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## Here for you during COVID-19 outbreak

With schools closed and remote learning the new normal across the country, *District Administration* magazine has gone into overdrive to provide essential news and resources for districts scrambling to adapt.

As the coronavirus pandemic forces schools to quickly pivot, we're focused on what administrators and teachers are telling us you need.

We are compiling ever-growing listings of free resources, covering how districts have launched successful food distribution systems and digging into the best practices for teaching students with special needs from a distance.

We'll continue to highlight success stories and effective strategies during this global emergency.

You'll find all of this information and more on our website. Please visit [DAmag.me/coronavirus](https://www.districtadministration.com)

—Eric Weiss, executive editor

## Reasons to visit DistrictAdministration.com

### Helping teachers tackle housing costs

Leaders build new units, offer stipends to recruit and retain teachers  
[DAmag.me/rent](https://www.districtadministration.com)



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1st Qtr	2nd Qtr	1st Sem	3rd Qtr	4th Qtr	Fnl Exm	Fnl Mrk
A	A		B+	B		B+
B+	C+		C+	C		C+
B+	B+		B+	B		B+
B	D+		C	C+		C
B+	C					C+
B+			B+	B		B
				A		B

### Does tough grading improve student learning?

Tough grading backed by high expectations can elevate student achievement, report says  
[DAmag.me/grading](https://www.districtadministration.com)

### Helicopter parents creating equity issues?

Some teachers may do special favors for children of helicopter parents who volunteer at school  
[DAmag.me/helicopter](https://www.districtadministration.com)



## DA Events by color

While reading this issue, look for the colors within individual articles to indicate a related DA event that you may want to attend, as well as the target audience.

- **Superintendents Summit**  
current superintendents
- **Superintendents Academy**  
aspiring superintendents
- **CAO Summit**  
chief academic officers; executive directors/assistant superintendents of curriculum, teaching and learning, and innovation; directors of curriculum, deputy superintendents
- **CIO Summit**  
chief information officers, district technology leaders
- **CIO Academy**  
chief information officers (CIOs), aspiring CIOs, technology leaders and leadership teams
- **Future of Education Technology Conference**  
technologists as well as administrators educators with interest in technology
- **Academic Esports Conference & Expo**  
academic, technology and athletic leaders

### Why extracurriculars are not 'extra'

Seven ways after-school activities benefit students and complement academics—and why they should not be cut from budgets  
[DAmag.me/extra](https://www.districtadministration.com)

### Stepping up with STEAM

Schools of education are offering teachers more instruction on using ed tech in class  
[DAmag.me/steampd](https://www.districtadministration.com)



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# Navigating the electric bus ecosystem takes more than GPS.

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# Why learning to read relies on content

**Reading comprehension is a product of decoding and language comprehension, DA's CAO Summit speaker says**

*Adding more reading time to the school day—at the expense of subjects such as social studies and science—will not help struggling readers advance. In fact, it's the opposite of what these students need, says Holly Lane, an associate professor of special education at the University of Florida.*

*Lane is currently working to improve reading instruction in Florida's Title I elementary schools, where many students are not meeting reading standards. In her keynote at the District Administration Leadership Institute® CAO Summit in March, Lane discussed how educators can move beyond the time misconception.*

*In a discussion with DA, she offered a summary of her keynote.*

## **Give our readers an overview of the work you're doing.**

What we're primarily doing is helping teachers understand the reading process more deeply and how to develop that process in kids who are struggling. That involves understanding what's happening in the brain, understanding the linguistics involved in proficient reading and the pedagogy involved in kids acquiring the language skills they need.

The more we study the brain, the more we study effective instruction, we really are getting a clear understanding of what's going on. But a lot of the

practices going on in school are in conflict with what kids really need.

## **What challenges do Florida schools face in improving reading instruction?**

A large number of teachers have no teacher preparation at all—they're coming from other fields, they're being plopped in first-grade classrooms and they're expected to teach kids to read. And there are teachers who did come through preparation programs, but didn't learn the science of reading.

What goes into teaching reading is linguistics and understanding all the language features kids need to acquire but most teachers haven't had any classes at all in linguistics.

## **Why aren't reading scores improving?**

In an effort to increase reading scores, schools keep adding more and more time to reading instruction, and that's generally the opposite of what they need to do. A lot of the knowledge and skills that are necessary to do well on reading comprehension tests aren't gained through reading instruction, they're gained through content instruction.

A number of famous studies have looked at the role of prior knowledge in reading comprehension. Schools are spending so much time on reading instruction, they're cutting down on teaching content.

If kids aren't learning about how plants grow and a test has a reading a

passage about it, it doesn't matter if a student can read all those words. Students need to understand the content to make sense of what they're reading.

## **What guidance can you give to CAOs?**

Our common conceptualization of reading is flawed and we need to think more broadly. There are five key elements of reading—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension—and any teacher can rattle those off pretty quickly, which is great but also not great. Teachers conceptualize reading as these five pieces and don't understand how these pieces interact.

We have been working with district-level folks—reading coordinators, special education and ESOL coordinators, instructional coaches and principals. It has been very eye-opening. Principals had increased their school's time spent reading—and let teachers quit teaching social studies and science—and have been kind of floored to find out that's the opposite of what they should be doing. **DA**

*Matt Zalaznick is DA's senior writer.*

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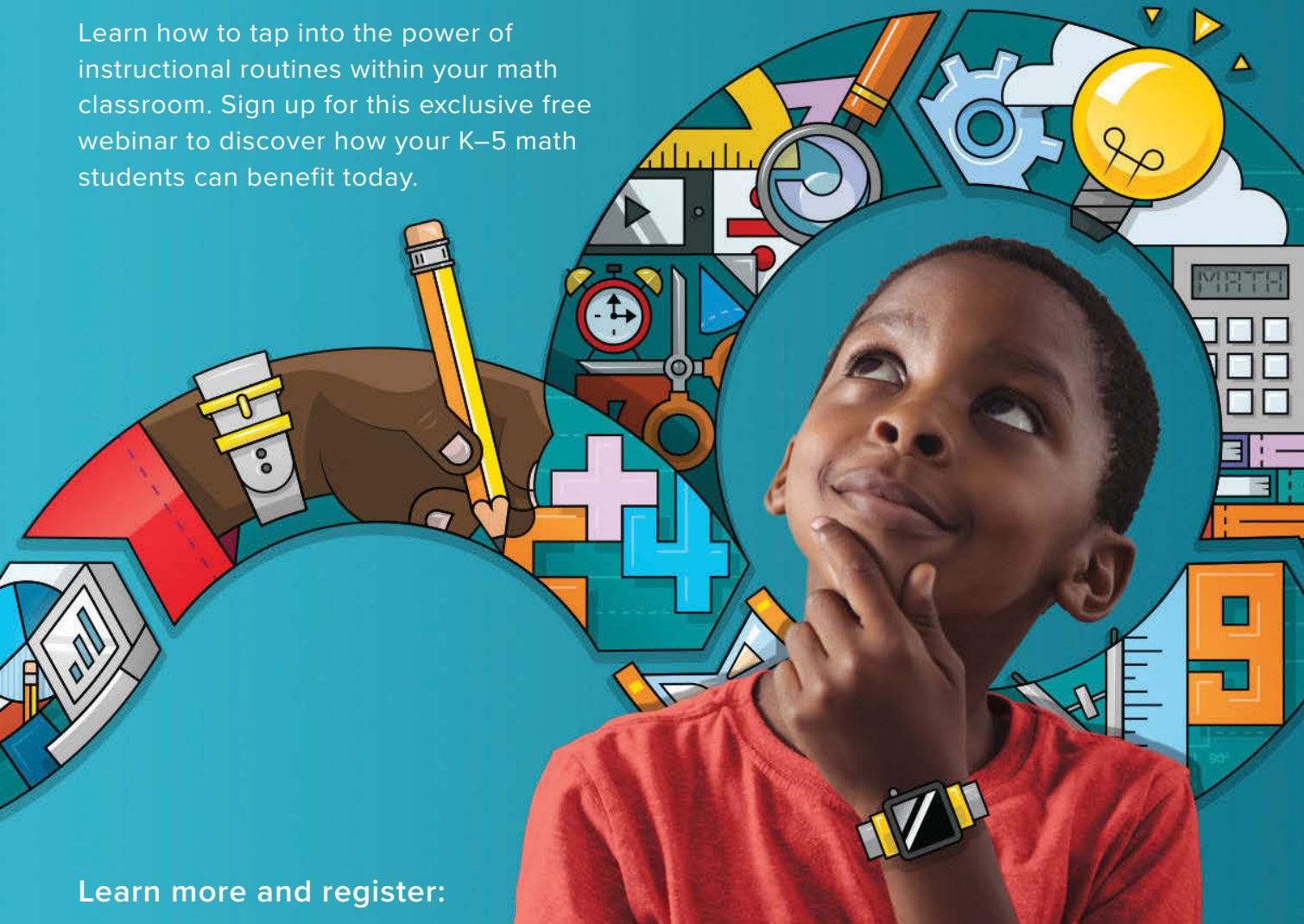
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# Making it easier to collect payments campuswide

## MySchoolBucks simplifies accepting payments with a wide range of solutions for schools and parents

**J**efferson County Public Schools in Louisville, Kentucky, is one of the largest school districts in the country with more than 100,000 students. It takes time and personnel to process the vast number of cash and check payments for registration fees, field trips, athletics, donations and concessions, among other items. Until 2019, credit and debit cards were not acceptable forms of payment.

Hannah Lehman, supervisor of accounting for the district, knew there was a solution for accepting more than just cash and checks, which she had seen for herself. In her previous role, Lehman was the finance coordinator for the district's food service department, which used Heartland School Solutions' MySchoolBucks, an online service allowing parents to manage lunch accounts and pay online.

After putting out a request for proposal for vendors, the district selected MySchoolBucks to accept and process credit and debit card payments in person and online.

### Streamlining processes

Time, money and resources were challenges as district bookkeepers were going to the bank "constantly" to deposit cash and checks.

Now, with MySchoolBucks, payments can take place at the main office, in the classroom, online, or at the concession stand or ticket office. MySchoolBucks makes reconciliation



**"I love going out to our schools and explaining that MySchoolBucks can be whatever you want it to be."**

seamless, with access to reports for all in-person and online payments in one place.

With its ease-of-use design, anyone from staff to volunteers can easily accept payments, and all credit and debit card information is protected with end-to-end encryption using Heartland Secure™.

