

Blackboard Learn™, Angel Edition: “The Glue” for One District’s Digital Success Story



In 2007, under the direction of newly hired Superintendent Mark Edwards, EdD, the Mooresville Graded School District (MGSD) in North Carolina developed a strategic plan with an ambitious mission: “Prepare every student, every day to be a successful and responsible citizen in a global workplace and community.” The plan called for implementing a “digital conversion” to transform both district pedagogy and learning technology. By 2009-2010, MGSD was reporting results in terms of improved academic performance, improved attendance, reduced suspension rates, greater parental engagement and proficiency with the technology among the vast majority of district teachers and administrators.

“Blackboard is one of a very few, very important educational partners for us,” says Dr. Edwards. “They provide the glue that holds our digital conversion together. The folks at Blackboard, like our other partners, understand that what we’re after is measurable academic improvement, not just a technology system. That’s what makes the partnership work for the district, our students, their parents and our staff.”

Technology is only one component of MGSD’s digital conversion. This case study looks at three aspects of the effort that has enabled district-wide success: 1) Academic Performance; 2) Technology Excellence; and 3) Community Engagement.

1. ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

The MGSD “digital conversion” is carefully aligned with the district’s strategic plan, which is in turn aligned with North Carolina Standard Course of Study¹ and with the ISTE

The Mooresville Graded School District is one of 115 school districts in North Carolina. MGSD is close to the bottom in terms of per-pupil educational spending but is quickly emerging as one of the most technologically sophisticated districts in the state, perhaps in the country. At the same time, MGSD’s digital conversion is boosting academic performance, attendance, community engagement, professional development and the district’s thought leadership.



Blackboard

MGSD DIGITAL CONVERSION TIMELINE

- **Nov 2007; 400 MacBook computers rolled out on carts to English Dept at Mooresville High School**
- **Dec 2007; all teachers receive MacBooks**
- **Jan 2008; professional technology development begins**
- **Jul 2008; MGSD's summer institute, #1, featuring Blackboard's ANGEL Platform**
- **Aug 2008; 2400 MacBooks distributed to HS and Intermediate School students; 80 SMART Boards in K-2 classrooms**
- **Jul 2009; MGSD's summer institute, #2, featuring Blackboard's ANGELplatform**
- **Aug 2009; every MGSD 4-12 grade student has personal MacBook; all K-3 classes have SMART Boards**

National Educational Technology Standards². This alignment ensures that MGSD delivers academic results for its students that correspond with state and national educational goals.

In terms of technologically enhanced academic performance, ISTE's National Education Technology Standards support numerous goals. The MGSD digital conversion aligns with two of those:

- Advance the art and science of teaching, learning, and educational leadership with and about technology, research, development, professional learning offerings, and other capacity-enhancing activities.
- Provide leadership through envisioning emerging technologies and their implications for teaching, learning, and academic leadership.

At the Mooresville schools, from kindergarten through 12th grade, students are fully immersed in age-appropriate technologies. In less than three years, MGSD has provided SMART Boards for all K-3 classes. The district has also provided every student in grades 4-12 with a personal MacBook® computer through the district's partnership with Apple. MGSD has implemented a district-wide, robust, efficient and functional IT infrastructure capable of graduating students who are fully conversant with 21st-century technology.

However, neither the national standards nor MGSD's mission are about technology itself. They're about academic performance.

Dr. Edwards' digital conversion engages MGSD administrators and staff with the Blackboard

Learn™ platform. Prior to the deployment of one-to-one MacBooks, (initially a high-school deployment), teachers attended a four-day, onsite summer institute featuring Blackboard's ANGEL Edition platform, where they received training in the course delivery system. They also explored the pedagogical changes necessary for technology-enriched curriculum development and delivery. The institute goal is for Blackboard trainers to teach administrators and teachers how to integrate technology effectively via the ANGEL platform. With subsequent training, MGSD teachers are employing various leading-edge approaches to instruction and eLearning, such as one-to-one computer-enhanced learning, challenge based and project based learning, and student-centered teaching methodologies. Additional training sessions featured the utilization of all the Web 2.0 tools (blogs, wikis, discussion boards, etc).

