Sarasota County Schools:

Successful Transition from ANGEL to Blackboard Learn
Sarasota County Schools: Transition from ANGEL to Blackboard

Sarasota County Schools in Florida, like many ANGEL districts, has enjoyed much success with the ANGEL platform over the years. Like numerous districts in other states across the U.S., Sarasota faces the transition from the state’s Sunshine State Standards to Florida’s next generation of academic standards incorporating the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Sarasota is leveraging the move to CCSS to empower the move from ANGEL to Blackboard Learn, enjoying many benefits from Blackboard’s technologies along the way.

At a Glance:

**CHALLENGE:**
Academic leaders opted to upgrade from ANGEL to Blackboard Learn to facilitate the transition from state to CCSS.

**SOLUTION:**
Academic leaders leveraged benchmark assessment data from ANGEL to drive the development of Instructional Focus Guides (IFGs) in for each teacher in Blackboard Learn to guide transition to CCSS and to Blackboard Learn. Sarasota maximizes LMS use by preparing teachers for this transition through Blackboard Learn.

**RESULTS:**
- 120,000+ district benchmark assessments delivered per year
- IFGs for 2,500+ teachers
- Improving instruction for 42,000+ students
- ESOL & Gifted Certification available for all teachers
- PD available to 5,000+ employees
- Successful transition to Blackboard Learn from ANGEL
- Successful transition to CCSS
**CHALLENGE:**
Meet New Benchmarks, Improve Instruction, and Meet Professional Development Needs While Transitioning to a New LMS

With over 42,000 students and 2,500 teachers, Sarasota County Schools has been recognized as one of Florida’s highest performing school districts. District leaders knew that sustaining and enhancing student achievement while transitioning to new standards would create numerous challenges. District leaders identified three key challenges: efficiently meeting state benchmark assessment requirements and using the data obtained to shape classroom decisions; improving instruction during the transition from state standards to CCSS; and providing sustained and continuous professional development for staff members across a school district which spans 555 square miles. In addition, the district identified the move to CCSS as the idea opportunity to make the successful transition from ANGEL to Blackboard Learn.

**SOLUTION:**
Conduct Benchmark Assessments, Create Instructional Focus Guides, and Deliver Professional Development Leading to Rapid Adoption of New LMS

Blackboard has helped Sarasota district leadership meet their key challenges. Sarasota chose the superior capabilities of Blackboard Learn to replace their legacy LMS. To ease the transition between systems, the district used their legacy system, ANGEL, side by side while also implementing Blackboard Learn for the 2013-2014 school-year. Sarasota has leveraged Blackboard Learn ANGEL Edition to deliver formative benchmark assessments three times per year, with over 40,000 assessments delivered on each occasion, for several years. These assessments provide rich data, which is used to inform instruction across the district such as within individual classrooms and for larger projects such as Instructional Focus Guides (IFGs). This year, curricular leaders are leveraging this benchmark data to create a series of IFGs within Blackboard Learn. The IFGs are designed to serve as a blueprint to help teachers fully transition to CCSS. The IFGs consist of CCSS aligned digital content organized into unit and theme-based learning for each grade level, content area, and course. By providing an IFG for every Sarasota teacher, district leaders aim to ease the transition from state standards to CCSS, improve pedagogy, promote blended learning across the district, and smooth the transition from ANGEL to Blackboard Learn. Finally, Sarasota creates and delivers professional development programs with the LMS including ESOL Certification, Gifted Certification, and Facilities staff training online. In addition to these offerings, Sarasota will leverage Blackboard Learn to provide professional development to prepare teachers to effectively utilize the IFGs to fully transition to CCSS.
RESULTS:
Deliver Efficient Benchmark Assessments, Improve Instruction in Transition, and Power Professional Development Opportunities in Transition to Blackboard Learn

Blackboard Learn came online in Sarasota for the 2013-2014 school-year, and operates in co-production with Sarasota’s legacy Blackboard Learn ANGEL Edition platform. To prepare teachers for the new LMS and encourage transition, all LMS training in Sarasota is now focused on Blackboard Learn, rather than ANGEL. Additionally, all Instructional Focus Guide (IFG) development and deployment takes place in Blackboard Learn. By fall 2014, the district plans to migrate all ANGEL content to Blackboard Learn and complete the transition.

Although its use this year is completely voluntary, the district has been pleasantly surprised with the high rate of adoption Blackboard Learn among Sarasota teachers since the beginning of the school year. Over 400 teachers had begun actively using Blackboard Learn in August of 2013, and voluntary Blackboard Learn continues to grow. From August 2013 to January 2014, the average number of teachers using Blackboard Learn had increased by over 71%, to well over 700. These 700 plus teachers are already actively engaging over 15,000 students per month with Blackboard Learn.

