

## Polk County Public Schools Delivers More Professional Development, More Effectively with Online Courses and Communities

One of the 40 largest school districts in the country, Polk County Public Schools in Lakeland, Florida, spans over 1800 square miles. Keeping all 12,000 employees up to date with the latest technologies available in the district requires constant professional development. By creating virtual courses and online communities, the district Information Systems & Technology (IST) Division has increased the frequency and availability of professional development, and developed a collaborative learning community of peer coaches and technology mentors.

### About Polk County Public Schools

As the county's largest employer, Polk County Public Schools has about 6,000 teachers and 6,000 additional employees across 160 schools and educational sites. The IST Division is responsible for technology professional development for administrators, teachers, and instructional technology and instructional television contacts.

### The Need to Increase Learning Opportunities

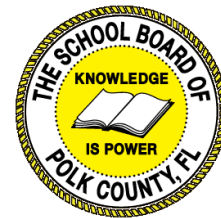
"The IST Division became interested in online instruction because of the challenges for teachers to be out of class and for administrators to be away from school," said Cristie DeVane, senior manager, School Technology Services Department. Traditional face-to-face workshops cost the district dearly in lost instruction time, fees for substitutes, travel time, facilitator fees, and facilities. Beyond the actual costs, the fixed time and place of workshops limited the number of people who could attend, the number of courses offered each year, and lacked ongoing engagement to change behavior.

### More Effective Instruction at a Lower Cost

The IST Division of Polk County Public Schools implemented a Blackboard solution in 2004 by piloting the Blackboard course delivery solution with two courses for teachers. Over 900 course sites have been created by 95 teachers for blended instruction with their traditional classrooms. The School Technology Services Department now offers 27 online courses, including their entire technology proficiency curriculum, a facilitator training course, the management of a technology coach mentoring program, and a school recognition program. Five facilitators manage as many as 65 courses each semester and serve about 3,000 district employees each year.

"The Blackboard platform allows us to more effectively deliver technology instruction to more staff and reduce our costs at the same time," said DeVane.

By integrating Blackboard technology with the district's professional development registration system, courses can be automatically populated with registered students and



## Polk County Public Schools

- + Lakeland, Florida
- + <http://www.polk-fl.net/>
- + 93,000 students
- + 6,000 teachers
- + 160 schools and education centers
- + Blackboard Learning System
- + Blackboard Community System

new courses added as needed. When creating a course, the facilitator has the option to base the new course on a previous one and easily copy resources and content as needed. When the course ends, student accounts become inactive unless they are enrolled in another course.

## Information Systems & Technology Expands Learning

### Increased frequency and participation

With virtual courses, there is much more flexibility to expand enrollments or simply add another course. Popular technology professional development classes may be offered every two weeks to accommodate busy schedules. Teachers and facilitators have fewer scheduling conflicts and courses have fewer no-shows. "Blackboard software has enabled more teachers and administrators to participate," said DeVane. "It is less invasive on their time; courses can be completed 24/7, wherever there is Internet connectivity."

Reduced travel and less face-to-face interaction saves facilitators time and enables them to interact more with students online. They can easily replicate courses, export content, and share resources to constantly improve courses and maintain consistency. "The facilitator is learning along with the participants of the class," said Dawn Mulder, assistant principal of North Lakeland Elementary. "We each bring our own background knowledge as educators that result in varied class dynamics. With Blackboard we are able to offer consistent course delivery throughout the year with just a few mouse clicks to import the content into a new class section."

### Collaboration and coaching without leaving the classroom

Blackboard course facilitators find that people who may not participate in a traditional class feel comfortable sharing their ideas in an online forum. In fact, the design of the courses often requires participants to respond to the facilitator as well as to each other and to share their work. "With the Blackboard offering, participants have continuous access to the facilitator and the course content throughout implementation," said Mulder. "Learning from other participants gives them a more diverse exposure to content areas and perspectives. It is a richer learning experience because of the 100 percent participation and implementation."

"We believe it impacts the way teachers work with their students," said DeVane, "as they recognize the value of sharing and are more open to feedback."

Even teachers who are less tech savvy have become active users. According to Mulder: "They will get together at their school or find a buddy as a study partner. We monitor whether or not a person is participating and email, phone, or even visit them to help them through any challenges they may have."

### 24/7 availability gives teachers time and flexibility

Unlike traditional professional development, online learning creates a virtual place for learning that teachers have access to anytime, anywhere. They can easily go back to refresh their

memory or ask another participant for help. They do not have to leave their classroom and travel to and from a workshop location to learn about a new technology or instructional practice.

"The comfort level rises and their fears decrease because they have access to the learning material or someone in the learning community at home," said Mulder. Before teachers receive new technology in their classroom such as a smart board or new grading software, they complete an online training course. Evaluations and surveys help facilitators determine how the new technology has been integrated into practice.

### Learning put into practice and recognizing success

Whether or not a teacher actually changes practice after training depends on many factors. Staff in the School Technology Services Department use a Blackboard course to manage and track the implementation of technology through technology coaches. Teachers trained as tech coaches write about lesson plans, how they are integrating technology, reflections on what worked and what didn't, and the results of student engagement in "collaboration logs". They regularly upload the logs as assignments and the facilitator uses the gradebook to track the logs and comment on them. The logs also create a valuable record across the district and over time of technology integration and best practices.

Recognizing success solidifies the results of professional development. The district created the Shining Star Program to recognize schools that integrate technology and collaborate across the curriculum and grade levels. Blackboard software is used to administer and manage the contest. A school contact enrolls in the course, completes an online survey, and uploads a short video as an assignment. Mulder used the e-mail function to send weekly e-mails to the 60 participating schools over the 5 month application process.

## Polk County Public Schools Plans for the Future

"We haven't had to sell this to anybody," said Mulder. "The success of the users and their excitement have generated interest." Thousands of district staff members have become accustomed to online learning and are eager to add the virtual tools to their own classrooms.

Bill Bucklew, senior online training coordinator helps department chairs across the district design courses for online delivery and identify new ways to enhance collaboration across the district using Blackboard technology. The district uses a Blackboard course to track the completion of administrator and network manager technology proficiency classes. Participants often take more than a year to complete the required classes and the Blackboard grade center tool tracks progress for both facilitator and participant. Teachers seeking entrance into the assistant principal pool must successfully complete a series of online technology classes and assignments as a pre-requisite for application.

A math group used Blackboard software over the summer to revise the math curriculum. The team met once, trained on the platform, broke into subcommittees, and continued their work with each other wherever they were during the summer. "The Blackboard community engagement solution serves as a repository for their thoughts and items they want to share," said Bucklew. "We found that to be very powerful."