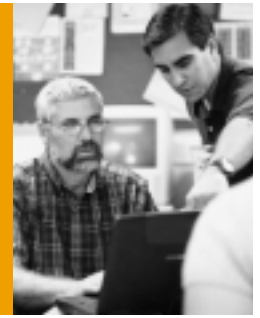


DeKalb County Schools Revolutionize PreK-12 Curriculum Management System



From mule trains to airplanes – that’s how one educator in the DeKalb County Schools describes the district’s move from traditional pen-and-paper curriculum management to a comprehensive technology-driven model. The shift is even more dramatic when you consider that this urban Georgia school system decided on simultaneous district-wide implementation of PLATO Professional Services, affecting 7,000 staff in 137 schools.

Why would any school district want to subject their educators to such monumental change?

"Our initial thought was that if we could help teachers eliminate the pages and pages and pages of paperwork they were buried under, they could spend much more time responding to students in terms of their intellectual needs," states Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum Design, Dr. Jackie Mitchell. "Bottom line: We believe that with a seamless, articulated curriculum that is completely technology-driven and linked to top quality resources such as PLATO Instructional Solutions courseware, we’ll be able to improve student achievement."

The Challenge

With the vision firmly in place and supported by the school board, the challenge became: How does a school district accomplish such a momentous paradigm shift with more than 100 disparate schools and an even more numerous and diversified staff? According to Dr. Mitchell, major factors to consider include:

- Prepare your district’s curriculum team before beginning the switch. "DeKalb was at a bit of a disadvantage compared to other school districts because we didn’t have a curriculum department before we began this initiative in 2000," Dr. Mitchell states. "We needed to do a lot of team building amongst ourselves – and even more PR to sell the idea to teachers, administrators and parents."
- Follow your district’s textbook adoption cycle when replacing management systems. "We started with math because that’s what was up next for review," Dr. Mitchell says. "We’re now working on social studies and plan to have science and health done by next fall." By following a well-established cycle, teachers and administrators will be less overwhelmed by the change.

- Know your technology system's capabilities, both equipment and personnel. "It was a huge undertaking to make PLATO Professional Services available in all 137 schools," admits Dr. Mitchell. "Our MIS department was gracious enough to 'lend' us a technology person for an entire year. Now that we've got PLATO Instructional Solutions courseware running on hundreds of servers across the district, the next challenge will be to make it a Web-based program so teachers can have access at home."

- Train, train and train some more. "We have trained a boat-load of people on PLATO!" Dr. Mitchell exclaims. "Including school board members, administrators and secretaries – even parents. But most importantly, teacher training is absolutely critical to successful implementation. We have experienced teacher trainers who continue to reach out to the staff. We'll be at it for a long time."

"It's taken blood, sweat and tears to get where we are now," Dr. Mitchell says candidly. "It's a challenge to overcome the old way of doing things."

The Results

The effort is worth it, however. With PLATO Learning, DeKalb County teachers now have at the click of a button:

- Major portions of curriculum aligned to state and national standards and benchmarks. DeKalb objectives are matched with Georgia's state-mandated tests, along with McREL, ASCD, PSAT and a host of other national standards and tests.

- Suggested lesson plans and instructional strategies linked to local objectives and standards.

- Searchable lists of prerequisite skills that students need before they can tackle specific learning objectives.

- Automatic interdisciplinary connections (For example, a teacher can search for language arts concepts that correlate with a selected math objective and cover both in one lesson.)

- Resources embedded into the software, including Internet links and an online catalog of media available in the District's Resource Center.

- Instructional strategies for teachers to use with up to three different levels of student preparedness in one classroom.

- Links to the previous year's Georgia state assessments at grades three, five and eight.

"My life as a teacher has become so much easier," says Lakeside High School math teacher Anthony Stinson. "It's making a difference because I spend less time on paperwork and more time with my students. I can also prepare reports for parents that show which objectives their students need more work on. Parents love this."

"I'm excited about the possibilities," adds Chestnut Elementary teacher Cassandra Moore. "We definitely need more time to learn what's available to us, but I know I no longer need a file drawer full of papers I'm not going to search through anyway."