"I love going out to our schools and explaining that MySchoolBucks can be whatever you want it to be," Lehman says.

### Increasing acceptance

After an initial rollout to a few schools at the start of the current school year, 25 to 30 schools and some central office departments now use MySchoolBucks.

"Ideally, I would love to see it, in some capacity, at all of our schools and central office departments," Lehman says.

### Saving time, money and resources

The district can cater to more parents, staff, students and community

For more information, please visit [myschoolbucks.com](https://myschoolbucks.com)

Share this story online at [DAmag.me/myschoolbucks](https://DAmag.me/myschoolbucks)



members by offering MySchoolBucks as a payment method.

"It's been a very seamless process, which saved our district so much time, money and resources," Lehman says. "It's gone beyond our expectations in the first year. We are excited to continue expanding it."

One district high school is using MySchoolBucks for advanced theater

ticket sales, and Lehman says she recently went to another district high school to teach students how to use it because they were going to be in charge of a campus café after school.

"The students were excited to learn about it because in a survey of potential patrons, 70% wanted an option to pay with credit or debit cards," Lehman says.



## Expanding payment options through automation and paperless solutions

### Q&A with **Rosemary Orless**, Senior Director of Payments, Heartland School Solutions



**Larger districts such as Jefferson County in Kentucky struggle with cash and check payments due to having more data to process with limited resources. What unique challenges do smaller districts face?**

The challenges are universal, no matter the size of school districts. They all look at how more can be done with fewer resources, and how efficiencies can be gained in specific areas such as collecting and processing payments, and making deposits and reconciliations. The ability to automate those processes helps any district limited by time constraints or lack of personnel. Administrators and teachers do not have time to chase down the payments for a field trip. Educators are instructors, not collection agents.

**Why are K-12 leaders still hesitant to expand beyond paper despite these challenges?**

Process changes are hard, depending on the scale and number of moving parts. Our invoicing feature eliminates parent mailings or sending paper home with students since invoices go straight to parents' email addresses. The feature includes due date and reminder functions, so emails generate automatically and are sent to people who have not paid fees. We rely on these paperless triggers in other areas of life.

**What are the pros of only accepting credit card payments?**

It is simply easier for parents and students to make payments. We are aware of how transactions have shifted toward more credit card payments as fewer people carry cash or checks. From a business operations

**"We work with schools and districts to create flexible options for growth that ultimately provide convenience and make their jobs easier."**

perspective, it also improves reporting, with more of a digital trail for visibility and accountability. Payments are made, they're checked against the bank account and they're reconciled. It is more efficient.

**What steps should schools and districts take to simplify the process of expanding their payment options?**

Schools and districts should make a wish list about what currently works for them and where they would like to see process improvement. They must also find a technology partner who provides several options that meet immediate needs and expands with them as they evolve and change. Partners need to be with schools and districts every step of the way from technology and service perspectives, and even from a resource perspective after they begin to implement changes. We think of ourselves as being a partner that accommodates those needs. We work with schools and districts to create flexible options for growth that ultimately provide convenience and make their jobs easier. That convenience extends to parents because the easier it is for parents, the easier it is going to be for schools and districts.

## Continuing to teach through coronavirus closures

*What district leaders have done, and can do, to prepare for a shutdown*

Ensuring students can still learn during coronavirus-related school closures has become as big a priority for many district leaders over the last several weeks as has disinfecting their buildings.

“The key to this whole thing is communication—this is about over-communicating with your public,” Ian Saltzman, superintendent of Everett Public Schools in Washington, told *District Administration*. “You can plan for a hurricane or an earthquake or a tornado, but a virus is a little different. This has never happened before.”

One of the district’s high schools reopened after a three-day closure due to a student testing positive for coronavirus. A week later, the district closed an elementary school for at least two days when a parent of a student, who was also showing symptoms, fell ill.

Nearby, Northshore School District closed all its schools on March 5 as many buildings had been directly or indirectly impacted by people who had contracted the infection. Superintendent Michelle Reid had earlier notified the community that educators were making plans to shift to online and blended learning, and had also held a training day to help teachers make the transition.

Many parents who took to Twitter to

comment in the days following praised Northshore’s leaders for the thoughtful approach to continuing school through distance learning. One wrote that the district’s response “has been nothing short of phenomenal. They were prepared for this and *it shows*.”

The district provided computers and put Wi-Fi hubs on vans that traveled to areas where students needed access to the internet.

Long-term closures subsequently occurred in hot spots around the country. Scarsdale Public Schools near New York City, for instance, shut down for two weeks after a staff member tested positive. The district was planning a shift to online instruction afterward.

But at least one district, Hillsboro Public Schools near Portland, Oregon, decided not to shut down a middle school even though a student had tested positive. Health officials told district leaders that closing might not impact the spread of the virus.

And one of the nation’s largest districts, Miami-Dade County Public Schools—which as of March 10 had not yet closed any schools—announced that its educators were preparing 200,000 laptops and tablets to send home so students could work online in the event of closures. At a press conference, Superintendent Alberto Carvalho said, “We are ready. We have protocols in place.”

### **Will home instruction days count?**

While districts seem to be figuring out how to get devices and wireless access to students if needed, additional concerns about moving instruction online include how working parents will manage to essentially home-school their children and how mandated minimum days of school per year will be counted.

States are providing guidance. For



**SCHOOLS CLOSED, LEARNING OPEN**—Leaders of Northshore School District in Washington transitioned students and teachers to online instruction in March after closing all schools for two weeks.

example, a March 5 memo to administrators from New Jersey’s commissioner of education, Lamont O. Repollet, stated that local boards of education may move to home instruction provided they are acting on a written directive by the state department of health or the health officer of the jurisdiction.

Acceptable home instruction services would include direct services, online instruction, services provided through a contract with another district, or any other means developed by the district to meet students’ needs.

The guidance further clarified that days on which students learned remotely during health-related closures would count toward New Jersey’s 180-day requirement.

Any plan for home instruction, the commissioner added, must address how equitable access, including special education services for students with disabilities and nutrition benefits for eligible students, would be delivered. —*DA staff*

### **Online teaching resources**

In early March, the nonprofit Common Sense posted a curated list of top resources—including websites, apps and tools—for helping teachers prepare for and make the most of teaching and learning during school closures. The list can be found at [DAmag.me/commonsense](https://www.common Sense.org/DAmag.me/commonsense).

# Transportation software mitigates bus management issues for merging districts

Routefinder from Transfinder eases the burden of bus routing, scheduling and planning

The consolidation of West Geauga Local Schools (1,900 students) and Newbury Local Schools (350 students) for the 2020-21 academic year required new bus routes to accommodate new students without increasing ride times.

The consolidated district in northeastern Ohio has not only higher enrollment, but also greater coverage, with 70 square miles.

"We don't have sidewalks here, and because of the distance between homes, we also don't have a lot of opportunity for group stops," says Sean Whelan, director of technology and operations for West Geauga. "We needed to get these routes right to properly estimate the right number of buses." Transfinder's Routefinder software was selected to provide this data.

## Improving services, lowering costs

The Routefinder software for school transportation management is easy to use for bus routing, scheduling and planning. It analyzes bus routes and pickup sites and quickly adjusts to changes.

Routefinder also creates and analyzes "what-if" scenarios to continually improve service and lower operating costs. It seamlessly integrates with districtwide student information systems, and it increases efficiency, enhances function and reduces costs.

## Succinct data presentation

Transfinder created and presented a four-page report to the West Geauga superintendent and board of education. The report was met with enthusiasm. It outlined how new bus routes would incorporate Newbury



**"Transfinder took out a lot of the data and technical jargon, and broke down the report to the number of routes, buses needed and actual route times ..."**



**SCHOOLS MERGING**

students but ensure that students were not on the bus for more than an hour, a timeline the board did not want to cross after the consolidation.

"Transfinder took out a lot of the data and technical jargon, and broke down the report to the number of routes, buses needed and actual route times, which was what we were concerned about," Whelan says.

## Preparing for the future

Routefinder is in use for the current West Geauga-only bus routes, so it will be a seamless transition next school year when the Newbury routes are added into the daily schedule.

"This has been a really effective way to learn how to use the software," says Whelan, who adds that Transfinder's

support team is extremely responsive to any questions about Routefinder.

Real-time data will allow the district to improve financial planning for purchasing new buses or vans in the future. Routefinder also updates enrollment daily as students move into or out of the district.

"Five students moving into or five students moving out of the district can have a tremendous impact on increasing or decreasing the time on bus routes," Whelan says. "With Routefinder, we see the impact and know what it means for route times."

transfinder

### MOVERS AND SHAKERS

Superintendent  
**Brian Creasman**

took Fleming County Schools (Ky.) off state-assistance status after partnering with the Kentucky Department of Education and allowing teachers to determine districtwide curriculum. The partnership transformed a high school that originally placed in the bottom 5% of commonwealth schools into a distinguished district recognized by Cognia. A \$15 million career and technical education expansion allows more students to join the various programs offered there. The school also has a student-operated restaurant. Creasman is Kentucky's 2020 Superintendent of the Year.

*Source: WMKY*



situation and increased low morale by passing two bond issues that saved teaching positions and protected class sizes. He worked with local officials to develop a bipartisan funding plan that increased teacher pay and addressed critical needs. McCauley also created a 1-to-1 initiative that provides Chromebook computers in grades 6 through 12, a K-5 STEM curriculum and a high school agriculture program. He supervised the establishment of a therapeutic center for elementary students who struggle due to trauma. He received the 2020 Medal for Excellence from the Oklahoma Foundation for Excellence.

*Source: Bartlesville Radio*



Under Superintendent **William R. Hite's** leadership, the District of Philadelphia—the nation's eighth

largest school district—has regained financial stability and experienced four consecutive years of growth. Hite has opened innovative high schools, doubled the number of high-performing schools in the district, reduced the number of schools in the lowest performance tier by 50%, and increased the student attendance rate. Hite received the National School Foundation Association's 2020 Superintendent of the Year Award for his efforts.

*Source: Philadelphia Patch*

In three years, Superintendent **Chuck McCauley** pulled Bartlesville Public Schools (Okla.) out of a dire budget

Superintendent **Gustavo Balderas** has grown the number of people of color in administrative positions at Eugene School District 4J (Ore.) over the past four years. Approximately 40% of principals and about two-thirds of administrators are people of color. Graduation rates increased by 14% over the past six years, and he developed equity systems around instruction and student behavior. He also improved equity and cultural proficiency in the state's K-12 instruction. Balderas, a founding member of the Oregon Association of Latino Administrators, serves as northwest regional representative and treasurer for the National Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents. Balderas was recently named the 2020 AASA National Superintendent of the Year.



