By Sonja Alexander and Aleigha Henderson-Rosser

Do-It-Yourself Professional

DeKalb County School System in Georgia transformed its one-size-fits-all PD approach into a customized online academy where all teachers and support staff can learn and collaborate at their convenience. Here's how they did it.

Development

You're sitting in a mandatory professional development session at the end of a long day of back-to-back classes. You're exhausted from trying to prepare your students for upcoming standardized tests, and you're a little peeved that you had to cancel your family plans to be here. And you fear that this session, like past trainings, will be difficult to implement because you won't get any follow-up technical support and you won't feel confident enough to try out your newfound skills in front of your tech-savvy students.

Does this scenario sound familiar? It was ripped straight out of our past playbook at the DeKalb County (Georgia) School System. We have the 25th largest district in the nation and are charged with delivering high-quality PD to more than 13,000 employees who are busy serving 100,000-plus students. Needless to say, our teachers were frustrated with the way we were offering them training, and our results showed it.

A widespread irony in education is that many districts look at technology only in relation to what the students need. As a result, they often neglect to provide teachers with technology-based learning, even though they expect them to support their students with instructional technology. And when they do offer PD, they often fail to provide an optimum learning environment or to give the teachers all the tools they need to succeed.

We decided there had to be a better way.

Getting Started

Just like students, teachers need time to absorb new concepts, and they need access to ongoing support to implement the instructional strategies they gain from professional development. Led by this reality, our PD department began problem-solving ways to increase our district's professional learning capacity while maintaining or enhancing the quality of the training.

To get started, we researched other districts' practices and online frameworks. One of the primary concepts we researched was online training. We had been using online teacher training designed by other providers, and although those classes were beneficial, they did not allow us to meet the National Staff Development Council standard of effectively following up with employees about what they were

Teachscape XL (on laptop, left) allows the DeKalb PD department to customize pre-existing online training modules to fit its needs. It also integrates with other online tools, such as the Elluminate and Wimba (right) collaboration applications.

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learning or whether that was tied to the district's goals. We decided that the best solution was to develop our own customized online staff development and move toward site-based collaborative cultures where each site's educator community learns and works collaboratively to achieve their common goals and build a culture in which learning and development can thrive.

But we couldn't do it on our own. The district purchased a customizable online PD tool, Teachscape XL, to help meet our PD needs. Among the tool's beneficial features were the capacity for uploading other online tools, such as the Elluminate and Wimba collaboration applications; integration with the school system's data-management system; and demonstrated ease of use, which was especially important for a district that had never before implemented its own online training.

Around this time, Aleigha Henderson-Rosser was hired to develop the district's online training components, review proposed courses that would be aligned with the district's goals and initiatives, and support the new site-based collaborative cultures that we were introducing to the schools. With

her support and our new online tools, we began building the Professional Learning eCampus (PLeCampus), the district's one-stop shop of online resources designed to promote a culture of collaboration among teachers and employees.

Customized and Collaborative

We knew that the first online class a district employee registered for would determine whether they would ever take another, so we spared no effort in creating high-quality offerings. First, we previewed all of Teachscape's multimedia training modules on topics such as literacy, math, science, teaching English language learners, high-yield strategies, new teacher induction, teaching with technology, and integrating technology into the classroom. Then, using our new custom publishing platform, we tailored a few of these prebuilt modules to make them our own.

We opted for a blended PD approach of face-to-face instruction with the online courses for follow-up. That way, instead of sending merely one or two school representatives to attend an offsite workshop, our course facilitators could hold classes at the actual school sites and use the online components to continue providing teachers with guidance and interpersonal contact for a set period afterward.

Because improving collaboration is another goal of our initiative, we are working with the schools in our district to implement professional learning communities. We have even created online courses about how to implement these communities.

We know that educators benefit from a continuous supply of information, research, and support, and that

collaborative learning environments are beneficial for both teacher performance and student achievement. But PD session attendees often have difficulty getting back together for collaboration after the main sessions end. Now our district employees can use virtual groups to keep the momentum going for creating and maintaining their professional learning communities.

To support larger groups, our teacher support specialists—who previously lacked the time to give teachers detailed guidance—would create online modules so that all the teachers can benefit from in-depth direction whenever it is most convenient for them.

Before presenting our first courses in the PLeCampus to district personnel, we also needed facilitators who were comfortable with the blended approach, as our previous facilitators had done only face-to-face training. Henderson-Rosser created a 30-hour online course on how to deliver high-quality online professional learning. We collaborated with the district's department of teaching and learning to support content specialists in using this tool to become online facilitators.

To successfully implement the PLeCampus, we also had to educate employees about the new technology and its importance in adult learning. We invited representatives from the other departments in the district to a demonstration of our new resources and explained the benefits of moving away from standalone courses. We opted to promote the new approach slowly and incrementally: We would ask coordinators how things were going, suggest online courses that suited their needs, and send them the login so that they could experience the course for themselves.

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Going Live

We officially announced the PLe-Campus in the district's summer 2009 course catalog. We offered 14 classes with 17 trained course developers, and those courses garnered more than 700 participants for the summer.

Teacher feedback was positive, including thank-yous for considering their needs, reflections about specific things they had learned, and appreciative comments, such as this one from a middle school math teacher: "I want to thank you for the abundance of resources and information you have provided in this course! It was a well-planned course that logically flowed and was both interesting and motivational."

The publishing platform's capacity for customization proved invaluable. If teachers needed a course on differentiated math content, we ensured that the course was relevant to their needs.

But it's not just for teachers. An auditor from the finance department created a completely customized course for school principals about finance procedures. The content specialists who have been trained as facilitators have also created classes for specific employee groups, such as social workers and bookkeepers, and we plan to offer customized courses on Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint to all of our support staff. Our next step is creating iPod and iPhone video courses using the publishing platform so that teachers can learn on the go, even when they don't have computer access.

Transitioning the Vision

We decided to start small for budgetary reasons to ensure that we were on the right track and to give employees a chance to make a comfortable transition. The preset online modules that we initially purchased were for orienting incoming teachers, and we acquired the modules for high-yield strategies and math shortly thereafter. This year, we are proposing the purchase of additional training modules as well as classroom walkthrough and observation tools to assess our use of PD in the classroom, because we want hard evidence of its effects on student performance. Teachers are also not always aware of the practices they need to change, so in addition to helping us evaluate whether our processes have had the intended impact, the data will allow us to conduct surveys on what is working and what needs improvement.

The ongoing challenge for our district's professional learning leadership is to keep moving our schools toward the site-based autonomy they require. To that end, we have begun helping teacher leaders create customized courses of their own. We now coordinate a New Teacher Induction program, in which each building has a teacher support specialist trained in creating online content so that he or she can develop courses that fulfill site-specific needs, such as those identified through school improvement planning.

After only one year of using online custom courses, we have already seen better results and feel as if we are on the road to resolving the challenges that in-person-only workshops present. Teachers have been receiving our mandatory trainings with more enthusiasm because they now have an online option. We have also seen an increase in administrators' enrollment because they are now able to access the content 24 hours a day, seven days a week, whereas it was next to impossible for them to attend after-hours classes in the past.

Research has proven that all humans—students, teachers, and administrators alike—learn better under certain conditions. By rethinking the way we deliver professional development to better accommodate our teachers and administrators, we hope to help them become better educators so that they can, in turn, help our students reach their full potential.

Resources

Elluminate: www.elluminate.com
National Staff Development Council standards: www.nsdc.org/standards
Teachscape: www.teachscape.com
Wimba: www.wimba.com

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