Sarasota County Schools:

Successful Transition to Common Core State Standards with Blackboard
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Like numerous districts in other states across the U.S., Sarasota County Schools in Florida is transitioning from the state’s Sunshine State Standards to Florida’s next generation of academic standards incorporating the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Along the way, the district encountered several challenges that they overcame with the help of solutions from Blackboard.

At a Glance:

**CHALLENGE:**
Academic leaders faced a series of challenges from benchmark assessments to professional development as the district moved from state to CCSS

**SOLUTION:**
Academic leaders leveraged benchmark assessment data from the LMS to drive the development of Instructional Focus Guides (IFGs) for every teacher in Blackboard to guide transition to CCSS. Sarasota maximizes LMS use by preparing teachers for this transition to CCSS through Blackboard.

**RESULTS:**
- 120,000+ district benchmark assessments delivered per year
- IFGs for 2,500+ teachers
- Improving instruction for 42,000+ students
- ESOL & Gifted Certification available for all teachers
- PD available to 5,000+ employees
- Successful transition to CCSS
**CHALLENGE:**  
Meet New Benchmarks, Improve Instruction in Transition, and Meet Professional Development Needs

With over 42,000 students and 2,500 teachers, Sarasota County Schools has been recognized as one of Florida’s highest performing school districts. District leaders knew that sustaining and enhancing student achievement while transitioning to new standards would create numerous challenges. District leaders identified three key challenges: efficiently meeting state benchmark assessment requirements and using the data obtained to shape classroom decisions; improving instruction during the transition from state standards to CCSS; and providing sustained and continuous professional development for staff members across a school district which spans 555 square miles.

**SOLUTION:**  
Conduct Benchmark Assessments, Create Instructional Focus Guides, and Deliver Professional Development with Blackboard

Blackboard has helped Sarasota district leadership meet their key challenges. Formative benchmark assessments are delivered three times per year through Blackboard technology, with over 40,000 assessments delivered on each occasion. These assessments provide rich data, which is used to inform instruction across the district such as within individual classrooms and for larger projects such as Instructional Focus Guides (IFGs). Curricular leaders are leveraging this benchmark data to create a series of IFGs within Blackboard Learn. The IFGs are designed to serve as a blueprint to help teachers fully transition to CCSS. The IFGs consist of CCSS aligned digital content organized into unit and theme-based learning for each grade level, content area, and course. By providing an IFG for every Sarasota teacher, district leaders aim to ease the transition from state standards to CCSS, improve pedagogy, and promote blended learning across the district. Finally, Sarasota creates and delivers professional development programs with Blackboard Learn including ESOL Certification, Gifted Certification, and Facilities staff training online. In addition to these offerings, Sarasota will leverage Blackboard Learn to provide professional development to prepare teachers to effectively utilize the IFGs to fully transition to CCSS.

**RESULTS:**  
Deliver Efficient Benchmark Assessments to Drive Instruction, Improve Instruction in Transition, and Power Professional Development Opportunities

The adage, “success breeds success,” certainly rings true for Sarasota’s transition from state to common core standards. The district curriculum leaders who designed and developed the benchmark assessments are leading the effort to create the district’s new Instructional Focus Guides (IFGs). These district leaders are using the formative assessment data to shape the
development of the IFGs. The professional development planned to support the effective implementation of the IFGs will be created and delivered through Blackboard.

Let’s take a closer look at the three primary strategies Sarasota is using to facilitate the transition to CCSS...

**BENCHMARK ASSESSMENTS**

By state mandate, schools in Florida must conduct benchmark assessments at least three times per year. After exploring other alternatives, Todd Alexander, manager of School Support Services – Information Technology, suggested, “Why don’t we look at using a tool that’s already in place that will do this for us?” As a result, Sarasota decided to use Blackboard’s LMS technology to meet this need. “Any earlier attempt to do benchmark assessment and to bring results back in a timely fashion did not work,” according to Denise Cantalupo, director of Research, Assessment & Evaluation/School Improvement.

Creating and delivering these formative assessments within the LMS streamlines this process by disseminating assessments and capturing the results digitally.

Sarasota takes great care constructing benchmark assessments for delivery within the LMS. Curriculum specialists bring groups of expert teachers together at specific grade levels to create the assessments. They develop test items that go through a series of reviews and validity checks to make sure the language level is appropriate and that assessment items are tied to the appropriate Common Core and Sunshine State Standards. Despite Sarasota’s meticulous assessment item construction process, problems can still arise. Using the LMS for benchmarks makes handling any inaccuracies within assessments a breeze. “We found out that we could, after the test had actually started, take an item and change its correct answer and not negatively impact the student experience,” says Doug Roberts, program coordinator Research, Assessment & Evaluation/School Improvement.
Improvement. “We discovered a great deal about how flexible it was.” Denise adds, “It’s one of the many benefits of digital testing.” No heavy lifting is required to fix mistakes; “You can make changes on the fly.” Using their LMS to deliver benchmark and mid-term assessments helps students, teachers, and administrators. Students benefit by familiarizing themselves with online testing, which helps with other tests given during the year. “When we get down to our high stakes testing, more and more of that testing is taking place online,” says Todd. “Doing benchmarks this way helps prepare students for the FCAT and the EOC assessments online. It’s not something that’s completely foreign to them; they’ve done it throughout the year.” Denise adds, “It truly bridges the transition from the paper test to the digital test, and that is the future.” Sarasota’s Department of Assessment and Evaluation relies on the LMS for efficient delivery of these assessments and open access to data, to quickly turn around useful analyses of assessment results to teachers for data-driven instruction. “All the research about feedback in the use of formative assessment depends on its immediacy,” says Denise. “Teachers must use the results immediately, changing the course of instruction in an individualized way with children.” Todd adds, “It provides immediate feedback for our instructors to drive instruction.” Teachers leverage the formative assessment data to drive decisions in the classroom and to differentiate instruction. District leaders leverage the data to reallocate resources such as human capital, instructional time, and monetary resources based on students’ needs as revealed through performance on the benchmark assessments.

