

Blackboard Managed Hosting and K-12:

Poway Unified School District and Walnut Valley Unified School District



As technology becomes an increasingly vital part of their daily lives, K-12 students and faculty alike are demanding more from their e-Learning environments. As a result, districts are under increasing pressure to ensure their application's availability twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Complicating matters, districts also need enough storage space to accommodate growth and the ability to seamlessly implement upgrades, recover data during outages and properly train faculty. That's a tall order in an era marked by sweeping state-wide budget cuts and accompanying staff shortages.

A Critical Application

Serving a student population of approximately 15,500, the mission at Walnut Valley Unified School District is to "put kids first - every student, every day," and it's one that Rod Ulrich takes very seriously. As Walnut Valley's Educational Technology Specialist, he knows full well the challenges associated with managing a mission-critical system with a small staff. In his case, it's a staff of one. "In the past, I attempted to administer and maintain our Blackboard solution primarily by myself," he says. "Needless to say, I just didn't have the manpower to adequately maintain the hardware and the backups and upgrade the software in a timely manner."

Situated in suburban San Diego, Poway is a larger school district than Walnut Valley, but faced many of the same self-hosting challenges. "We simply didn't have the internal expertise or the resources to dedicate to something of

Blackboard Managed Hosting At-A-Glance

- 99.7% - 99.9% application availability guarantee
- 24 x 7 x 365 performance and fault monitoring by Blackboard staff across 4 continents
- 24 x 7 x 365 customer support
- 7 Day setup and installation
- Uncapped storage space and bandwidth SSL encryption (optional)
- Daily data backups
- Secure, best in class datacenter facilities
- Firewall protection
- Intrusion protection
- Redundant Tier-1 Internet connections
- Fully redundant and conditioned power



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Robert Gravina
*Chief Technology Officer,
Poway Unified School District*

this importance,” says Stacey Campo, an Instructional Technology Specialist at Poway who has been actively involved in the roll-out and implementation of Blackboard software across the district. “We couldn’t keep up on our updates. We couldn’t manage it. And we were always two, if not three, releases behind.”

As Poway’s Chief Technology Officer, Robert Gravina says the in-house challenges went even further.

“The year before we decided to outsource our Blackboard hosting, our local electric provider turned off our electricity a number of times,” he says. “When that went down, obviously, the servers didn’t work. And we had general issues with upgrades. We simply had to have a consistent, stable Blackboard environment- it’s a critical application for us.”

Reliable and Available

So when it came time to outsource their Blackboard application hosting, both districts knew exactly where to turn. At Walnut Valley, Ulrich says, “We put out a comparison that showed what we would need in order to self-host - not only in terms of extra hardware and backup servers, but in terms of manpower. It quickly became a no-brainer to move to Blackboard Managed Hosting.” For their part, Poway initially hosted with another provider but was not happy with the results. “Basically, the other company was guaranteeing our power and Internet would not go down - but that’s all they did,” says Gravina. “We needed another level of monitoring and management that we felt only Blackboard could provide.”

Blackboard Managed Hosting offers a fully-managed environment that ensures reliability and high availability for some of the country's largest K-12 school districts. The Managed Hosting team handles the installation, day-to-day administration and upgrades of the Blackboard system, enabling clients like Walnut Valley and Poway to focus on their emerging technology goals. Each Blackboard datacenter connects to the Internet via multiple Service Providers, a redundant network infrastructure, and multiple levels of power backup. Managed Hosting also employs a variety of software tools which monitor the servers, the network, and the application itself. Just as importantly, support is continuously available, with technicians online every weekend, holiday, and all hours of the night.

Both Poway and Walnut Valley felt an immediate impact in terms of uptime. "I did a technology survey at the end of the last school year, and I geared several questions toward Blackboard," says Ulrich. "When I asked for comments on availability, over 90% of the respondents rated it highly. They were very satisfied with the availability of the system - both home and at school."

Gravina doesn't think this response is unique. "Teachers don't know where the system sits, and they really don't care. What they care about is stability and reliability, so they're able to do what they need to do and not lose data. Having a stable, reliable environment has made it much less frustrating for teachers, and as a result, it's much more likely that they will use the product and use it regularly."

Easing Upgrades

When Walnut Valley recently upgraded to the Blackboard Learn™ enterprise solution, they found further benefits in hosting with Blackboard. "I really noticed the time I didn't have to spend on the hosting side when we went through our major upgrade," says Ulrich. Poway has similar plans to upgrade to Blackboard Learn, Release 9.1 underway with a district-wide launch expected before the beginning of the next school year. "Our upgrade path will be much easier because of Blackboard Managed Hosting," Gravina says. "They're building a test environment for us, so we'll have an opportunity to troubleshoot any issues before rolling it over." Stacey Campo concurs. "Will hosting affect our migration to 9.1?" she asks. "Absolutely.

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Rod Ulrich
*Educational Technology Specialist,
Walnut Valley Unified School District*

Blackboard is setting up a test server and we'll begin a cohort process for our batch files shortly. It will make the transition much easier to implement.”

In terms of support, Ulrich has had a very good experience. “When I call Blackboard, I get somebody. Most of my inquiries to the technical staff are usually minor, so I'll create the ticket and send it in, and then wait for that to be addressed. I really appreciate getting immediate access to an actual person.”

Benefits both Tangible and Anecdotal

In terms of tangible cost savings, both districts testify to how Blackboard Managed Hosting has enabled them to qualify for the federal government's “E-Rate” program. E-Rate was created by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to help bring every school and library in America into the information age. Both Walnut Valley and Poway have received hosting E-Rate grants by virtue of

utilizing Blackboard Managed Hosting. “If you self-host, you can't e-rate,” says Ulrich. “But if you utilize managed hosting, you can e-rate that cost. The overall cost is less and in a way that I can easily quantify.” Gravina says that E-rate was a major factor in Poway's decision to host with Blackboard. “It brought the cost down to where it was either a wash or a cost savings for us,” he says.

However, Stacey Campo says Blackboard Managed Hosting has had a dramatic impact on the Poway schools in a number of other ways. “Whenever you have a mission-critical tool in your organization, then you also need to support it 24/7, 365 days a year,” she says. “In a K-12 district such as ours, with the budgets the way they are, we don't have the manpower to do that. We went with a hosting package to take some of the burden off of us and it's paid off with sustainability and uptime. It was a financial decision, but you can't just look at dollars - you have to look at dedicated people and time and stress and crying.”

Rod Ulrich says even if he had manpower and funding for a self-hosted solution, he'd still prefer Blackboard Managed Hosting. “We've been doing this for four years, and have been very satisfied with the service and uptime. Peace of mind is what it really is - knowing that it's up and running.”