“One-to-one computer education is the tip of the iceberg regarding 21st-century academic performance,” says Bethany Smith, an 8th-grade teacher at Mooresville Intermediate School. “The laptops enable teachers to reach today's students through a format that suits their lifestyles. But unless teachers understand how to use technology in the classroom, learning doesn't change. Fortunately, through our 'digital conversion,' Mooresville teachers have had the professional and pedagogical development to build our curriculum around digitally-enhanced learning. With few exceptions, we're very engaged in the conversion. We see meaningful results every day.”

STUDENT HELP DESK

With nearly 2000 MacBooks floating around Mooresville High School, someone needed to be responsible for trouble-shooting technological problems with laptops and answering basic computer-related questions. Under the guidance of CTO Scott Smith, the former computer lab was converted into a drop-in/call-in help desk – staffed by students! Mooresville High School students receive academic credit for staffing the help desk. They learn the MacBook system in depth and are able to help fellow students resolve basic computer questions regarding their laptops.

The onsite help desk promotes:

- **peer-to-peer learning**
- **technology skills development**
- **technology cost containment**

2. TECHNOLOGICAL EXCELLENCE

Establishing the correct technology platform is key to academic success and community engagement. It is also critical for practical considerations, such as cost control and system efficiency. MGSD has been diligent and strategic about the implementation of its technology platforms, including the selection of partners to implement the system. The district's performance results reflect the high-quality system now in place.

"We've been very careful to build a system that is as simple as possible for teachers, students, administrators and parents to use," says MGSD Chief Technology Officer Scott Smith, EdD. "Efficiency and ease-of-use are critical to establishing technological excellence. They drive engagement across the entire community of users, and system excellence of this nature also helps drive academic performance. System efficiency comes partly from being strategic about the technology partnerships a district cultivates. MGSD has only six or seven key technology partners, and they've been able to deliver everything we need, particularly with the ANGEL platform serving as a key point of integration. Our partnering strategy has also enabled us to keep costs low both in terms of implementing an excellent system and maintaining it over time. Essentially, we are able to pay for the technology by reallocating and redirecting funds for purchasing textbooks, professional development materials and other print costs. In addition, staff positions were repurposed to best utilize personnel to support the digital conversion."

MGSD has worked with Blackboard to build its system and maintain two platforms (Blackboard's

ANGEL platform and Alert Now® solutions) that deliver:

- Leading-edge learning management
- Mass-communication email and voice message delivery
- Easy-to-develop classroom websites and portals for students and parents
- Facilitation of online content delivery for students, including video
- Online professional development for teachers and administrative staff
- Email, discussion boards, wikis and chat capabilities to enable electronic communication among all platform users (student-student, student-teacher, teacher-teacher, teacher-parent)
- Real-time progress reporting for key performance indicators (individual student performance, class- and grade-level performance, individual school performance, district performance)
- Tools to create a closed, safe, monitored internet environment that protects students from inappropriate web content and activity

"Blackboard is not our only technology partner, but the company's ANGEL and Alert Now platforms are the points of integration," say CTO Scott Smith. "One of the core values of our digital conversion is simply that 'community and business partnerships are important for success.' Each of our technology partners has helped us generate a community-wide conversation. The Blackboard platforms are where that dialogue and engagement come together."

Chief Technology Officer Scott Smith adds two points of advice:

“First and most important: digital learning and pedagogy need to be integrated for a conversion of this nature to succeed. Instructional and technological leaders need to work side-by-side and across the entire district. Unless there’s a professional development strategy, no amount of technological innovation will deliver results. Fundamentally, a digital conversion is about cultural change within our schools. That needs to be strategic, measurable and enforced. Teachers and staff need to be prepared for and open to new ways of teaching and learning”.

“Second, I advise people to look at their budgets creatively. MGSD is delivering excellent results with little impact to our budget because of the way we’ve reallocated resources and funding from previous instructional practices, especially the reliance on textbooks and other printed materials. We spend less per student than almost any other district in North Carolina, so I think we’ve proven that a 21st-century learning environment is affordable for even the most constrained districts. It’s a matter of vision, commitment and preparing students for a far different world from the one we attended school in.”

3. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT; NARROWING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

“ Mooresville is a bedroom suburb of Charlotte, North Carolina,” says Jody Binkley, the parent of an MGSD 4th grader. “We want to see our children find employment at the global companies around us. And we all understand that our children need that kind of education from the time they enter school. It’s a goal the entire community supports.”