INSTRUCTIONAL FOCUS GUIDES
Blackboard was selected as the teaching and learning platform in which to create and deliver the district’s strategic IFGs. “We looked at a lot of other tools,” says Brad Porinchak, Sarasota science curriculum specialist. “Blackboard Learn seemed to be the perfect fit.” Benchmark assessment data is used to shape the development of IFGs in this transition to full implementation of CCSS. The IFGs will serve as the blueprint to guide teachers in the full implementation of CCSS.

In Blackboard, curriculum specialists representing nine content areas are leading the development of the IFGs that consist of CCSS aligned digital content organized into unit and theme-based learning for each grade level, content area, and course. Approximately one hundred expert teachers will contribute to the project under the leadership of the curriculum department. “We are creating a tool that will give teachers the opportunity to really change their way of teaching
and impact student learning,” according to Sue Meckler, Sarasota’s Director of Curriculum & Instruction. “It’s a tool to help teachers teach better and to help students to learn in a different way. With the impetus of common core, we’re really looking at changing teaching and learning and we feel that this tool is going to be something that is easy for teachers. It’s going to be one-stop-shopping that they can then personalize and customize to meet the needs of their students.” Todd Alexander, adds, “We want our teachers to use technology resources and rich dynamic content. We want them to expose our students to some of the online tools that will enrich their classes.” The desire to develop a way to do that which was simple and easy for teachers led district instructional leaders to develop the IFG Project. With IFGs, district leaders aim to ease the transition from state standards to CCSS, change the way teachers teach, and promote blended learning across the district. After offering professional development in the spring and summer, in Fall 2014 Sarasota will provide IFGs in Blackboard to all of the approximately 2,500 K-12 teachers in the district. Teachers can use the IFGs in one of two ways: teachers can choose to use the IFG as a personal guide to the new learning standards, or teachers can opt to leverage it directly with students in Blackboard with the IFG serving as the foundation for a blended learning class. Teachers can modify and enhance the IFG to personalize the experience and cater to the needs of individual students and each unique class, or they can use it exactly as it’s been created.

The IFG Project will ensure that technology is fully integrated into instruction. “For the first time, technology will no longer be a separate entity,” says instructional technology specialist Cameron Parker. She says, “For the first time, teachers will ask, ‘Why would I NOT want to do this?’” Todd adds, “Technology allows us to engage students in meaningful ways for longer periods of time. The more that we can engage our students, the higher our student achievement is going to be.”

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Providing timely and relevant professional development (PD) for approximately 2,500 teachers and over 2000 support staff is a significant task on its own. In a district as geographically large as Sarasota, the ability to deliver PD for teachers throughout the district via the LMS is essential. Using the LMS for PD delivers time and money savings, as well as flexibility for teachers and district staff. In many districts, the district administration office is the central point of PD delivery. The Sarasota County Schools district office is not in a central location, which means that a large number of teachers and staff work in schools that are a 30-45 minute drive away. While the district does
offer face-to-face PD classes, as well as hybrids, which meet both in person and online, such classes incur costs for substitute pay and mileage expense. A two-hour face-to-face training class can easily take a teacher out of his or her class or away from family in the evening or on a weekend for four hours or more.

A substantial part of Sarasota’s PD is now delivered with Blackboard Learn. In fact, Sarasota teachers can now earn two certifications solely through online courses, Gifted Certification, and ESOL Certification. Each certification requires the completion of five 60-hour courses which are offered 100% online. Gifted and ESOL Certification is required for any teacher that has a gifted or ESOL student in his or her class. After a teacher has completed the certification through Sarasota’s online professional development courses, the teacher earns an endorsement reflected on the Florida teaching license. Sarasota employees, such as custodians and skilled tradespeople, are required to review safety videos and other materials to comply with Occupational Safety and Health Administration requirements. These materials are made available through the LMS as well, which significantly reduces travel costs and lost job time.

In addition to solving the PD challenges related to the geographical size of the district, meeting the needs of teachers requiring Gifted and ESOL Certifications, and providing OSHA compliance training for district employees, Sarasota plans to ease the transition to the Common Core State Standards with Blackboard Learn. Most of the professional development planned to help teachers effectively use the IFGs will take place in Blackboard.