

Broward County Public Schools Meet the Needs of Today's Adult Learners

One of the largest school districts in the country, Broward County (FL) Public Schools not only educates K-12 students, it also serves the local adult population. Since 2007, the school district's Sheridan Technical Center has conducted countless online workshops via Blackboard Collaborate to help educate thousands of adult students, with life-changing results for those who would not be learning otherwise.

Some adult learners are from other countries and need a U.S. high school diploma to continue their education. Others want to refresh academic skills to pursue a career change. Whatever the reason, these adults have significantly improved test scores, increased graduation rates, and broadened their horizons. In fact, teachers and students alike credit the real-time virtual classroom with facilitating the engagement, interaction, and community building necessary for success.

Making a Difference

At Sheridan Technical Center, adult learners from Florida and beyond have the opportunity to participate in 35 to 40 live webinar presentations every month, covering subjects such as reading, math, language arts, essay writing, science, social studies, and career overviews. "Online is one more avenue for students to take. eLearning isn't a different avenue, our classes are simply online," explains Kimberly Gates, Sheridan Technical Center's Adult, ELCATE (English Literacy for Career and Technical Education), and ESOL Education Online department chair.

The sessions enable students to improve their academic skills, prepare for tests such as the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE), Test of Essential Academic Skills (TEAS), and General Educational Development (GED) test. Online sessions also help broaden their awareness of post-secondary educational opportunities and career choices available to them.

As a result, Broward County has seen significantly improved TABE and GED test scores, as well as increased successful completion of Adult Basic Education (ABE) and Applied Academics for Adult Education (AAAE) classes.

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*Kimberly Gates,
Adult & ESOL Education Online
Department Chair*

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In fact, most GED graduates cite their online workshops in Blackboard Collaborate as a key reason they were able to pass their tests and earn their high school diplomas.

Building Relationships in the Virtual Classroom

While online courses are available 24/7, Blackboard Collaborate provides a key real-time component. "In Blackboard Collaborate, students can ask questions in a live classroom environment," Gates says. "It gives our students an additional way of getting instruction, rather than just an asynchronous online course. It also helps them build community, which I think is very important."

"Since students are coming in at different levels, traditional online discussion boards don't work too well," adds Gates. "But in the live environments, relationships get built. It's amazing to see how they interact with one another. You have a very warm, welcoming environment. Students wish each other good luck on tests and support each other by giving good explanations and feedback. That's the strongest reason I see for students returning time and time again."

Offering Something for Everyone

Sheridan Technical Center serves students from different countries who want to go to post-secondary schools but have a high school degree from their home country that isn't recognized here. Then there are those who graduated but have been out of school for a number of years. These students are interested in career programs for which they need a level of math or language. "We help them achieve the scores they need," says Gates.

ABE or AAIE students are likely working in reading, math, or language," she explains. "This is where instructors play a key role by helping students decide on which areas to focus. With GED prep, which includes reading, writing, math, science, and social studies, the teachers let the students know on which areas to focus on the most but can give them help in their weaker areas."

Over the course of the past five years, live web-based learning opportunities for adult students in Florida have jumped from just one session a month to over 40 sessions in May of 2012. In fact, between January 2012 and the end of May 2012, almost 280 online large-group webinars were offered to adult students in and out of Florida. This live, direct-instruction has helped students improve their academic skills, raise their self-confidence and motivation, and become better prepared for current and future jobs within the workforce.

RESULTS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES



- On the TABE test, one adult learner's original reading and language scores were at a second-grade skill level. After consistently working with his teacher in one-on-one help sessions using Blackboard Collaborate, his scores improved six grade levels.
- Another student scored at a fourth-grade level in math on the TABE test. After attending every large-group Blackboard Collaborate workshop offered to her, she got the highest score possible, an improvement of 8.7 grade levels.
- This student saw a 50 point increase in her GED math test score and a jump of 23 percentile points after participating in daily GED math boot camps held in Blackboard Collaborate in the two weeks leading up to her retest. She is now a proud graduate with a high school diploma.
- One adult learner started ABE class reading at a sixth-grade level. After attending large-group workshops in Blackboard Collaborate, her scores jumped to a ninth-grade level, enabling her to move into the online GED program and eventually get her diploma.

Going from Good to Great

"A tool like Collaborate is literally the best things since sliced bread," says Gates. "I look back on it and say it really changed how I teach online. Being able to reach multiple students and let them know that others have questions and others might not understand something makes them more comfortable."

"Blackboard Collaborate is what separates a good online course from a great online course. You cannot have a great online course without a live component," she concludes. "Once students realize what it does, they'll return time and time again, and even ask for more. And that's a great testament. I know it has increased the number of diplomas earned and people who complete programs. We wouldn't have had the success we had without it."