In fact Lowe’s has relocated its headquarters to Mooresville and the Charlotte area, partly because of the concentration of highly qualified people it can recruit from Mooresville and local communities.

This environment has created a unique impetus for district/community engagement. On the one hand, many Mooresville parents work in the global industries in and around Charlotte. On the other hand, other local families have seen their economic standing collapse as North Carolina’s traditional industries – lumber, textiles, tobacco, furniture – have moved abroad. Both sets of families know that technological proficiency will be critical to their children’s success.

Part of the boon for parents and students – particularly those who could not afford home computers – is that each student, beginning at 4th grade, has a computer to bring home. MGSD has also partnered with local internet service providers to reach into neighborhoods previously without internet access.

The presence of a computer in the home of every 4th- to 12th-grade student has made it possible for all parents to use the Blackboard Learn ANGEL Edition platform to stay engaged with their child’s work and performance. With home access to instructional materials, assignments, email, chat and other communications tools, the platform has effectively extended the school day and has made it possible for students to stay engaged when they’re not well enough to attend school or if they miss a day for other personal reasons.

MGSD has also been strategic about using Blackboard’s Alert Now system to drive parental engagement. Alert Now enables mass phone and email messages to be sent to parents, which is used for emergency alerts, weather-related closures, school events and many other announcements. MGSD alerts parents when interim and quarterly performance reports are posted on line, and administrators use Alert Now to promote parental use of the ANGEL system at home.

RESULTS

Implementation of MGSD’s digital conversion began in the 2007-2008 academic year. Midway through the 2009-2010 academic year, MGSD reported the following results of its digital conversion

Mooreville Intermediate School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scores increased in all categories tested on the North Carolina Standard Course of Study. Math and reading end-of-grade scores rose by 6 percentage points and overall growth increased 4 percentage points. • Made Expected Growth on the North Carolina ABC Accountability Model • Avoided the “implementation dip” most institutions experience • Met 27 out of 27 Adequate Yearly Progress goals • Total suspensions dropped from 86 to 21
Mooreville High School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • End-of-course exam scores rose 11 percent between 2006-07 and 2008-09 • Attendance rates have increased from 94 to 96.7 percent • Suspensions have decreased 64 percent
MGSD (District)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieved 53 of 54 District Adequate Yearly Progress goals • Recorded a 7-percent gain on all end-of-course/end-of-grade test scores • Reduced district suspensions by 50 percent

