

Doing More with Less:

Strategies for Success



eduviews:

A K-12
Leadership Series

DOING MORE WITH LESS: STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

THE DRUMBEAT IS DIFFICULT TO IGNORE. THE CONSUMER, BUSINESS, AND ACADEMIC PRESS ARE EACH NOTING HOW THE NATION'S ECONOMIC CHALLENGES ARE DRAMATICALLY IMPACTING OUR SCHOOLS, AND IT'S NOT HARD TO SEE WHY. A WEAKER NATIONAL ECONOMY TRANSLATES TO POORER STATE AND LOCAL REVENUE PERFORMANCE, AND THAT POTENTIALLY REDUCES SCHOOL FUNDING. SIMULTANEOUSLY, THE REALITIES OF K-12 EDUCATION, SUCH AS AN EMPHASIS ON ACCOUNTABILITY, INCREASED TEACHER TURNOVER, AND DIVERSE STUDENT NEEDS, CREATE ADDITIONAL PRESSURES ON DISTRICTS. TYPICALLY, SCHOOLS RESPOND TO THESE CHALLENGES WITH SPENDING INCREASES TO ENSURE THAT EVERY STUDENT HAS THE INSTRUCTIONAL AND SERVICE SUPPORT NEEDED TO SUCCEED. ALL OF THESE CHALLENGES, HOWEVER, COME AT A TIME WHEN THERE IS SIMPLY LESS MONEY AVAILABLE. AND BECAUSE DISTRICTS ARE SO FIRMLY FOCUSED ON STUDENT SUCCESS, THEY'RE RESPONDING TO THE CURRENT AND ANTICIPATED SHORTFALLS WITH REMARKABLE SPEED, CREATIVITY AND PRECISION. IN PARTICULAR, MANY DISTRICTS ARE HARNESSING TECHNOLOGY TO OVERCOME THEIR CHALLENGES TO INCREASE STUDENT SUCCESS.

THE HARSH REALITIES

As the 2008-2009 school year begins, 23 states are expecting budget gaps with a cumulative shortfall of more than \$26 billion.¹ Cumulative budget gaps across all states have grown to \$40 billion for fiscal year 2009, from \$14 billion last fiscal year according to the State Budget Update: June 2008.² And while economic experts have predicted a slowing economy for some time, both the severity and the speed of the downturn have surprised economic pundits and governmental, school, and business experts alike. In a survey of superintendents conducted by the American Association of School Administrators, nearly every respondent noted the impact that rising fuel costs were having on their districts, with 75% adding that additional state aid to cover the expense was not forthcoming.³

In fact, districts are being affected by decreasing funding from all levels – federal, state and local. They are reporting reductions in operating budgets as a result of state and local funding shortfalls and citing decreased real estate values and reduced state sales tax revenue. At the federal level, the education budget, with its substantial contribution to local program budgets, is also constricted due to other funding priorities.

Districts are now grappling with the overarching goal of reducing costs without impacting the quality and scope of their core instructional programs.

In Florida, for example, the economic gap translates to a nearly \$330 million reduction in the operating budgets of the state's schools, with districts laying off teachers and in some cases, closing schools. In Delaware, three percent (approximately \$30 million) will be cut from school budgets, and in other states, planned programs are not being funded.⁴

Budget shortfalls are perhaps most evident when looking at district-level impacts. Jennifer Walters, Superintendent of the Escondido Union School District, recently said, “[Our district] is adversely impacted by the state of California’s current budget shortfall of \$16 billion. The district must look to reduce its operating budget for 2008-2009 by \$11.1 million. This significant reduction will impact instructional programs for students, student support services at schools, and services such as custodian and maintenance to schools.” In response to the devastating budget cuts, potential reductions at the district include eliminating teaching and counselors positions and reducing the work year for all employees. But despite of the difficult fiscal environment, district commitment to student success is unwavering. Says Walters, “Our district and its dedicated employees remain steadfast in their commitment to provide a high quality education the elementary students in Escondido.”⁵

THE EDUCATION COMMUNITY RESPONDS

From district to district, the belt-tightening has already begun in earnest with school leaders taking a variety of steps including employee layoffs at all levels and delaying or canceling textbook purchases. Districts are also postponing hiring for open positions, delaying or canceling technology refreshes, and electing not to update their collections of instructional materials and library resources. Administrative responsibilities are being reshuffled to increase productivity and districts are aggressively mounting campaigns to improve attendance so they can capture the highest FTE reimbursements. Other tactics in play include more cooperation and shared services across and among districts, cutting bus routes, eliminating bus services for high school students, and reducing the use of substitute teachers.

All across the United States, districts are taking swift and strategic steps to address budgetary crises. Among the cuts are many summer school programs. While this step can certainly save money, the impacts may be profound. Students who need summer school opportunities often slide academically without them.