## NASEF expands its esports reach with UK partnership

After sealing a partnership deal with the Japan High School Esports Federation a few months ago, the North America Scholastic Esports Federation (NASEF) is now reaching into the U.K.

NASEF, which is a signature program partner for this year's Academic Esports Conference & Expo, recently signed a memorandum of understanding agreement with the British Esports Association, a not-for-profit organization that runs the British Esports Championships for schools and colleges in the U.K.

The alliance is a natural for the two organizations, which both work to use esports as a positive activity to boost students' character development, STEAM skills, leadership, teamwork, communication and other transferable skills. The nonprofit NASEF also runs student tournaments; helps high schools set up esports clubs; and provides coaching, mentorship and more.

"NASEF is excited to be partnering with British Esports to make a difference in the lives of children and young adults through a scholastic and academic approach to esports," says Gerald Solomon, executive director of the Samueli Foundation and founder of NASEF. "It is rare when two entities have the same set of values and moral compass. Working together, we can accomplish so much more for children around the world."

### On the agenda

British Esports and NASEF will design, develop and implement new programs; run joint esports tournaments and other events; and run exchange programs for coaches, esports managers, teachers and more. The two groups plan to develop content for an existing online student learning

## INDUSTRY NEWS

### Clayton County Public Schools

(Ga.) will improve student safety on school-provided technology using **Gaggle**. A combination of artificial intelligence and an in-house team of trained safety professionals evaluates flagged content for false positives and determines their severity. Gaggle alerts district personnel to policy violations, inappropriate content, critical mental health issues and imminent danger to students.

### Indian Prairie School District 204

(Ill.) recently selected many of **Edupoint Educational Systems'** Synergy platforms, including student information, assessment, special education, analytics, and tiered intervention and positive behavior management. The district will be able to access real-time data through one cloud-based interface using one login.

### Madison County School System

(Ala.) will expand the use of **Scientific Learning's** Fast ForWord reading intervention program to its middle schools after students in 17 elementary schools experienced seven months' worth of reading growth in seven weeks. Select K-8 students use the program for 30 minutes per day, five days per week.

**Nederland ISD** (Texas) selected **Boxlight** to outfit hundreds of classrooms with 230 75-inch ProColor panels that include MimioStudio software. Visual Techniques will manage the installations.

Several California high schools are piloting an outreach program from the **Stanford Women in Data Science Conference** that inspires students to consider careers in data science, artificial intelligence and other related areas. These schools are using the program's videos specifically designed for high schoolers in math and computer science classes, robotics clubs, and career centers.

—Steven Blackburn



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program, as well as a coaching manual for prospective esports coaches.

British Esports and NASEF will also provide input for their boards, offering an international perspective. NASEF officials recently attended British Esports' advisory board meeting in London, sharing insights into their programs while learning how the U.K.

organization's thoughts can be applied to benefit students in North America.

The aim is to share different esports educational approaches and programming methods, including curriculum development and related career content—and to set new standards for the esports community at a scholastic level.

—Chris Burt

**REGISTER TO JOIN US** at the Academic Esports Conference & Expo in Chicago, Oct. 19-21. [DAmag.me/esportsexpo](https://DAmag.me/esportsexpo)

## MOVERS AND SHAKERS

Superintendent **Steve Murley** of Iowa City Community School District plans to lead the Green Bay Area School District, starting in July. Green Bay is Wisconsin's fourth-largest district.

Assistant Superintendent **Evan Horton** of Coweta County School System (Ga.) will begin leading the district in June.

In July, Superintendent **Brian J. Ganan** of Komarek School District

94 (Ill.) will begin serving as superintendent of La Grange School District 105 (Ill.).

Assistant Superintendent **Brian Reagan** of Wilmington Public Schools (Mass.) was recently named superintendent of Waltham Public Schools District (Mass.).

Assistant Superintendent **Troy Roth** of Findlay City Schools will begin leading the Ohio district in August.

—Steven Blackburn



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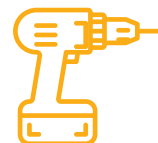
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# AT-RISK AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS



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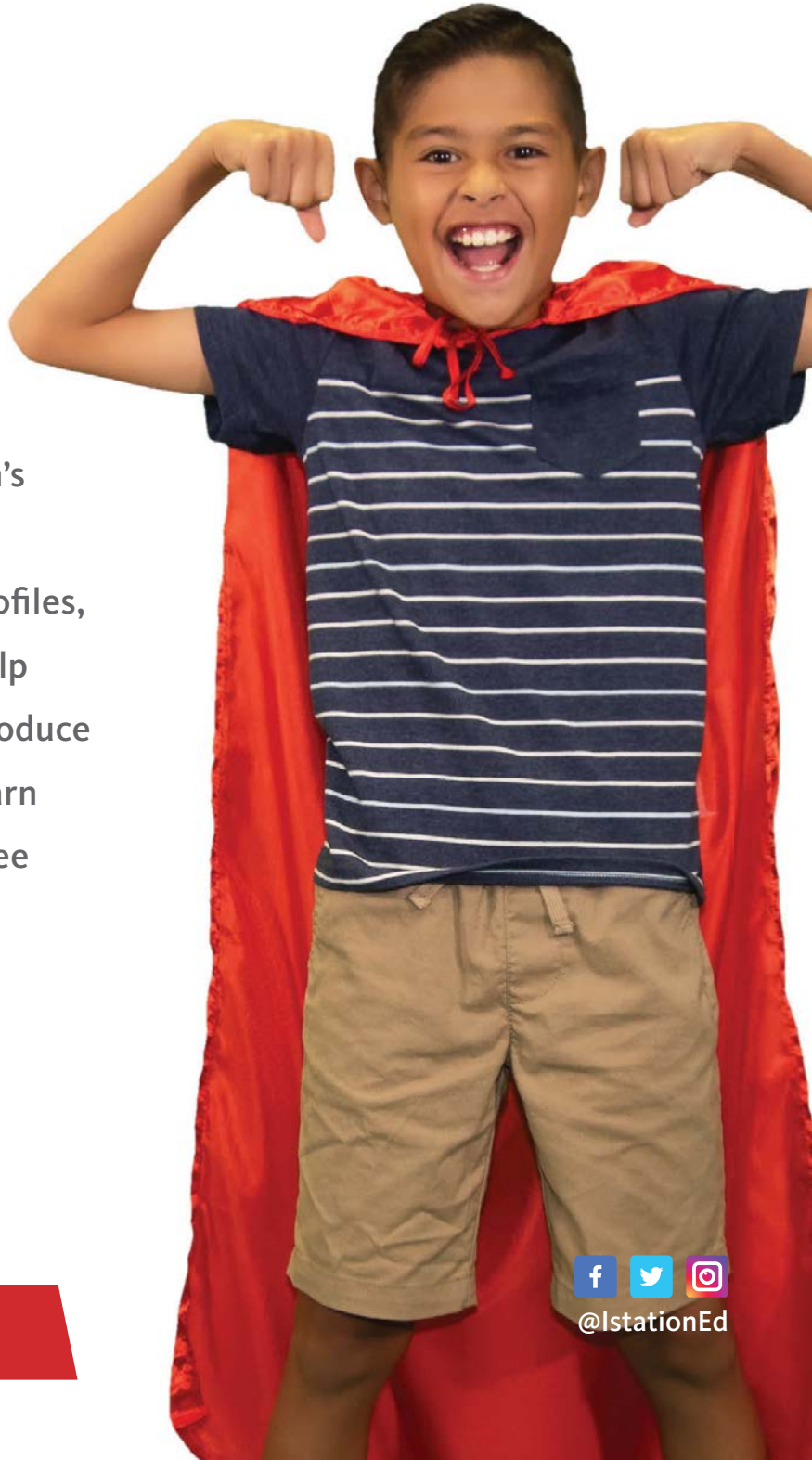
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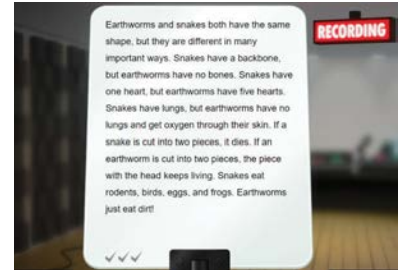
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# ASCENDING to new heights

Maine Township High School District 207  
supports minority student success

By Steven Blackburn



**FOOD FOR EQUITABLE THOUGHT**—District 207 created a hybrid block schedule that embeds lunch periods during classes each week. This schedule accommodates weekly ASCEND workshops where participants discuss what it's like being a minority student who is “leveling up” at Maine West without cutting into academic classes.

**M**ore Latinx and other minority students are enrolling in high-rigor classes after an Illinois district created and implemented a multipronged program

to improve accessibility.

Through weekly workshops and summer sessions, the ASCEND program has increased Latinx enrollment in AP courses every year since 2016-17. ASCEND students have also shown significant growth gains on the state’s reading assessment.

“If education stands for anything, it’s for making a more equitable, fair and just society,” says Superintendent Ken Wallace of Maine Township High School District 207. “This involves putting our underprivileged students in a position where they can change the trajectory of their life to help them get a job that not only pays well, but will positively change the life of their children and their children’s children.”

## Maine Township High School District 207

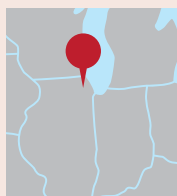
District size:

**6,400 students**

Superintendent:

**Ken Wallace**

Initiative launched: **2016-17**



### Self-advocacy

This year, the district invited minority students not enrolled in

## IMPRESSIVE TESTIMONIALS—

“I feel like I can be successful at Maine West” and “I know an adult I can talk with if I need help” are just two of the comments students have made about how the ASCEND program has impacted them.



AP or accelerated courses to participate in ASCEND based on English teacher recommendations and high grades.

“We are teaching students that it’s important to speak up on your own behalf and to always ask questions,” says Wallace. “Often, underprivileged families tell their kids to just go to school and to do what they’re told. That sends a clear message about compliance but not self-advocacy.”

### ‘Leveling up’ together

Every week, workshop coordinator Nate Hassman invites freshmen to participate in 45-minute workshops on Wednesdays and then their older peers on Thursdays. Many students come for advice or to discuss their journey as they “level up,” such as enrolling in AP for the first time, becoming a first-generation college student or taking student leadership positions. Students support and challenge each other to stay in difficult classes, clubs and activities.