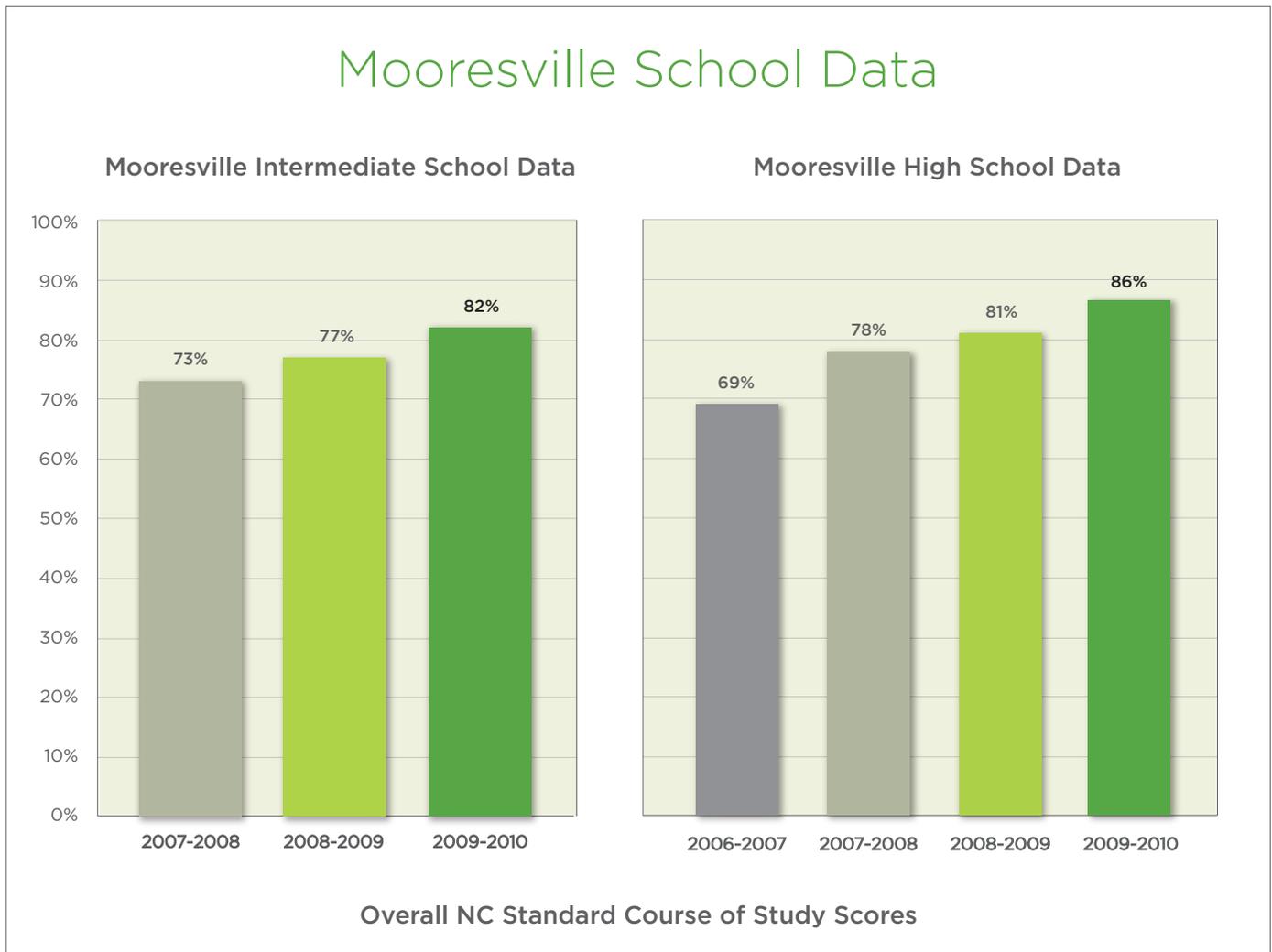
These performance results have propelled MGSD into the pedagogical and administrative limelight. More than 300 educational leaders from 30+ school districts across the U.S. have visited Mooreville to learn about digital conversion implementation. In the summer of 2010, MGSD is hosting a national institute to share its learnings, best practices and implementation strategies. Hundreds of participants are expected to attend.

“The entire program is about integrating 21st-century pedagogy with 21st-century technology to produce 21st-century graduates,” says Superintendent Mark Edwards. “We’re excited about our results. We’re optimistic about the future. We’re grateful for the business engagement we’ve

seen. Most importantly, we're delighted to be helping our students build their futures. In the end, it's the only thing education providers - whether that's teachers or technology developers like Blackboard - are here to do."

For more on the Mooresville Graded School District, see www.mgsd.k12.nc.us

For more on Blackboard teaching, learning and communication platforms, see www.blackboard.com/k12.



END NOTES

¹ The North Carolina Standard Course of Study sets curriculum standards and graduation requirements for students in North Carolina school. Among these are state requirements and standards for end-of-grade and end-of-course tests. For details, see www.ncpublicschools.org/curriculum/.

² The National Education Technology Standards are a set of guidelines that direct the work of the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE). Its mission is to advance excellence in learning and teaching through innovative and effective uses of technology. Key ISTE values are strategic partnerships across the educational spectrum and belief in "the power of a diverse and inclusive global community of members who learn, teach, and lead to advances in the field." For more information, see www.iste.org.



Blackboard K-12

650 Massachusetts Avenue, NW 6th Floor
Washington, DC 20001
1-800-424-9299, ext. 4

Copyright © 1997-2011. Blackboard Inc. All rights reserved. Blackboard, the Blackboard logo, BbWorld, Blackboard Learn, Blackboard Transact, Blackboard Connect, Blackboard Mobile, Blackboard Collaborate, the Blackboard Outcomes System, Behind the Blackboard, and Connect-ED are trademarks or registered trademarks of Blackboard Inc. or its subsidiaries in the United States and/or other countries. Blackboard products may be covered by one or more of the following U.S. patents: 7,493,396, 7,558,853, 7,816,878.



Blackboard