And because summer programs are often a source of free or low-cost meals, cutbacks also affect students' nutrition. As one example, Coeur d'Alene, Idaho dropped its summer school program for both elementary and middle-grade students. In an effort to cut \$2 million from its budget, the Santa Rosa School District in California has limited summer school available to students who need additional help to pass the state exit exam or who are in jeopardy of failing. Santa Rosa students interested in enrichment courses, such as a popular Mandarin Chinese class, simply will not have that opportunity.⁶

Today's economic challenges are prompting district leaders to explore new opportunities that assure continuity of instructional excellence in the face of future economic turbulence.

Unfortunately, these are short-term remedies for longer-term challenges. "All districts are short on resources – people, time and money and we have to be good stewards of those resources," said Cheryl Rowley, District Administrator, Cobb County, Georgia. "In Cobb County, we build the demand for solutions and then implement them. That is a good way to justify the expenditures."

SPECIAL CHALLENGES FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

While economic conditions may be changing rapidly, the same can not be said for schools' mission to provide quality educational opportunities for every student. Administrators must continue to find ways to staff their schools with highly qualified teachers who deliver quality curriculum. They still must meet NCLB requirements and establish clear funding priorities and strategies to support professional development, the use of effective learning materials, and deliver on their objectives for improved achievement. For more and more district leaders, today's economic challenges are prompting them to explore new opportunities that will assure continuity of instructional excellence in the face of future economic turbulence.

AN UNWAVERING COMMITMENT TO EXCELLENCE AT THE POINT OF INSTRUCTION

For classroom teachers and school leaders, the commitment to instructional excellence is unchanged. What has changed are increased expectations from students and parents, diverse student needs, and the drive to prepare students to compete in the new global economy. But addressing diverse student needs with limited economic resources is especially difficult when considering the additional materials, on-going teacher training, and changes in instructional practice all necessary for an effective solution. As districts exert more stringent controls on purchasing new materials, classroom teachers will need to squeeze more value from their existing curriculum materials, so they can continue to individualize and differentiate instruction. Already struggling to retain successful curriculum and instructional approaches in the face of teacher turnover and retirement, school and curriculum leaders also have to seek new ways to reduce the costs of additional training and materials.

THE GOAL: BETTER INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCES

District curriculum and instructional leaders understand the very real need for providing additional learning resources and materials for both students and teachers – but limited budgets often provide barriers. Some districts are turning to technology, and in particular, learning management technology, to expand their resource portfolios without significant incremental costs.

Many districts see online learning as “win/win” because they achieve a reduction in key operational costs without compromising instructional quality or consistency.

“We have already started when we get to class,” said Cheryl Rowley of Cobb County. “Using our LMS [Learning Management System], student access to resources – video, blogs, and other teacher identified resources – extends the classroom and bridges the time between classes. Students and teachers can then spend more in-class time on whole class instruction and discussion and student-teacher learning exchanges.”

One clear example of technology’s potential to expand and enhance student instructional experiences is through virtual field trips. In times of rising fuel costs, schools find it more difficult to transport students to different points of learning. As a result, points of learning are finding their way into the classroom. Interestingly, this approach may actually improve the students’ learning situation. They can interact virtually with artifacts, tour museums or talk with experts well beyond the typical transportation range. Other approaches include web quests (Internet-based inquiry activities) and guest speakers who appear via web or other digital technologies. Providers of virtual field trips are reporting 55% increases in the usage of their trips.⁷

Some districts are taking even more aggressive steps. A four-day school week, with corresponding savings in busing, heating/cooling, electricity, and transportation costs is garnering serious attention. To compensate for a four-day schedule, schools are considering longer school days or online offerings on the fifth day. Online options include virtual courses, enrichment and accelerated programs, and programs for credit recovery—all of which can improve and expand students’ learning opportunities. Many districts see this as “win/win” option, because they achieve a reduction in key operational costs without compromising instructional quality or consistency.

FINDING STRATEGIES THAT WORK TODAY...AND TOMORROW

District leaders are now looking aggressively for economies of scale in professional development, curriculum, and instruction – without compromising quality, differentiation or potential results. Learning management technology enables districts to expand access to learning resources and opportunities while controlling costs. It’s a powerful answer as schools seek strategic ways to reach higher and higher achievement goals in the absence of additional funding.

Changing Professional Development Models

For many, technology-based learning management systems are providing new and highly promising answers. These systems enable districts to deliver professional development programs in more cost- and time-efficient ways, saving money on travel, substitute teachers, and facilities, while improving access to participation in training programs.

Additionally, with technology-supported professional development programs, districts build flexibility and agility. These programs can be delivered throughout the school year and in some cases, with a just-in-time model that addresses teachers’ immediate needs more effectively. A full-day in-service model is evolving into a digitally supported approach, primarily because teachers learn more successfully and districts realize better cost containment.

Professional communities of practice that reinforce and extend the professional development experience for teachers are most effective when supported by a district-wide connected environment. Why? Because participants can share materials, conduct thoughtful discussions, and reflect collaboratively on their new approaches to instruction. These professional relationships also support a sense of connection and commitment to their districts.