“I don’t really teach students about our weekly topics. It’s quite the opposite. I’m the one getting taught,” says Hassman. “Students challenge my thinking. I challenge theirs.”

For example, a recent workshop was led by freshman Carlos

Hernandez who discussed how failure can be an asset, even a gift. “We all walked away seeing failure in a new light,” says Hassman.

### Preparing for college and careers

Students participate in two four-day sessions at the beginning and end of summer to prepare for college. Educators help with application essays, financial aid applications and discuss returns on investment. Students then visit a college campus for admissions presentations and tours.

ASCEND students are also encouraged to join a series of workshops led by school counselors that target first-generation and low-income learners. This group visits higher ed campuses and apprenticeship programs as well.

“There are no quick fixes in this work. Nothing happens in a day,” says Wallace. “It’s about creating a system of adult learning that equips educators to come up with ideas about how to serve our students. I am privileged to have great people who serve our kids in these significant ways.” **DA**

*Steven Blackburn is associate editor of DA.*

“If education stands for anything, it’s for making a more equitable, fair and just society.”

—*Superintendent Ken Wallace*



## Closing the equity gap

**2015-16:** 38.6% Hispanic population with 14% AP participation

**2017-18:** 38% Hispanic population with 26.4% AP participation

**2016-17:** 38% Hispanic population with 17.8% AP participation

**2018-19:** 39.5% Hispanic population with 28.1% AP participation

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# Keep students reading all summer long.

## Turn the summer slide into summer growth

Research shows that reading at least 20 minutes a day, every day, can make a world of difference for students at all levels.

The challenge for district leaders is how to get and keep students engaged in reading over the summer months, without regular contact with teachers, school librarians, and others who provide that reading message during the school year. The solution is a summer literacy initiative that motivates students **with the support of families and community partners**.

A successful summer initiative should mirror the district culture and serve as a connector between the prior school year and the upcoming school year. Well-executed summer initiatives that become part of the fabric of a district community result in an expectation that *"Of course our students will continue reading over the summer months. Why wouldn't they?"*

## Our solution for greater summer reading engagement

Students who use myON during the school year can continue to access it over the summer. The myON platform provides unlimited access to thousands of enhanced digital books and age-appropriate news articles, allowing students to read anytime and anywhere.

And myON's smart engine provides each student with a recommended list of books that match their interests, grade, and reading level—helping to ensure they're reading those just-right books that foster reading growth even when they're out of school.

## Planning a just-right summer initiative

An important first step is to identify a summer literacy coordinator who can lead the planning and implementation processes:

- Ensuring that students have access to engaging material for summer reading
- Establishing goals and success indicators, along with a plan for monitoring progress
- Communicating information about the summer initiative to staff, students, and families

Next, drill down into the elements that will make the summer initiative engaging and effective:



Select a summer reading theme and create reading challenges that enable students to strive for their personal best to boost engagement.



Provide families with information about the importance of summer reading and recommendations for reading with and to their children.



Forge partnerships with public libraries and community organizations that offer summer programs to provide additional support and access to reading materials.



Celebrate successes with culminating activities around the summer reading theme, student awards for achieving reading goals, etc.



Discover how myON will support your summer reading initiative. Get started at [www.renaissance.com](http://www.renaissance.com)

# Districts of Distinction At-Risk and English language learner category finalists

Three K-12 districts being honored as Districts of Distinction runners-up for developing innovative programs that target at-risk students

By Steven Blackburn

## **FAIL IS A FOUR LETTER WORD** School District of Springfield Township (Pa.), [sdst.org](http://sdst.org)

**CHALLENGE:** Over four years, a disproportionate number of students failing high school courses were students of color. Also, the number of minority students who failed one or more courses increased each year. Administrators wanted greater teacher responsibility, intervention and investment in student support systems.

**INITIATIVE:** Before assigning a failing grade, teachers meet or call parents, (instead of emailing), as well as share concerns with administrators, request more support, help students 1-to-1 and set up mandatory tutoring. Parents receive automated computer notifications every two weeks that warn if their children are at risk of failing, and guidance counselors conduct bi-weekly student check-ins. Parents and students participate in school conferences to discuss potential failures.

**IMPACT:** Parents feel more included, while students appreciate the personalized outreach and have gained confidence. “Typically, high school parents hear at the last minute if their child is failing from impersonal progress reports or report cards,” says Superintendent Nancy Hacker. “For some seniors, our program made the difference with them being able to graduate.”

**ADVICE:** Conduct comprehensive data analysis, including the reasons behind failing grades. “Identifying factors that contribute to a student’s lack of interest or

motivation is critical so that these issues can be overcome,” says Hacker. “Equity means ensuring students have a sense of belonging and need to know that teachers care about how they do, without being judgmental about the ... failure.”

## **COLLEGE-BOUND SENIORS** Talbot County Schools (Ga.), [talbot.k12.ga.us](http://talbot.k12.ga.us)

**CHALLENGE:** Many students were not pursuing higher education and very few of those who did were accepted into college. Many seniors also considered dropping out of high school to get jobs.

**INITIATIVE:** “I began by talking to students about the reality of the job market and how education upgrades the type of job and salary they can achieve,” says Jody Tarleton, director of counseling. Now seniors must have 1-to-1 counseling sessions biweekly and meet with an assigned faculty or staff member as part of a weekly mentoring program. Hanging on a wall in the cafeteria are pictures of students who have been accepted to college. “This caught fire and every senior wanted to make it to the wall,” she says.

**IMPACT:** Originally, just 9% of students were accepted into college. Over the last three years, every student who has applied has been accepted into a college or university. GPAs have increased and more students take the SAT and ACT exams to improve their performance. “This has brought a feeling of hope and excitement to our district and encouraged parents that their children can achieve higher education,” says Tarleton.

**ADVICE:** “It’s important to have an open-door policy, allowing students to

seek attention or feedback as often as they need it,” she says.

## **CREATING OPPORTUNITIES AND ACCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS** Meriden Public Schools (Conn.), [Meridenk12.org](http://Meridenk12.org)

**CHALLENGE:** Many students with special needs received specialized services outside of the system. “We wanted to develop a districtwide continuum of services for students to allow them to thrive and grow within their home community,” says Mark Benigni, superintendent.

**INITIATIVE:** These services begin with early interventions in preschool and then programs for students with autism and communication disorders, emotional and behavioral disorders, and multiple disabilities. A newer academy for students in grades 6 through 12 offers a smaller, more supportive environment. The latest innovation is a community classroom for 18-21 year olds at the local YMCA. The district also added a sensory room staffed by a special ed teacher, physical and occupational therapists, and support staff.

**IMPACT:** Meriden continues to bring back 8 to 10 outplaced students annually. The number of classrooms offering PreK-12 programs has increased from two to eight. The community classroom serves 25 students. Parents get to stay connected with their neighborhood school, and staff welcome the greater opportunities for communication, says Benigni.

**ADVICE:** “Think creatively about how you can reallocate resources, reengineer space, empower staff and collaborate with community partners,” says Benigni. “We did it. You can, too.” **DA**



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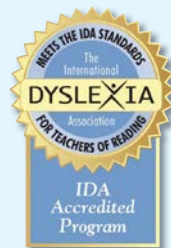


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—Co-Author Dr. Louisa Moats



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# Lessons in LISTENING



**LISTEN UP!**—Both elementary and high school students in Sanger USD schools use technology to practice listening skills.



PHOTO COURTESY OF LISTENWISE

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# 5 reasons why listening skills are being incorporated into reading instruction

By Victoria Clayton

How often have you heard any student boast “I’m a great listener!”? Beyond preschool, probably not often. It turns out we should be hearing it a lot more.

Listening well is not only a highly relevant skill—thank you TED Talks, podcasts and audiobooks—but it’s also become an educational standard as well as a long recognized critical link in future success.

Last year, a survey by Morning Consult for the ed tech company Cengage found listening skills were the most in-demand talent among employers—74% of whom indicated it as a most-valued skill.

For college-bound kids, listening is essential. In fact, researchers have called this phase of life a four-year (or more!) linguistic swarm marked by a daily boatload of oral language.

And then there’s a little thing called standardized testing—with 22 states now testing for listening. It’s an anchor standard across all grades, says Monica Brady-Myerov, CEO of Listenwise, a provider of educational listening programs. “No doubt, listening really took off with the adoption of Common Core.”

Auding, or listening to spoken language, skills have become so important that Meta Metrics, creators of the Lexile leveled reading framework, recently introduced a listening framework.

Too much hoopla over a soft skill we didn’t think to explicitly teach a few years ago? Nope. In fact, listening can be seen as a superpower. Here are five reasons why.

**1. Listening exposes cracks in literacy**  
Comprehension is the underlying skill for both reading and listening for learning. Students have to be able to draw

conclusions, integrate and make inferences.

In early grades, however, poor comprehenders can go undetected when these students are good decoders. But with more complex texts later, hidden impairments emerge. A 2015 study published in the *International Journal of Speech and Language Pathology* highlights a growing number of children who fail to develop adequate reading comprehension skills, primarily due to deficient listening comprehension skills.

“Sort of the classic dyslexic is a student who might listen well but struggle with reading, but there are also students with the opposite profile,” says Alistair Van Moere, chief product officer at MetaMetrics, the creators of Lexile. “Students who have cracked decoding are able to take a passage and read aloud. We think, ‘Oh they’re doing fine,’ but comprehension is really a separate skill.”

By actively teaching and evaluating listening comprehension, educators get a fuller picture of a student’s strengths and weaknesses. “It just gives you a more global view and it often tells you that you need to work on comprehension skills, something you maybe didn’t realize,” says Van Moere.

## 2. Listening serves as a dyslexia inclusion strategy

Laws requiring dyslexia screening recently took effect in many states, including Missouri. This year districts there were required to screen every student in kindergarten through third grade. Amanda McCaleb, a literacy intervention specialist with Springfield Public Schools, says her district’s results were in line with what research has indicated. “We found about 18% of those screened—almost one in five—were identified as at risk for dys-

lexia,” says McCaleb. “This is definitely a significant amount of students who need some very specific interventions.”

About half the schools in the district of 25,000 students are Title I and have an interventionist on staff, but the district also needed a way to better assist kids in the other schools. They’re now using MindPlay virtual reading coach, a tool that relies heavily on audio to teach vocabulary and grammar for the students identified as needing extra help.

