Sycamore Community Schools

Blackboard learn+

Enhancing Communication and Improving Student Achievement

Sycamore Community Schools has adopted the **Blackboard Learning System™** and the **Blackboard Community System™** to enhance communication between educators and the community and to improve student achievement. "Our goal is to provide a window for parents into the academic lives of their children and to engage all students in the learning process," says William Fritz, District Technology Coordinator..

Building Strong Home-To-School Connections At Sycamore

When the Sycamore Community Schools in Ohio began looking for ways to enhance communication between educators and the community and improve student achievement, they turned to the Blackboard Learning System™ and the Blackboard Community System™. District Technology Director Mark Souders and District Technology Coordinator William Fritz led the process of evaluating the many products available to the K-12 community and making the final decision on a solution that would meet their disparate needs.

"Our first step was to find a solution that would open the door for two-way communication with parents. The technology needed to be easy for parents and teachers to learn, yet flexible enough to do everything we required of it," says Souders.

After consulting with several local colleges and peer institutions as well as reviewing several products at conferences, Souders and Fritz determined that the Blackboard Learning System and Blackboard Community System were the obvious choice for Sycamore. "The fact that Blackboard is used by many of the local colleges was attractive to us. Thousands of future teachers are learning on Blackboard, making the transition to using technology into the K-12 classroom that much easier," says Fritz.

Communication And Collaboration

Sycamore implemented the Blackboard Learning System and Blackboard Community System in May of 2002 and launched a two-month pilot program designed to bring 40 teachers and 5 administrators online.

"When we first saw the Blackboard Community System, its potential as a communication and collaboration tool was immediately obvious," says Fritz. "The ability to delegate content management rights within the Blackboard Community System was extremely important for a small district like ours and has allowed the district to shift its focus from administrating technology to delivering education and information."

"With a very small technology department, we needed to delegate many of the responsibilities of managing the district's Web content," explains Fritz. "The Blackboard Community System allows us to provide a consistent image across schools and departments, yet provides content-owners with the power to easily create and manage their own information."

Within the Blackboard environment, Sycamore has created Web pages for all of the schools within the district, providing parents with access to information on district and school activities as well as insight into their children's academic lives. "As a parent, I appreciate that the

Sycamore Community school district

+ **Blackboard Client Since May 2002**

+ **5,700 students**

+ **SASI student information system**

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Blackboard

teacher can post daily homework assignments on Blackboard. It enables me to keep up with homework when my child is absent from class," reports one parent.

Early adopters of the platform quickly became champions for education technology and for Blackboard, playing an instrumental role in helping their peers integrate technology into their lesson plans. Those pioneering teachers who adopted Blackboard early on have shared their success stories with colleagues, detailing how they have engaged students of all learning styles by integrating Blackboard into daily classroom activities. "Success stories encourage other teachers to try Blackboard—and soon the enthusiasm becomes contagious," says Fritz, who reports that the district quickly accomplished its goal of bringing 40 teachers online during the pilot program.

Sharing Ownership

Today, 85% of Sycamore's teachers are using Blackboard software to communicate with parents and enhance classroom instruction. The superintendent of the school district has even gone as far as to mandate that every teacher maintain a Blackboard course site by the end of the 2005-2006 school year.

Assistant Principal Doug Mader used Blackboard when he was a classroom teacher and now is an advocate for integrating its benefits throughout his school. "As a Calculus teacher, I valued Blackboard because it made learning more exciting for the kids and allows them to be more engaged in class discussions. When they go home, they can access the notes and practice questions for as long as they need. As an administrator, I value Blackboard's role as a communication link. Parents and students can share ownership of what's happening in the classroom and be active participants in the education process."

In an effort to provide students with access to more learning opportunities, Sycamore has also launched online summer school courses. For example, each year, Advanced Placement English students are required to read 10 books before the school year begins. In the past, the first few weeks of the school year were spent on those books. This past summer, however, Sycamore's English teachers put the courses online, creating quizzes and a discussion board for every

Enhancing District Relations with the Blackboard Community System:
The 4Cs of Community Building

1) Common Space
An ideal environment for community-building, the Blackboard Community System provides virtual space for synchronous and asynchronous group discussions, one-on-one chats, or small team projects.

2) Context through Customization
The Blackboard Community System helps districts present a customized view of the community based on each individual's unique role, allowing Sycamore to deliver a customized view of the events and activities for their community members.

3) Content-Sharing
Sycamore uses the Blackboard Community System as its district intranet, to deliver communication in multiple formats and to share content that is relevant to the community. This has helped the district increase communication and decrease administrative costs.

4) Collaboration and Exchange
On-going communication is one of the most important aspects of a thriving community and plays a critical role in the learning process. "Students enhance their critical thinking skills by posting comments and ideas online" says English teacher Christine Minano.

book. Not only was time freed up once the school year began, the discussion around the works became much more substantive. "Online learning is a must for districts where students want a variety of courses, access to AP classes and extra credits," says Souders.

In addition to understanding the value that Web-enhanced learning can bring to the classroom, Sycamore believes that integrating online learning into staff development can have a profound impact on student achievement. "The district already uses Blackboard as its intranet, to centrally post important documents and staff materials. This provides a low-barrier way to get cautious teachers online and eliminates administrative burdens," says Fritz.

Moving Forward With Data Integration

Sycamore is beginning a data integration initiative with the help of Blackboard Global Services. "In the near future, when our teachers log in, all of their courses will be available, and all of their students will be populated in each course," says Fritz. Another feature will be fully-integrated online grades so parents can track academic performance throughout the year, the importance of which is not lost on Fritz. "Nothing means more to parents than online grades. By making them available, we also reap the benefits associated with a captive audience. Grades drive them to the site, but once they're logged in, we take advantage of the forum to share additional important information with them."

Moving forward, Sycamore also hopes to build a module for online fees using the e-Marketplace feature in Blackboard's Application Pack 3 so when parents make online payments, they are simultaneously recorded to the district's back-end Student Information System.

Through its implementation of Blackboard software, technology integration and parent communication have become standards by which Sycamore's teachers are evaluated by both the administration and by the community. "When budgets are getting crunched, the Blackboard line item is not even questioned," says Fritz. "There's an understanding throughout the district that it simply has to be there."

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