Curriculum Development Processes Benefit from Change

By creating curriculum programs and resources in asynchronous, online environments that work flexibly within staff schedules, many districts are saving travel time and costs while increasing convenience. And the work product from these curriculum development efforts can now be archived easily and adapted on demand even as staff changes occur. With the support of an effective LMS, curriculum development can also support instructional goals by adding cost and time efficiencies. Another option is to leverage an LMS so curriculum development and professional development connect more organically. As new curriculum is developed, educators can model instructional strategies for each another while aligning curriculum and instruction more effectively. As a bonus, teachers learn to work with more agility and fluidity online, so they can support their digital native students with greater impact.

“We’re now looking at professional development with much more of a local focus and ways to do more video conferencing and online training. Our approach is to use our system to improve access, so we can control and lower professional development costs over the longer term.”

Marie Scigliano Ed.D.,
Director of Technology and Library Media,
Palo Alto Unified School District

Moving Beyond Traditional Approaches to Instructional Delivery

Because students’ needs are diverse and often specialized, many districts are expanding their instructional delivery capacity beyond traditional schedules and environments. Learning management systems support more flexible student schedules and enable districts to leverage highly-qualified teachers beyond a single school building. In addition, districts use these systems to address needs for small demand and credit recovery courses while expanding access to advanced courses and foreign languages with greater cost efficiency.

Online credit recovery is becoming a valuable weapon in the fight against drop-out rates because it offers a cost-effective, flexible and personalized way for more students to complete more courses.

In order to better prepare students to compete in the global economy, American schools are tasked with delivering more effective instruction in science, technology, engineering, and math. As a result, courses that deliver more rigorous academic challenges and content, such as those offered in Advanced Placement® and International Baccalaureate programs, are in demand. Complicating matters, only 44% of U.S. high school students studied a foreign language in 2002, putting American students at a distinct global disadvantage.⁸

Currently, more than 40% of American high schools do not offer Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) courses. By supporting virtual school programs and supplemental course programs, more students in more schools will have the opportunity to take AP and IB courses. Blended learning opportunities that combine both online and onsite coursework provide yet another avenue for conserving resources without placing limits on instructional opportunities.

Going Green in the Process

School- to-home communications are also shifting to learning management portals, saving districts time, money, and resources. Marie Scigliano from the Palo Alto School District said, “We’re working to eliminate duplicate systems, save money and ‘go green’ simultaneously. We’re looking at how to use less paper and post more communication for students, parents, and teachers online.”

Schools are saving printing costs and other communications expenses, simply by posting class and school activities, accepting homework, and providing a range of resources online. This represents just the tip of the “going green” opportunities that can be supported and sustained through an effective digitally-based school-to-home connected learning environment.

Graduation rates tell another part of the story. In the 2008-09 school year, 1.23 million students will fail to graduate from high school. U.S. public high schools are losing 6,829 students per day, with the lowest graduation rates among African-American, Hispanic, and Native American students. Nationwide, about 71 percent of 9th graders graduate four years later.⁹ For many districts, extending the school day and in some cases extending the school year, are necessary strategies for credit recovery. Now, online learning credit recovery is becoming a valuable weapon in the fight against drop-out rates because it offers a cost-effective, flexible and personalized way for more students to complete more courses. This stands to dramatically improve graduation rates.

Hidden Opportunities Emerge

Cheryl Rowley of Cobb County points out that their tuition-based online summer school is now larger than their face-to-face summer school, saving teachers and students travel time and money. “Despite its compressed schedule, online summer school is now more engaging and accommodating to student and teacher needs,” she said. The lesson here is that schools can use these challenging times to develop new and sometimes unexpected opportunities for serving students, faculty and the community in new and highly cost-effective ways.

THE FOCUS ON INSTRUCTION: MORE MISSION-CRITICAL THAN EVER BEFORE

For a growing number of districts, the challenge lies in changing instructional approaches and processes so they provide optimum flexibility in resource planning and deployment. That way, districts can allocate budget appropriately and respond to conditions, such as fuel and food costs, that are outside their direct control. That is why learning management systems have become mission-critical for many districts in order to support more cost- and time-effective professional and curriculum development. At the same time, this technology improves stakeholder communications and instructional resource management while functioning, in some cases, as a self-sustaining support system.

As many district leaders point out, LMS technology now supports multiple functional areas. From delivering individual instruction at the classroom level to expanding access to specific courses, the right system provides lower total cost of ownership by reducing the costs associated with acquiring and maintaining disparate systems. In addition, LMS solutions help with resource allocation by offering greater visibility into district-wide needs and opportunities.

Technology's role in helping districts address an uncertain financial future has never been more critical or compelling. The right investment today can support and strengthen district performance and improvement in the years to come - no matter what the economic climate has in store.

School districts may not need to eliminate existing programs and staff to meet budget limitations. Instead, district leaders can consider strategies to make personnel and program assets more productive through the use of rapidly growing technology which, when deployed effectively, results in improved efficiencies, cost savings, expanded access to services and opportunities, and maximizes the value of existing investments. By harnessing technology, districts can meet their existing and future needs with limited resources. And most importantly, learning management technology has the potential to ensure that every student has an opportunity to achieve and excel, even in the face of budget limitations.

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