Another key tool, Learning Ally, is specifically dedicated to listening. “The audio piece is really important for all students, but especially for our students who either have a diagnosis of dyslexia or may be at risk for dyslexia,” says McCaleb. “What we’ve found is that typically these students have quite high listening comprehension.”

Struggling readers who listen to content rather than read it—or listen while also reading a transcript—often can comprehend at or above grade level. “In this way, audio is an assistive technology just like speech-to-text assists with writing,” says McCaleb. “We can make learning accessible to students who might otherwise not be able to access grade-level content.”

Occasionally, teachers think relying on listening rather than reading is somehow unfair, but most educators take the opposite stance: they feel it’s one way to help level the playing field. “For me, those conversations always come back to needing to support the student to make sure they have equitable access,”



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# Lessons in LISTENING

McCaleb says. “And now I really think primarily teachers are very excited and want to just kind of figure out how to incorporate more audio content.”

### 3. Listening can improve reading comprehension

Reading aloud to children has long been heralded as the foundation for literacy development. Studies dating back decades have called it the single most important activity for reading success.

It makes sense, then, that since the advent of audiobooks, educators have embraced them as golden resources for vocabulary, comprehension and reading fluency.

Students can use audio along with text, which scaffolds weaker readers. In effect, they can ‘ear read.’ But there is a hitch. Once students become proficient readers, the tables turn. Strong read-

ers learn complex information easier by reading than by listening.

### 4. Listening can engage hard-to-reach students

At first, listening instruction in Tyson Bohlinger’s English language arts classes at Griffiths Middle School in Downey, California, included TED Talks and a graphic organizer. Now he’s graduated to Listenwise, which provides short NPR clips and a host of rich resources students find intriguing. Bohlinger ties the listening activities with other lessons—recently it was civil rights and social justice—and he’s even able to sync the lessons and activities with his Google Classroom.

He introduces a new audio lesson every two weeks, and what he has noticed is nothing short of miraculous for middle schoolers: A lack of complaints.

“They just get the headphones on and get to work,” he says, adding that he makes sure students understand the purpose behind the activity. “I tell them that learning to listen well could be the difference between holding on to a job or losing a job. I also explain to my students that listening is a skill set that is going to be extremely important not only to just becoming intelligent humans, but also important so that they can contribute to civic society—especially since we’re living in an age of disinformation.”

It helps that Bohlinger is a podcast and audiobook fanatic. “My passion definitely comes through,” he says.

### 5. Listening matches up with core standards

“Speaking and listening” skills are part of the Common Core standards for English language arts. Like most U.S. students, Bohlinger says Griffiths middle schoolers haven’t been doing particularly well in this area. But as a Title I school, they are fortunate to have one-to-one devices and funding to spend on tech and supplemental programs. Bohlinger became determined to get his kids listening well.

“When I first started out I allowed transcripts along with audio, which is kind of like training wheels,” he says. Eventually, he removed the transcripts to align with the scenario that would come up on the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASP). After a semester of using Listenwise, Bohlinger tested the waters. He gave his students the interim listening assessment that CASPP provides and then compared one class’s results with what those same students scored for their seventh grade standardized test. Roughly 22% more students scored above the standard.

“I’d call that statistically significant,” he says. He’s looking forward to results from this year’s test, but so far he’s convinced listening is a worthwhile investment. **DA**

*Victoria Clayton is a Southern California-based writer.*

## How to get started with listening



Theresa Blanchard, the EL Program Specialist for Sanger Unified School District near Fresno, California, has been helping implement and fine-tune a listening program in her district for the past two years. Here are the steps she recommends for getting started.

#### Seek out your early adopters

There are always some teachers who love to experiment with different resources. They’ll help pilot a program and share wisdom. They can also steer professional learning communities centered on best practices for listening activities.

#### Think outside the English class

Blanchard recommends integrating listening as much as possible into all subjects, but especially with science and social studies in the secondary level. “There’s a lot of great audio content that brings these subjects alive that teachers will want to embrace,” she says.

#### Focus first on subgroups of students

If you introduce listening first with English language learners and students with IEPs, many of whom need alternate strategies to access content and build skills, Blanchard says other teachers will clamor to use it as well.

#### Don’t rely solely on tech

No matter how good your listening ed tech resource might be, there’s still some old-fashioned explicit instruction that needs to take place. Think-alouds, modeling and mini-lessons are effective listening instruction strategies. Many students will need to be taught how to take notes or annotate a transcript while listening along or even how to have a collaborative conversation after listening. Teachers will also need to coach students to use the features of tech to their advantage—for example, accessing definitions for unfamiliar vocabulary words.

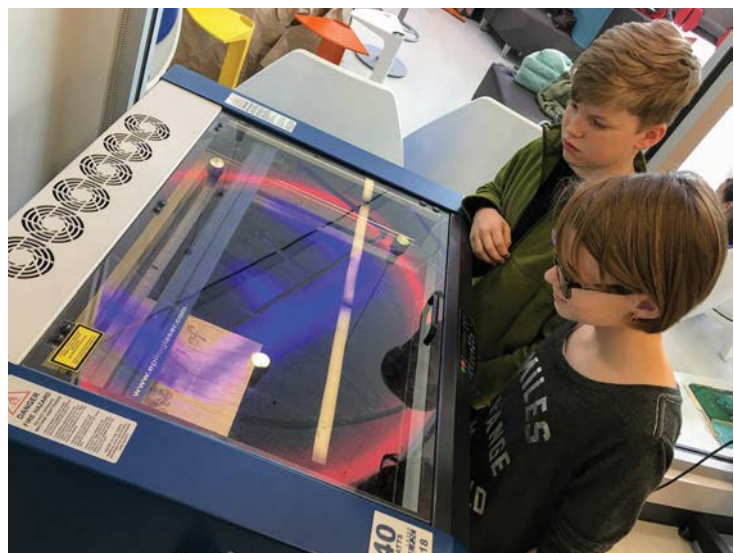


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# Math fluency improves student learning and appreciation of the subject



Applying characteristics of fluency requires student time and patience

## Q&A with **Gina Kling**, Mathematics Instructor at Western Michigan University and Author of *Everyday Mathematics 4*, McGraw-Hill

### How does developing fluency in mathematics improve student learning and appreciation of math?

There are four components of fluency: flexibility, appropriate choice of strategies, efficiency and accuracy. The focus on flexibility and strategies to develop problem-solving skills makes students more efficient and accurate. The idea of fluency in terms of flexibility and the problem-solving aspect makes students feel less anxious about it and more confident in their mathematical abilities, resulting in greater appreciation.

### What can K-12 administrators eliminate to improve math fluency and set up students for success?

When students first develop fluency, we are helping them become flexible thinkers and develop meaningful strategies. The other piece of that is how to assess fluency. The way we traditionally assess basic facts is the timed test. When thinking about the four components of fluency, we are not assessing flexibility because there is no way for teachers to see how students think about a problem when they are just recording an answer in a short amount of time. We cannot assess the strategies either because timed tests do not do that by design. As for efficiency and accuracy, there is quite a bit of research coming out of the fields of neuroscience and psychology about the damaging effects of timed testing and the anxiety that children feel, which impedes their ability to show what they know.

### What strategies help teachers support all learners in developing fluency and reaching automaticity?

One of the biggest strategies for teachers is having patience while providing students time to wrestle with ideas. Kindergarten and first-grade teachers feel pressure to have students reach automaticity, which is different from fluency. Automaticity involves fluency because when students are automatic, they reach the point where they can very efficiently apply characteristics of fluency. Teachers

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**“Students need to have a sense of overall measurement before we expect them to do complex problems with area or volume.”**

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should assess for automaticity at the end of second grade. It is premature to assess them in kindergarten or first grade as students need time and space to reach automaticity in a lasting and meaningful way by tying together conceptual pieces with efficiency.

### What are the most effective learning practices and how can instructional coaches help teachers use them effectively?

In *Everyday Mathematics 4*, we help students create an environment where they own their learning. “Subitizing,” which is the ability to quickly identify the number of items in a small set without counting, is a good strategy learned through Quick Look Cards, an activity in which images of quantities on durable cards are displayed for a few seconds and then removed. Students are naturally discouraged from merely trying to count, which encourages strategic development. Students need to have a sense of overall measurement before we expect them to do complex problems with area or volume, and the same principle applies with basic fact development—conceptual understanding must accompany the development of fluency. We are honoring and understanding that developmental progression with *Everyday Mathematics 4*.





# COMPLETE COMPETENCE

## HOW FOUR SCHOOL DISTRICTS ARE TRANSITIONING TO COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

By Matt Zalaznick



**D**o traditional letter and number grades truly prove what a student has actually learned? Do they indicate whether a learner is ready to tackle the next unit or grade level, or to move on to a college and career?

No, say the growing number of K-12 leaders who are transitioning their districts to competency-based education, a model that allows students to progress only when they can demonstrate they've acquired a skill or met a learning standard.


“A student can cram and memorize facts and get 100% on an exam, but will those facts be retained in two weeks' time?” says Superintendent Libby Bonesteel, who is shifting her district, Montpelier-Roxbury Public Schools in Vermont, to competency-based education. “This should get deeper into the learning process so students hold onto what they've learned.”

Competency-based education can also make instruction more equitable because it should prevent students from moving

up and graduating without mastering essential college and career skills, says Eliot Levine, research director at the ed tech and learning organization, the Aurora Institute (formerly iNACOL).

Traditional models of education leave students with a learning deficit that forces them to take (and pay for) remedial courses in college, a situation that impacts minority students disproportionately, explains Levine, who also manages the institute's CompetencyWorks initiative.

**MASTERY MINDSET**—Districts in New Hampshire and North Dakota shifted to competency-based education so these students get a chance to learn and retain skills more deeply.

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# COMPLETE COMPETENCE

He also points to studies of employers, who say entry-level employees are arriving with inadequate academic knowledge and without necessary lifelong success skills. “They go into the world to find they’re really unprepared.”

## Giving students choice builds confidence

Competency-based education relies on students having some freedom over how they demonstrate learning. That’s because this kind of freedom is a crucial life skill, says Cory Steiner, superintendent of Northern Cass School District 97 in North Dakota.

“We expect kids to be choice-ready when they leave our buildings yet we never let them make any choices while they’re in our buildings,” says Steiner, whose district has eliminated letter grades during its three-year transition to competency-based education in all grades.