The adage, “success breeds success,” certainly rings true for Sarasota’s transition from state to common core standards. The district curriculum leaders who designed and developed the benchmark assessments in ANGEL are leading the effort to create the district’s new IFGs. These district leaders are using formative assessment data to shape the development of the IFGs in Blackboard Learn. The professional development planned to support the effective implementation of the IFGs will be created and delivered through Blackboard Learn.

Let’s take a closer look at the three primary strategies Sarasota is using to facilitate the transition to CCSS and Blackboard Learn:

BENCHMARK ASSESSMENTS
By state mandate, schools in Florida must conduct benchmark assessments at least three times per year. After exploring other alternatives, Todd Alexander, manager of School Support Services – Information Technology, suggested, “Why don’t we look at using a tool that’s already in place that will do this for us?” As a result, Sarasota decided to use Blackboard Learn ANGEL Edition to meet this need, a platform that was already in place. “Any earlier attempt to do benchmark assessment and to bring results back in a timely fashion did not work,” according to Denise Cantalupo, director of Research, Assessment & Evaluation/School Improvement. Creating and delivering these formative assessments within the LMS streamlines this process by disseminating assessments and capturing the results digitally.

Sarasota takes great care constructing benchmark assessments for delivery within the LMS. Curriculum specialists bring groups of expert teachers together at specific grade levels to create the assessments. They develop test items that go through a series of reviews and validity checks to make sure the language level is appropriate and that assessment items
are tied to the appropriate Common Core and Sunshine State Standards. Despite Sarasota’s meticulous assessment construction process, problems can still arise. Using the LMS for benchmarks makes handling any inaccuracies within assessments a breeze. “We found out that we could, after the test had actually started, take an item and change its correct answer and not negatively impact the student experience,” says Doug Roberts, program coordinator Research, Assessment & Evaluation/School Improvement. “We discovered a great deal about how flexible it was.” Denise adds, “It’s one of the many benefits of digital testing.” No heavy lifting is required to fix mistakes; “You can make changes on the fly.”

Using Blackboard Learn ANGEL Edition to deliver benchmark and mid-term assessments helps students, teachers, and administrators. Students benefit by familiarizing themselves with online testing, which helps with other tests given during the year. “When we get down to our high stakes testing, more and more of that testing is taking place online,” says Todd. “Doing benchmarks this way helps prepare students for the FCAT and the EOC assessments online. It’s not something that’s completely foreign to them; they’ve done it throughout the year.” Denise adds, “It truly bridges the transition from the paper test to the digital test, and that is the future.” Sarasota’s Department of Assessment and Evaluation relies on the LMS for efficient delivery of these assessments and open access to data, to quickly turn around useful analyses of assessment results to teachers for data-driven instruction. “All the research about feedback in the use of formative assessment depends on its immediacy,” says Denise. “Teachers must use the results immediately, changing the course of instruction in an individualized way with children.”

Todd adds, “It provides immediate feedback for our instructors to drive instruction.” Teachers leverage the formative assessment data to drive decisions in the classroom and to differentiate instruction. District leaders leverage the data to reallocate resources such as human capital, instructional time, and monetary resources based on students’ needs as revealed through performance on the benchmark assessments.

**BENCHMARK ASSESSMENTS - BY THE NUMBERS:**
- State benchmark assessments – three times per year
- High School/Middle School – each semester
- Assessments delivered during each assessment period - 40,000+
- 120,000+ district benchmark assessments delivered per year

**BENEFITS OF DELIVERING ASSESSMENTS VIA THE LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM**
- Prepares students for end-of-course and other online state testing
- Fuels data-driven decisions in the classroom and at the district level
- Serves as the catalyst for differentiated instruction
- Helps the district understand how students learn
- Informs the reallocation of resources based on student needs
- Provides a high comfort level for students, reducing test anxieties
- Enables more efficient use of teacher & student time
- Fosters collaboration and creativity with the common goal of improving teaching and learning

**INSTRUCTIONAL FOCUS GUIDES**
Blackboard Learn was selected as the teaching and learning platform in which to create and deliver the district’s strategic IFGs. “We looked at a lot of other tools,” says Brad Porinchak, Sarasota science curriculum specialist. “Blackboard Learn seemed to be the perfect fit.”

Benchmark assessment data from ANGEL is used to shape the development of IFGs in Blackboard Learn in this transition to full implementation of CCSS and Blackboard Learn. The IFGs will serve as the blueprint to guide teachers in the full implementation of CCSS.

In Blackboard Learn, curriculum specialists representing nine content areas are leading the development of the IFGs that consist of CCSS aligned digital content organized into unit and theme-based learning for each grade level, content area, and course. Approximately one hundred expert teachers will contribute to the project under the leadership of the curriculum department. “We are creating a tool that will give teachers the opportunity to really change their way of teaching and impact student learning,” according to Sue Meckler, Sarasota’s Director of Curriculum & Instruction. “It’s a tool to help teachers teach better and to help students to learn in a different way. With the impetus of common core, we’re really looking at changing teaching and learning and we feel that this tool is going to be something that is easy for teachers. It’s going to be one-stop-shopping that they can then personalize and customize to meet the needs of their students.”

