasieu technology department is ready to help.

Calcasieu teachers and administrators today have more time to focus on student achievement as well as opportunities to develop their own skills and expertise. "When thinking about technology, you'd be wise to consider the resources and tools you want to provide to your district and how Blackboard (software) can enhance what you are doing," says Abshire.

"Blackboard software is a core component for how we communicate and disseminate information internally and externally."

Dr. Sheryl Abshire
Chief Technology Officer