“Now, we hear kids saying, “For once you’ve allowed me to make a choice, and look what I can do!””

For instance, students in Northern Cass get to decide when they’re ready for assessments. In an ELA course, that could take the form of a video about a novel.

Educators revamped the curriculum by prioritizing state standards in each

content area and mapping out proficiencies that learners must demonstrate before progressing. The district houses the standards—and the resources to teach them—in its learning management system.

Learners spend most of their time in small groups that are rearranged every few weeks as students reach different points in their learning. The district is also finding ways to give students credits for work done outside the classroom. For instance, students who went on a dinosaur dig got physical education credits for the long hikes they took each day.

“Nobody talks in terms of ‘we’re doing chapter four’ because we very seldom have textbooks anymore,” Steiner says. “And you won’t see seminars because whole-group instruction assumes every learner is at the same place.”

## Learning, rather than teaching

The state of Vermont in 2014 directed all districts to move to competency-based learning. The big pedagogical shift in Montpelier-Roxbury Public Schools has been de-emphasizing time as a measure of learning, says Bonesteel, the superintendent.

For example, instead of a traditional end-of-semester exam week, her district has a January “retake week.” Students who haven’t reached proficiency can get additional tutoring from teachers before retaking an assessment. The district has scheduled an intervention period during each school day so students can get additional assistance from teachers.

Montpelier-Roxbury’s middle and high school educators also have prioritized the standards and built proficiency scales. Teachers no longer give number or letter grades, but rather provide students with constant feedback based on a variety of formative assessments. In one Latin class, for instance, the teacher gave students five options for demonstrating their learning. “We need to get better at the formative assessment process, rather than the summative that teachers are well versed in,” Bonesteel says. “Summative is the autopsy but formative is the diagnosis.”

## DISTRICT CASE STUDY: Preparing for competency-based education

School districts, particularly large systems, can’t just flick the switch on competency-based education. Here’s how one Arizona school district is approaching the transition.



**WHERE:** Mesa Public Schools

**DISTRICT PROFILE:** 80 schools, 640,000 students (the largest district in Arizona)

### PREPARATION PIECES:

- Ensure students’ competency-based grades will be able to be accurately reported to colleges.
- Develop a “portrait of a graduate” to lay out the skills students should have when they complete high school.
- Pilot some competency-based learning environments (for example, by allowing some students to demonstrate mastery for a digital literacy requirement without having to take a full course in the subject).
- Shift grading toward a mastery focus, providing students with multiple ways to demonstrate learning.

### Thoughts from Jennifer Echols, the director of personalized learning and the district’s distance learning program:

- On helping teachers consider how grading must change: “It’s thinking about not penalizing students for late work because that’s a behavior; it’s not connected to what they know and can do. It’s thinking about issuing an incomplete and not assigning zeros, which is a grade a student can’t recover from.”
- On messaging to communicate to teachers about why the district is changing its mode: “Kids really need to be expert learners. They have to be prepared to reinvent themselves and learn new things at any time based on the changes that will come at them in the world of work.”

Parents were initially concerned about how their children's competency-based work would translate to traditional college transcripts. So educators have to communicate regularly and clearly that colleges and universities now take alternative types of transcripts that can accommodate Montpelier-Roxbury's proficiency system.

"Competency-based learning changes the conversation to learning rather than teaching," Bonesteel says. "We're switching our focus from what the adults are doing to what students are doing."

### Allowing students to defend their thinking

Across the border in New Hampshire, Sanborn Regional High School and the Sanborn Regional School District have been competency-based for about 10 years.

The district's teachers are constantly developing new performance tasks that allow students to show mastery. In a fourth grade science class, for example, students built a solar cooker to demonstrate skills that would've been tested by a state assessment.

In high school math, teachers designed a performance task around cell phone plans. Students had to research cost and other factors to make a pitch to their parents about the best data plan. "It's not about getting the answers. It's all about process and students being able to defend their thinking," says Brian M. Stack, principal of Sanborn Regional High School.

Designing these tasks and assessments requires constant collaboration by teachers because, as Stack has seen, they'll come up with more powerful ideas together than they will working alone.

The competency-based learning system also allows Sanborn High School students to engage in one or more "extended



**TEST QUESTIONS**—Students in Northern Cass School District 97 get to decide when to take assessments.

learning opportunities." These begin sophomore year with a "student interest" course that allows them to explore topics they're passionate about. Students then complete three to four months of research that culminates with a defense of learning in the form of a presentation, video or other project.

In junior and senior years, the experience becomes a year-long project that takes up multiple periods of the school day. One student, for example, started a production company while others have interned in doctor's offices, elementary schools and on archaeological digs. Some of these students, including one who studied fungus in a University of New Hampshire lab, got additional course credits for this work.

"Learning doesn't just have to take place inside classroom walls," Stack says.

"Our educators can help quantify, manage and focus the learning opportunities that happen outside school walls, which some would argue is the more authentic, relevant learning."

### 'Champing at the bit'

The Iron County School District in southern Utah is devoting a whole new school to competency-based learning. Launch High School will open in a district-owned office building in August with about 200 students and a highly personalized curriculum.

"Unfortunately, traditional systems move students ahead when they're not ready and hold them back when they're champing at the bit," says Cory Henwood, coordinator of the district's innovative teaching and learning team. "It's not very responsive to their needs or interests."

Students will attend Launch High School for their core classes and return to their home schools for electives and extra-curricular activities.

After enrollment in the school via lottery, students will spend about half their time on experiential, hands-on learning projects through which they will demonstrate mastery of standards.

Professionals and other community members will mentor students to guide them in their projects and help them develop soft skills such as problem-solving, creative thinking and collaboration.

"It appeals to all sorts of students, like the advanced learner who wants to progress at own pace, and the learner who wants a more hands-on experience," Henwood says. "It also appeals to students with IEPs and special needs who want a more personalized approach." **DA**

*Matt Zalaznick is DA's senior writer.*



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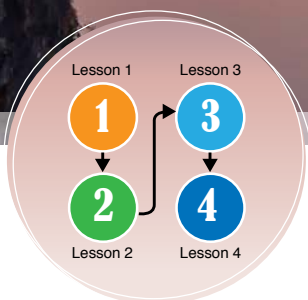
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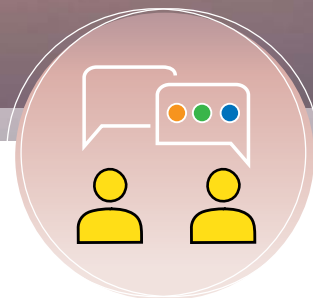


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# Individualized for all



Whole-classroom personalized learning approaches and their impact on students with disabilities

By Nancy Mann Jackson

**W**ith new technologies available to help facilitate students' progress, increasing numbers of schools are attempting personalized learning (PL). But some educators wonder if it can leave students with disabilities behind. The assumption is that these students are left to their own devices—with technology responsible for

moving them into higher-order skills.

But teachers and administrators who are incorporating personalized learning in the classroom and schools say this isn't the case. Rather than relying on technology programs to provide students with academic content on their level, when they appear ready for it, classrooms focused on the PL approach

provide robust learning opportunities for all, including students with special needs. Those opportunities may include collaborating on projects with other students, practicing critical thinking skills by pursuing their own learning interests, and attempting more rigorous work with their teachers' guidance.

"An effective personalized learning



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**MULTIPLE APPROACHES TO TEACHING**—Teachers at Fresno USD blend whole-group instruction, targeted small-group instruction, collaborative tasks and independent practice with meaningful use and nonuse of technology.

# Individualized for all



**STAFF ASSISTANCE**—In some Putnam County (Tenn.) schools, special ed teachers share their experiences in personalized learning with general ed teachers.

initiative should emphasize the variability of all learners,” says Julie Wheelock, program manager for the department of special education in Fresno USD in California, which just completed a four-year implementation of PL. “Effective personalized, blended learning requires high expectations grounded in each students’ gifts and strong support aligned with each students’ needs. When done well,

we’ve observed students with special needs learn to know their own giftedness.”

Here’s how various aspects of personalized learning are making an impact on special education students.

## **Instructional method mixture**

Variety is an important component of personalized learning, and when teachers have a toolbox of instructional methods at their

disposal, meeting the needs of each student is more likely. For instance, in Fresno, teachers are applying approaches that blend whole group instruction, targeted small group instruction, collaborative tasks, and independent practice with meaningful use and non-use of technology.

Such methods serve as a foundation used to tailor instruction to match individual needs, says Ryan Coe, secondary director of curriculum, instruction and professional learning. “The blended approaches applied by teachers for all students allow multiple entry points, different ways to show learning, increased opportunity for face-to-face and digital communication and collaboration, and improved access to digital supports for alternate ways to process learning and demonstrate understanding.”

One Fresno teacher found that using Flipgrid, a fun video app, helped special needs students more readily reflect on their learning before moving to writing. Another found that a flipped instruction model allowed students to watch the instructional video at their own pace and rewind or play back the video as needed.

Some teachers implement various instructional methods at the same time, using learning stations. At the high school in Corcoran USD in California, a special ed teacher was included on the design team for the school’s PL initiative. After training on various PL methods, the teacher implemented the model in her class and supported other teachers, both special ed and general ed, to implement in their classrooms.

Corcoran High Principal Antonia Stone offered an example of how this special ed teacher implements PL in her classes: On Monday, she teaches a new concept to her students. On Tuesday, a formative assessment shows where the kids are and how well they are grasping the new content. Groups with various levels of support are then created based on strengths and weaknesses.

One group may work with a paraprofessional on vocabulary the students struggled with and the teacher may

## **Personalized learning checklist**

- Flexible content
- Targeted instruction that emphasizes learner variability
- Student reflection and ownership
- Data-driven decision-making
- Structures to ensure more teacher time with students
- An inclusive culture where students act as resources for each other

work with students who need support with strategies to summarize. Other stations, which all students visit at some point, incorporate work with a peer mentor and engaging with a video clip or short article on the concept. Students get reassessed before moving on to new concepts.

## Learning from special ed

Many of the strategies that work best in personalized learning classrooms are the same strategies that have worked well for special education teachers for many years. “A lot of special ed classrooms are based on competency; we want students to understand a skill before moving on to the next thing,” says Michelle Bowman, assistant principal of Cookeville High School, part of the Putnam County School System in Tennessee, and a former special education teacher. “And personalized learning is adopting that approach.”