Todd Alexander, adds, “We want our teachers to use technology resources and rich dynamic content. We want them to expose our students to some of the online tools that will enrich their classes.” The desire to develop a way to do that which was simple and easy for teachers led district instructional leaders to develop the IFG Project. With IFGs, district leaders aim to ease the transition from state standards to CCSS, change the way teachers teach, and promote blended learning across the district.

After offering professional development in the spring and summer, in Fall 2014 Sarasota will provide IFGs in Blackboard Learn to all of the approximately 2,500 K-12 teachers in the district. Teachers can use the IFGs in one of two ways: teachers can choose to use the IFG as a personal guide to the new learning standards, or teachers can opt to leverage it directly with students in Blackboard with the IFG serving as the foundation for a blended learning class. Teachers can modify and enhance the IFG to personalize the experience and cater to the needs of individual students and each unique class, or they can use it exactly as it’s been created.

The IFG Project will ensure that technology is fully integrated into instruction. “For the first time, technology will no longer be a separate entity,” says instructional technology specialist Cameron Parker. She says, “For the first time, teachers will ask, ‘Why would I NOT want to do this?’” Todd adds, “Technology allows us to engage students in meaningful ways for longer periods of time. The more that we can engage our students, the higher our student achievement is going to be.”

**IFGs – By the Numbers:**

- Approximately 100 teachers contributing to content development
- Nine Curriculum Program Specialists leading the instructional design efforts in each content area
  - Elementary ELA
  - Secondary ELA
  - Elementary Mathematics
  - Secondary Mathematics
  - K-12 Social Studies
  - K-12 Science
  - CTE Specialist Career & Technical Education (2)
  - K-12 Fine Arts

- Subjects and courses at each level
  - **Elementary (36)** – English Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies, Fine Arts for each grade Kindergarten through Grade 5
  - **Middle (13)** – English Language Arts (3), Math (3), Science (3), Social Studies (3), Career & Technical Education (1)
  - **Secondary (17)** – English Language Arts (4), Math (6), Science (3), Social Studies (3), Career & Technical Education (1)
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Providing timely and relevant professional development (PD) for approximately 2,500 teachers and over 2000 support staff is a significant task on its own. In a district as geographically large as Sarasota, the ability to deliver PD for teachers throughout the district via the LMS is essential. Using the LMS for PD delivers time and money savings, as well as flexibility for teachers and district staff. In many districts, the district administration office is the central point of PD delivery. The Sarasota County Schools district office is not in a central location, which means that a large number of teachers and staff work in schools that are a 30-45 minute drive away. While the district does offer face-to-face PD classes, as well as hybrids, which meet both in person and online, such classes incur costs for substitute pay and mileage expense. A two-hour face-to-face training class can easily take a teacher out of his or her class or away from family in the evening or on a weekend for four hours or more.

A substantial part of Sarasota’s PD is now delivered with Blackboard Learn. In fact, Sarasota teachers can now earn two certifications solely through online courses, Gifted Certification, and ESOL Certification. Each certification requires the completion of five 60-hour courses which are offered 100% online. Gifted and ESOL Certification is required for any teacher that has a gifted or ESOL student in his or her class. After a teacher has completed the certification through Sarasota’s online professional development courses, the teacher earns an endorsement reflected on the Florida teaching license. Sarasota employees, such as custodians and skilled tradespeople, are required to review safety videos and other materials to comply with Occupational Safety and Health Administration requirements. These materials are made available through the LMS as well, which significantly reduces travel costs and lost job time.

In addition to solving the PD challenges related to the geographical size of the district, meeting the needs of teachers requiring Gifted and ESOL Certifications, and providing OSHA compliance training for district employees, Sarasota plans to ease the transition to the Common Core State Standards with Blackboard Learn. Most of the professional development planned to help teachers effectively use the IFGs will take place in Blackboard.

INSTRUCTIONAL FOCUS GUIDE

BENEFITS:

• Make teaching easier for teachers
• Provide a blueprint for a smooth transition to CCSS
• Improve student achievement
• Catalyze the exponential growth of blended learning
• Make integrating digital content simple and easy for teachers
• Close the gap between the way students live and the way they learn
• Engage students in meaningful ways beyond the boundaries of the F2F classroom
• Easy, anytime, anywhere access to rich digital content for students and teachers
• Provide a one-stop shop for teachers
• Save teachers time
• Access learning anytime, anywhere
• Cultivate 21st century skills
• Improved school/home communication
• Foster cross-curricular collaboration among teachers