

Moving Online in Cobb County

Located outside Atlanta, the Cobb County School District is the second largest school district in Georgia. Like other K-12 districts its size, Cobb faces the daunting challenge of meeting state certification requirements. In fact, with 1,500 paraprofessionals and 8,800 classroom teachers, approximately 2,500 district personnel require professional development each year.

Cobb's administration and staff also face the challenge of serving a diverse and widely dispersed population of more than 100,000 students including many who require an alternative to traditional classroom instruction. Whether a student is hospital-homebound, experiences scheduling conflicts, needs to recover credits for graduation, or is involved in fine arts or after school programs, the district wanted to accommodate the varying needs of its student population.

With this in mind, Cobb County School District first turned to Blackboard in 2001 to expand curriculum offerings with online courses to increase capacity for professional development. As a professor in the Education Leadership Department at Troy University and a Blackboard user, Dr. Donald Beers, Deputy Superintendent at Cobb, has wit-

nessed first-hand how Blackboard solutions have improved and expanded professional development offerings, increased student learning opportunities and enhanced communication. "A solution like Blackboard was a logical choice for addressing some of the challenges we face at Cobb County," he says.

Blended Learning Beyond the Classroom

Using a "blended learning" model, Blackboard technology provides a platform for traditional teachers in Cobb County to supplement and enhance their regular classroom instruction with online assessments, plagiarism prevention, robust assignment tools, and collaboration through blogs, wikis, and podcasts. "Blackboard software provides a wealth of tools for teachers to use to meet the different learning

styles of students and keep them highly engaged in the course," said Cheryl Rowley, Curriculum and Instruction Supervisor.

Blended learning helps teachers differentiate instruction to all students and provides remediation options to help lagging students catch up. Teachers can offer additional content online for students

Cobb County School District

- + Cobb County School District
- + <http://www.cobbk12.org/>
- + 107,000 students
- + 8,800 teachers
- + 113 schools and education centers

to review at a time that is convenient for them or to supplement regular instruction with more challenging curriculum. One of the first groups to use the Blackboard system for supplemental instruction was students preparing for advanced placement exams.

“The vast majority of our students access their eHigh School or blended learning courses outside of the school day,” says Becky Nunnally, Supervisor, eHigh School. “Most log into the Blackboard system from home but they may also use computers at school, the public library, or a local restaurant that has wireless access. We encourage students to have a backup plan if they have computer issues and to ask friends and relatives if they may use their computers. They find a way to log on.”

Expanding Professional Development

Blended learning has also become popular with teachers for professional development. For example, the instructor for the rigorous, 50-hour class, the Exceptional Child, redesigned her course to combine seven weeks of face-to-face sessions with six weeks of online collaboration and discussion.

Beverly Addison, Supervisor for Online Staff Development Programs, finds that people are often more engaged online because they have time to think about issues and the format gives more people an equal opportunity to participate. “People like to be in a classroom with colleagues, but also the freedom not to drive and spend evenings in a classroom,” Addison said. “You often capture that quiet, reserved participant who would otherwise not be vocal in a face-to-face class.”

Her goal is to offer all professional learning courses in any format so that teachers can choose the best method for their learning style and schedule: online, blended, or in person. “What we’ve learned is that

there is always a way to provide the best service: convenient, efficient and of high quality. We are only hindered by our own lack of creativity and imagination,” says Addison.

Collaboration and Community

Blackboard technology also has changed the way stakeholders in the community share information and collaborate. With role-based communication and delivery tools, Blackboard learning technologies enable the district to expand collaboration beyond learners to all of the people who support learning in the school district. Library media specialists, principals, and grade level or subject area teachers, and even parent groups, can have their own collaborative space to communicate and share resources.

“Our school board and superintendent have asked that everyone make an effort to cut back on the number of days teachers are pulled out of classrooms,” said Addison. “We can use Blackboard technology to provide online professional development opportunities and to facilitate discussions and synchronous online meetings. Keeping people off the road helps them spend more time in

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*Supervisor for Online Staff
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the classroom.”

Andy Spinks, Supervisor of Library Media Education, provides support and training to 130 library media specialists across the district. With only one or two media specialists in any one location, he is always looking for ways to help them collaborate and learn from each other. With Blackboard technology, Spinks hopes to create a collaborative space to facilitate communication and coordination between the media specialists.

Moving Forward with Online Learning

The Blackboard deployment in the Cobb School District created a foundation for learning online and gave impetus to blended learning opportunities for teachers and students. When Cobb County began its first “eHigh School” term, the online program offered two courses and served 25 students. Today, thousands of students and teachers have taken hundreds of online courses, and the benefits of anywhere, anytime access to learning have permeated the whole district. eHigh School now offers 61 courses — from middle school Latin to personal fitness — to more than 1,800 students each year. Courses have evolved from text and presentations to include podcasts, audio, video, blogging and discussion boards.

The district has a dedicated staff of online instructors and offers 150 online professional development courses with training for state certification programs in gifted education, mentoring, and special education. Through a total immersion online course development and instruction training program, participants create course components as they study online design and facilitation techniques. Each class produces a new course that others will use in the future. More than 4,000 staff members have taken advantage of

the online offerings to date. To further highlight the demand for Cobb’s extensive professional development program, technology fluency has become a criterion for hiring and evaluating teachers in the district.

Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Development, Dr. Kay Wideman, says this is no surprise as infusing technology into instruction has become second nature to teachers. “Just as the chalkboard is seamlessly integrated into everyday teaching, teaching with Blackboard [software] and other online resources has become the standard not the exception.”

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