The district has just completed a three-year integration of personalized learning. Besides a focus on competency, PL-based classrooms incorporate strategies such as co-teaching, teaching stations and hands-on learning—all of which are commonly used in special education. In some schools, special ed teachers are being called on to share their experience with these techniques with general ed teachers.

“Special ed teachers have to develop strategies to fit the needs of each individual learner,” Bowman says, adding that language in individualized education plans can also give mainstream education teachers ideas.

### Student choice and voice

Giving students choices in how they learn, what projects they pursue and how their learning is assessed can be invaluable for all students. Those who struggle with written tests, for instance, can instead give a presentation or test verbally, says Sam Brooks, personalized learning supervisor for the Putnam County School System in Tennessee. In one classroom, he watched a teacher allow special needs students to choose how to present the information that needed to be assessed; one student gave a PowerPoint presentation while another made a poster and talked about it to the class.

When Fresno USD rolled out its personalized learning initiative four years ago, the foundations were “honoring student voice, cultivating competencies for future readiness, and delivering quality instruction with intentional use of digital resources,” says Philip Neufeld, executive director for information technology.

After four years of focusing on honoring student voice, third-party analysis of Fresno’s program showed positive impact across all student groups, including students with special needs, he adds.

### Real-time data usage

The continuous assessment of skills and understanding—central to the PL approach—is beneficial for all students, especially special needs students who may easily fall behind.

Software programs provide ongoing data for teachers to see how much students are learning, but there are plenty of other ways to glean consistent, real-time data in a PL classroom.

Formative, almost daily assessments can be as simple as an assignment posting

board where students mark their progress with choices such as “I understand this fully,” “I need help with a few things,” or “I need help.”

Harnessing ongoing data and using it to make decisions about how to move forward is a hallmark of personalized learning. And it’s especially helpful for students with special needs.

With regular, ongoing assessments to reveal student learning outcomes, teachers can use that data to make decisions about how to better target future instruction. PL makes it feasible to build targeted groups based on which students need a review of the concept, which ones can apply the concept and which ones can go deeper to analysis, says Stone of Corcoran High.

“I hear a lot about sped students never getting to analysis,” she adds. “With properly implemented PL, this isn’t true.”

For example, one special ed teacher used political cartoons as a means to discover the author’s purpose and find evidence from the text to support that assertion. The students then applied the concept to a short piece of text. She worked with three students at a time who had similar questions, comments and pace. The teacher also used different cartoons with messages leveled from more obvious to more obscure, based on each group’s abilities. The lesson was successful in moving students of all abilities from learning a concept, applying it and analyzing it.

“Personalized learning doesn’t impede already struggling students,” says Stone. “Rather, it challenges them, makes the content accessible and comprehensible, and allows them to achieve.” **DA**

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*Nancy Mann Jackson is an Alabama-based writer.*

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# Rural Schools Investing in Teachers for Student Success

*Windsor Community Unit School District #1 focuses grant resources on teacher development and training*

Windsor Community Unit School District #1 ("Windsor") is a small, rural school district in Central Illinois. There are only two school buildings, one elementary school and one junior/senior high school, serving nearly 400 students in kindergarten through 12th grade. Almost half of the students are from low income families and most students spend their entire pre-secondary educational careers in Windsor. As in many rural districts, it is hard to replace retiring teachers, find substitutes, or recruit individuals with specialty degrees or certifications. While many small, rural districts lament these shared challenges, Windsor has chosen to embrace its teachers, empowering them with training and support, to encourage retention and provide the educational excellence that their students deserve.

Windsor has dedicated the resources it receives through its ESSA grant to engage the support of Atlantic Research Partners, a technical services organization that has a footprint of serving schools and districts in 26 states, with more than 150 partnerships, impacting over one million students. The relationship between Windsor and Atlantic Research Partners is more than just that of a district and vendor. It is a true partnership forged from the shared passion of providing teachers all of the technical support and training that they need to ensure student success in their classrooms. District administration has made a commitment to its teachers to provide professional development and training through the methods and models utilized by Atlantic Research Partners.

## In the beginning

Atlantic Research Partners initially provided to Windsor, as it does with all engagements, a needs assessment and school improvement plan development support. This included systematic, thorough and comprehensive evaluations of programs, systems, and personnel. Analysis was based solely upon the basis of validated and documented evidence, and in accordance with clearly articulated criteria. Atlantic Research Partners identified educational standards achieved and not achieved at the school site and provided detailed strategies for implementing critical changes.

Crucial to Atlantic Research Partners' value is the collaborative involvement of leaders and teachers themselves at the building level. Longitudinal studies by



**"The relationship between Windsor and Atlantic Research Partners is more than just that of a district and vendor. It is a true partnership forged from the shared passion of providing teachers all of the technical support and training that they need to ensure student success in their classrooms."**

Atlantic Research Partners and efficacy researchers nationwide establish that effective interventions and sustainable change occur only if those affected by the interventions "own" and participate in implementation. Consequently, Atlantic Research Partners maintains a rigorous focus on collaboration, professionalism, respectfulness and sensitivity in all of its work. Issues are explored and probed with stakeholders—not independently or in isolation. High standards and high expectations are not compromised by collaboration; instead, opportunities for sustained growth are data-proven to be enhanced.

## Onsite, customized teacher support

Atlantic Research Partners dispatched professional development and instructional coaching experts to Windsor to provide customized, onsite professional development and instructional coaching for teachers in kindergarten through 12th grades. The Atlantic Research Partners team members provide shoulder-to-shoulder supports to teachers in their classroom. These supports start with teacher observation, complete with verbal and written feedback, to allow the teacher to have a deeper understanding of strengths and areas of needed improvement.

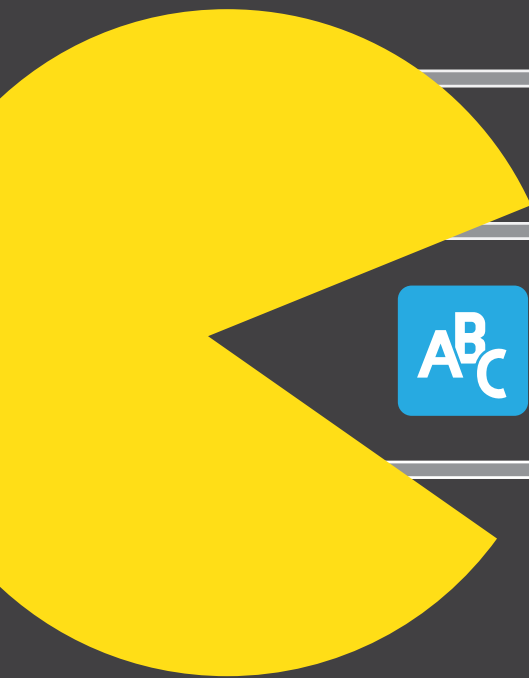
Each teacher has an individual plan of supports developed by Atlantic Research Partners specifically for them in the form

of regular coaching for the teachers. The ongoing coaching can include mentoring, modeling, self-assessment, and the development of instructional strategies targeted for the teacher and his/her classroom. All supports are research-based, data-driven best practices, specifically tailored to the needs of teachers and the goals determined by Windsor.

## The results are in

Windsor and its teachers have seen positive growth in their teacher instruction and student learning since partnering with Atlantic Research Partners. The district has maintained its Commendable rating in Illinois and through professional development sessions and individualized coaching, teachers are better prepared to meet the needs of their students and have a strong educational impact. Atlantic Research Partners' practice, coupled with deep research and analysis within each school and district they serve, confirms something fundamental: there is no one-size-fits-all solution to accelerate student achievement and develop sustainability within our schools. Together, with Windsor's team, Atlantic Research Partners has crafted strategies to meet the needs of each teacher in each classroom; strategies based on research-established methodologies proven to affect school culture and student academic performance.

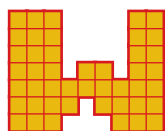
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# APP ATTACK

Four strategies to help districts rein in the influx of apps being used in the classroom

By Jodi Helmer



When Steve Langford realized that his employer, Beaverton School District, needed a process to manage the abundance of apps being used in classrooms, he asked teachers to submit help desk tickets through the IT department to help vet the learning tools. Within weeks, more than 1,600 tickets had been submitted.

“We looked at that and said, ‘Oh, this is a much larger problem than we realized,’” says Langford, CIO for the Oregon district. “I’ve heard it said that the district knows about 5% of the apps that are used ... and those are the ones that we pay for and manage. What we learned was there

were a vast multitude of apps [in Beaverton schools] that we just had no visibility into.”

A 2018 BrightBytes report of app usage in 58 school districts found that students logged almost 30 million hours on 177 learning apps. As app use becomes ubiquitous in schools, administrators are faced with the challenge of managing all aspects of usage—from ensuring tools are compatible with curriculum standards to

confirming compliance with the Family Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

When it comes to mobile device management, adopting these four strategies can help streamline app purchases, vetting and compliance within the district.

### 1. Create a decision-making system

Not long after Beaverton teachers began submitting help desk tickets, Langford realized the district needed a more formal



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# APP ATTACK

review process that included a working group with stakeholders from the curriculum and IT departments.

“It was much more complex,” he says, than what might be collected on a simple spreadsheet. “Each one of those decision points takes a group of experts to do that work.”

Officials at Lewisville Independent School District in Texas created an app store to provide elementary teachers with access to almost 200 vetted apps that can be used in their classrooms. Teachers can submit requests to have additional apps added to the store.

A team from the digital learning department reviews the apps twice each year to ensure each aligns with the curriculum and that the data and privacy policies remain compliant with district, state and federal standards.

Students can log into their iPads and launch apps, but the account provisioning is done on the back end, says CTO Bryon Kolbeck. “If we have a resource that a student is not in the right class or grade level to access, they might see an app but they’ll never be able to log in.”

## 2. Review app usage analytics

Once apps are vetted, school district staff are charged with making sure the licenses are being used, not uploaded and forgotten.

To combat the issue of unused licenses in Boston Public Schools, CIO Mark Racine started using tools like Clever and GoGuardian Director to capture metrics and drawing on that data to guide decision-making. Unused licenses, he explains, could be a sign that a teacher needs an alternative tool or training to implement the app in the

classroom. It might also be a chance to redistribute licenses.

“In some cases, it’s worked to tell the vendor, ‘I’ve got a school over here that wants to buy licenses and a school over here has too many licenses. Can we shift some back and forth?’” he says. “We’ve had some success with partners that have allowed us to redistribute licenses to where they’re needed rather than who bought them and may not be using them.”

