

District Priority: Supporting a One-to-One Laptop Initiative

In 2001, the Irving Independent School District, located near Dallas, Texas, implemented a one-to-one laptop initiative to augment their face-to-face classroom instruction with digital resources. At the same time, Irving selected Blackboard Learn™, a robust course delivery and collaboration platform for K-12 schools and districts, as the method for distributing academic content to its students via these new laptops.

Solution: Blackboard Learn™ to Deliver Engaging Instruction and Extend the Classroom

When Irving ISD implemented the Blackboard Learn solution, they primarily viewed it as a software program necessary to facilitate the use of the computers in their one-to-one laptop program. “Teachers needed to share content. Students needed to respond. The Blackboard solution was a natural fit,” explained Alice Owen, PhD., Executive Director of Technology for the district. Instructional teaching specialists in each school immediately began training teachers to integrate the Blackboard technology into their courses. Since implementation, teachers have leveraged Blackboard education tools in ways the district never imagined, dramatically improving student engagement and learning.

Extending the Traditional Classroom

Teachers initially used the Blackboard solution to enhance traditional

teaching methods and bring a blended model to the district, where face-to-face and online instruction intersects. Each of the teachers involved in the one-to-one laptop initiative are able to post their instruction modules and assessments online; share lessons, tests, and best practices with colleagues; assign work to students; and facilitate student collaboration through online discussions. The ability to quickly test students on the most recently taught material and immediately view their level of comprehension has allowed teachers to evaluate their students’ progress and proceed with the next lesson or sometimes re-teach a lesson to increase understanding. To further maximize valuable teaching time, teachers have also recorded lessons on video and posted them to the Blackboard system when they know they are going to be absent—enabling substitute teachers to simply monitor assigned classroom activity and reducing the risk of losing valuable teaching hours.

Using Blackboard technology to support standard teaching has not only helped to engage students and teachers, it has also extended the classroom period—making more time available for learning. “With the Blackboard solution, education doesn’t stop when the bell rings. Students can contribute to a discussion or work with other students on a project after school. If the teacher doesn’t finish a lesson, students can complete the lesson at home. In addition, students who are out of school due to illness or disciplinary action remain caught up,” says Sam Farsaii, Director of Instructional Technology for the district.

Quick Facts

- + Blackboard client since 2001
- + Student enrollment: 33,000
- + Instructors: 2,700
- + 35 schools and learning centers

Use of the Blackboard system has burgeoned over the past nine years. While the one-to-one laptop program started in the high schools, it has since moved to the middle and elementary schools and usage rates are quite noteworthy:

- The district has 1,600 online courses available through the Blackboard Learn platform.
- 15,798 students are actively using Blackboard technology in and out of the classroom.
- More than 50% of Irving ISD's teachers employ Blackboard technology in their teaching and in their professional development schedules regularly.
- Average Blackboard page views are 34,874 per day with 500-700 concurrent users at a time.

Facilitating New Classroom Paradigms

As teachers and administrators became accustomed to the Blackboard platform, their uses of the teaching and learning tool expanded. One example is a program called the International Teacher Project (ITP), which allows teachers from around the world to help Irving's students to improve their knowledge of Algebra or Science. We have 16-year-old students from these regions in algebra classes who perform at a 4th grade math level. Typically in high schools, the most experienced teachers teach the upper-level classes and the inexperienced ones teach algebra. Yet algebra is where most of these students fail. To reduce drop-out rates, our district now pairs the algebra teacher in the classroom with a highly experienced teacher in say, Argentina, who speaks Spanish and English. These teachers are available online through an organization called EdCast," explained Farsaii.

Farsaii continued, "The teacher from Argentina and students communicate live via Wimba and interact and participate in their course through the Blackboard platform. By taking advantage of this resource, the primary classroom teacher can work with one group of students while the virtual teacher from Argentina delivers some instruction online. As a result, the teachers don't get burned out and the students are less frustrated."

The district is currently conducting formal research to measure the results of the ITP. "Our informal, observational evidence has told us that students are consistently engaged and paying attention. Students' and teachers' enthusiasm has gone through the roof," said Farsaii.

Implementing Fully Online Classes for Students

After the State of Texas began requiring high school students to take four classes each in English, Social Studies, Science, and Math to graduate, it became difficult for students to complete all their classes in four years. To improve flexibility, the district developed a series of elective classes offered fully online during the '07-'08 school year, taught through the Blackboard system.

Students initially meet face-to-face with the instructor in the classroom. After this meeting, they work online through their Blackboard courses to complete weekly assignments and meet milestones. Students enjoy working at their own pace and can review the lesson as many times as they want to absorb content. Tools within the Blackboard system, such as the discussion boards and wikis, make the class interactive and meaningful.

While districts typically purchase this type of online content, Irving chose to develop its online courses in house with the help of a Vision 2020 technology grant from the State of Texas. Explained Farsaii, "If teachers develop the content, they're more likely to use it. It improves capacity and knowledge in our district. Plus we own the content, so we don't have to pay an annual fee. In the long run, these online courses could even be a money maker for the district since any student in the State of Texas can participate and a fraction of that would pay the salary of the teacher."

The Irving Vision

Since their implementation of the Blackboard system in 2001 as a teaching and learning platform for their one-to-one laptop program, Irving's use of Blackboard technology has expanded significantly. The teachers, administrators, parents and students have used the tools within the Blackboard platform to accommodate different learning styles and facets of teaching and learning in ways they had not imagined. Said Owen, "We've had to constantly upgrade our level of district internet bandwidth user band over the years because teachers keep pushing us to higher levels of usage." In addition to using Blackboard solutions for instructional purposes, Irving has developed Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) that enable teachers to share content and participate in online discussions. Teachers are also completing training that fulfills professional development requirements on their own time through courses designed by Irving's administration. Online professional development reduces time out of the classroom for teachers and travel costs while enabling teachers to meet new colleagues online and glean new knowledge in a conducive learning environment.

Beyond the course delivery capabilities in the Blackboard Learn platform, Irving has recently begun to use the Blackboard Community System™ and the Blackboard Content System™ to extend the reach of their communications between parents, teachers, students and administrators, as well as to build out course content. By using these new tools, in conjunction with the course delivery platform from Blackboard, the teachers in Irving will undoubtedly continue their long-running efforts to enhance face-to-face and blended instruction, develop new ways to organize the classroom and design new online courses. The effects of technology in the district are endless and will only continue to enhance student engagement, create district efficiencies and prepare students for strong futures.