The data might also point to worthwhile investments, says Pete Just, CIO and CTO for Metropolitan School District of Wayne Township. Administrators at the Indianapolis district began gathering data about app use through the CatchOn platform in 2019. Although Just had wanted to use the analytics to cut underused apps, he discovered that knowing the numbers had an additional benefit. “When we learned that 30 of our 40 second grade teachers are using a version of a free app, we could say, ‘Maybe we need to look at upgrading to the paid version,’” he says.

## 3. Ensure seamless integration

In Beaverton, mobile device management helps teachers integrate digital learning tools into the curriculum. Langford works with the IT department to manage all 60,000 devices within the district network, installing apps and handling updates.

In addition to saving teachers from devoting countless hours to updating apps on their classroom sets of iPads and Chromebooks and then needing to monitor for regular updates, Langford explains, the centralized process allows IT staff to test the apps and work

through any problems.

“Sometimes we will catch an update that blows up and we’re able to prevent that from happening before it gets to students and teachers,” he says.

Although Boston teachers can make autonomous decisions about which apps

## From idea to approval: Determining the ROI on an app

Before approving an app for a classroom, administrators should ask six questions to ensure it is a smart investment:

1. Will it fill a gap in the curriculum or complement a resource currently being used in the classroom?
2. Is there a district-approved app that currently meets a similar need?
3. What are the system requirements and can the app be easily integrated into the existing infrastructure?
4. How does the cost of a district license compare to the cost for student or school site licenses, and which option makes more financial sense?
5. Will teachers require training to use the application, and when/where would that training occur?
6. Are data privacy agreements in place with the app vendor?

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to use in their classrooms, Racine often provides guidance about easy-to-use tools and integration practices.

“We can show them applications that have been rolled out with single sign-on, automatic rostering and privacy agreements that can be up and running the next day,” Racine says. “We want to jump in when we’re worried that teachers are going to have an enormous amount of manual labor because they’ve chosen an application that does not have any integration with our systems.”

#### 4. Prioritize student privacy

Guarding student data is paramount and districts take different approaches to ensuring classroom apps are compliant with FERPA guidelines.

As members of the national Student Data Privacy Consortium and Oregon Student Privacy Alliance, Beaverton School District has common privacy contracts for both national and state learning

**“We want to jump in when we’re worried that teachers are going to have an enormous amount of manual labor because they’ve chosen an application that does not have any integration with our systems.”**

—Mark Racine, Boston Public Schools

apps. The district maintains a page on its website where parents can see which vendors have signed contracts to protect student data.

Lewisville ISD IT leaders, meanwhile, spend a significant amount of time working with vendors to ensure data privacy agreements are in place. If vendors refuse to sign, Kolbeck looks for comparable apps that are in compliance. In rare cases when an app is essential and a vendor

refuses to sign a data privacy agreement, the district requires parents to sign consent forms allowing their children to use the app.

“We’ve had a couple of situations where a vendor has declined, and we’ve actually blocked access for our students and our teachers to that product,” says Lewisville ISD director of digital learning Michele Jacobsen.

Keith Krueger, CEO of the Consortium for School Networking, has witnessed an “explosion” of concern about student data privacy and works to educate districts about their federal law compliance responsibilities. At the most basic level, he says, “Districts have to balance the educational opportunities of apps with privacy concerns—and there have to be intentional policies about their use.” **DA**

*Jodi Helmer is a North Carolina-based writer.*



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## Are your employees feeling good about their paychecks?

How districts effectively compete with local employers and reduce turnover

By Carol Patton

**W**hen recruiting talent, you're probably contending with local employers who can afford to pay higher wages.

Some school districts have implemented creative ways to effectively compete, including eliminating salary caps. Offering competitive salaries or developing a variety of income opportunities sends a clear message to employees and job seekers: You're valued.

### Eliminate salary caps

At least 80% of students in Ogden School District, a Title I district in Utah, receive free or reduced-price lunches. Nationwide, employee turnover in such districts averages more than 25%, yet Ogden's turnover averages 18%, says Jessica Bennington, executive director of human resources.

She partially credits this to removing salary caps for licensed professionals. They receive an \$875 salary bump every year, and an additional \$875 after three years on the job and again between their seventh and eighth year in a position.

"We put a lot into professional development and want to retain our people and make sure we're competitive," Bennington says, adding that the district employs 1,250 teachers and staff. "We're high on the salary schedule for Utah. New hires say this is a big reason why they pick our district."



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## Offering competitive salaries or income options sends a clear message: You're valued.

### Offer extra-income opportunities

Ogden's noninstructional employees have other opportunities. The Ogden Police Department, for example, trained a handful as crossing guards who earn an additional \$400 per month. Like most districts, licensed professionals also coordinate after-school programs, such as a chess club, earning \$29.34 per hour.

Orange County Public Schools in Florida opened bus routes to classified employees and pays for them to be trained as licensed commercial drivers, says Theresa Harter-Miles, director of Compensation Services. Those with perfect attendance are also eligible for a \$1,100 annual bonus.

Paying college tuition is a benefit that can impact salary. Orange County, which supports 25,000 employees, partnered with Rollins College to develop an accelerated teaching degree program for paraprofessionals. It's paid for by the college's foundation and Title I funds. Currently, 18 are participating and another 14 plan to start in August. After graduation, Harter-Miles says the annual salaries for the paras will nearly double, to \$40,700.

A partnership with the University of Central Florida, Lockheed Martin Foundation and the district's Title I department helps teachers obtain master's degrees. There are 100 teachers in the

pipeline; 22 have graduated. In exchange for free tuition, they must teach at the district for at least three years.

An in-house training program—Emerging Leaders Academy—builds capacity for noninstructional employees who seek management positions. So far, 200 have completed the yearlong program that was launched in 2012 and can transition to the Management Leadership Academy, a two-year program.

"We compete with Disney and Universal," says Harter-Miles. "All of us in the city and county are feeling a lot of pressure involving compensation."

### Consider choice and flexibility

Not every district can offer salary bumps or income opportunities. So why not expand your benefit options?

Employees of the Davenport Community School District in Iowa can tailor their compensation and benefit package, says Robert Kobylski, superintendent of the district, which supports 2,500 employees. Seasoned administrators may choose long-term care insurance over other benefits, while young teachers may prefer a higher salary—versus a lower salary and signing bonus—to help pay off student debt.

Experienced teachers can also coach new instructors while being relieved of classroom responsibilities. They receive a "significant" stipend, Kobylski says.

He adds: "We're trying to provide an organizational culture and climate conducive to keeping individuals employed once they get here." **DA**

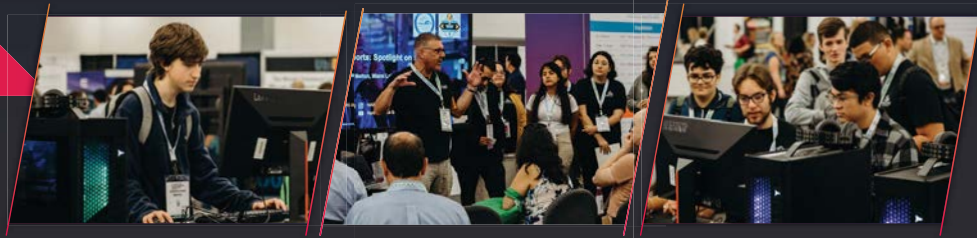
*Carol Patton is a Las Vegas-based writer who specializes in human resources issues.*



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## Engaging students in an age of distraction

Encourage your students to use their phones to lock into—rather than tune out—class

By Brent Warner

Teachers and professors long for the days when they could reasonably expect students to stay still for one or two hours and listen to a lecture on the sociological effects of the industrial revolution, or how the stomach communicates with the brain.

But here's the thing: The students who are texting their friends, playing games and checking Instagram are just the modern versions of those who passed notes, doodled in their textbooks or simply spaced out.

Instead of lamenting the loss of students who never were, perhaps it's time for educators to recognize that the impetus is on them to be more engaging, dynamic and effective in delivering content. This is not to imply that they need to be razzle-dazzle showpeople; they need to readjust their understanding of how to reach students.

One surefire approach is to stop treating the phone as the enemy. Following are a number of ways you can encourage your students to use the phone to lock into—rather than tune out—your class.

### Let's play

Most of us are spurred on by a little low-stakes, friendly competition. These days it's easy to create a quick timed quiz, pitting students against one another using services such as Kahoot and

### A little exploration and willingness to try new things can shift students to interaction.

Quizizz. These quick and easy games capture students' attention and give educators formative information on what students understand, which can help to shape upcoming lessons.

If you prefer a little more collaboration, try Quizlet. It prompts students to discuss answers with one another before committing to any individual's choice.

### Collaboration nation

All students benefit from collaborating on creating, building and documenting their work. The best way to get students working together is through Google Docs and Google Slides. These highly interactive tools allow students to watch what their classmates are doing in real time, and explain their thought process while they're doing it. It doesn't matter if you're teaching chemistry, algebra, composition or art; all students will benefit from a meta-analysis of their combined work as they build it.

On the educator's side, we can pop into any student's paper as they write, or take a look at the version history to see if the amount of work was relatively balanced among teammates. One great way to have students work with Google Docs and Slides is to start their projects in class, let them talk together through the early processes, and then transition into homework to complete their work.

### Ham it up

Today's students are more comfortable talking in front of a camera and sharing their thoughts with the world. Why not use that to your advantage? With apps like Flipgrid, students can display their social media savvy in a learning context. Each student can become an investigative reporter, a talking head or a coach with the studio they carry in their pocket.

If you don't know where to start when using Flipgrid, the online community of enthusiastic teachers is huge, and even the least creative teacher should have no problem finding ways to apply activities to a class. Jump on Twitter and search for #FlipgridFever for an endless supply of ideas.

### What can be

Rather than focusing on our false visions of what used to be, we can do our students a world of good by appealing to the world they understand, and focusing on what can be. With an endless barrage of great new tools—almost all of which were designed by students who had a ho-hum school experience—we can capture students' attention like never before. A little exploration and willingness to try new things can shift students out of distraction, and into interaction. **DA**

*Brent Warner is a professor of English as a second language at Irvine Valley College in California. He is a featured speaker at UB Tech\* (ubtechconference.com), a higher education event covering instructional and other key tech topics, run by University Business, DA's sister publication.*



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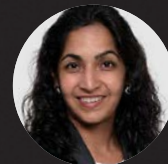
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