Google

Edmonton Public Schools builds collaborative learning community with Google Apps for Education

At a Glance

Goals
- Increase learning engagement
- Enhance collaboration among students and teachers
- Provide students with modern learning technologies
- Allow access to learning tools from almost anywhere
- Improve accountability
- Reduce paper use

Approach
- Implement Google Apps for Education district-wide to 197 schools

Results
- Boosted student enthusiasm about learning
- Sparked student and teacher ingenuity and creativity
- Enabled students to work from almost anywhere
- Improved access to industry-leading collaboration tools
- Allowed students to collaborate on projects
- Helped teachers more easily track homework and assignments

Organization

Renowned for its innovation in education, Edmonton Public Schools (EPS), which represents 197 schools, 80,000 students, and 10,000 staff, was among the first districts to create an "open boundary" system that allows parents and students to pursue education at the school of their choice. The school district for Alberta's capital city is known for consistently high levels of achievement based on Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) results and often hosts school district representatives from around the world who are seeking to learn what makes EPS a model for success in public education.

Challenge

EPS wanted to extend its innovative programs by providing easy-to-use online collaboration tools to staff and students alike. The district already offered school-hosted email accounts and client productivity software to staff and teachers, but most of the district's 80,000 students lacked access to online collaboration tools at school or at home.

"A typical school had one PC lab of 30 computers for a student population of 400, so access to technology and the Internet was limited," says Terry Korte, Technology Integration Planning Coordinator for EPS.

A high percentage of students already had access to the Internet and mobile devices outside of school, yet, without the proper collaborative tools, they didn't go online to work on school assignments. "In the lab, time would elapse, so the experience was fractured," Korte says. "At home, most students were doing their homework using paper and pencil."

At the same time, many students were obtaining their own mobile computing devices. They could connect to the district's wireless network; however, they could not use any district software or tools without secure VPN access. Teachers were also struggling with the differences in operating systems and software.

For teachers, it was often difficult to determine which students were taking the lead and contributing the most in group projects. Says Korte, "We wanted to build a collaborative learning community in which students could work together easily on projects with their peers and also interact more productively with teachers."

Solution

EPS chose Google Apps for Education based on several factors. "Google Apps is free, easy to use, works with the district's existing software, and offers platform neutrality," says Korte. EPS ran a pilot with two schools for six months, then expanded to the program to 12 schools for one school year. To document the trial, they collected feedback from staff and students through online surveys, journal entries, and focus-group interviews. "Google Apps met all of our criteria and then some," says Korte. "Google Apps is easy to use and the feedback from staff and students from the pilot was overwhelmingly positive."

About Google Apps for Education

Google Apps is a free suite of hosted communication and collaboration applications designed for schools and universities. Google Apps includes Gmail (webmail services), Google Calendar (shared calendaring), Google Docs (online document, spreadsheet, presentation, and form creation and sharing), Google Video (secure and private video sharing—10GB free) and Google Sites (team website creation with videos, images, gadgets, and documents integration), as well as administrative tools, customer support, and access to APIs to integrate Google Apps with existing IT systems.

For more information visit:
www.google.com/a/edu

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—Terry Korte, Technology Integration Planning Coordinator, Edmonton Public Schools

In April 2010, EPS conducted several information sessions for principals and lead teachers and reviewed planning procedures created in Google Sites. From there, the district roll-out has progressed smoothly, and currently involves all EPS staff as well as students at 90 district schools. The district completed an independent Privacy Impact Assessment, and Google addressed all privacy concerns without fail.

Benefits

Since moving to Google Apps, collaboration has flourished across the district. According to Korte, Google Apps is improving the way students learn and teachers teach. Today, students and teachers are blogging about novels; working out math problems using Google Spreadsheets; sharing documents such as lab reports, research projects and surveys using Google Docs; creating sites with Google Sites that include links, pictures, videos, and more – all using Google's tools.

Korte says Google Apps has solved the issue of dealing with the differences in the operating systems and software among mobile devices. In addition, distributing, sharing, and collecting material is more seamless for teaching staff. One teacher says Google Apps has significantly decreased workloads and planning, because staff no longer need to create several different versions of material for different access methods.

As one teacher notes, "Engagement and homework completion rates have increased significantly, and students like the ability to garner immediate feedback, edit items, and then share them back with me for final assessment."

Says another teacher, "Students are collaborating on projects, commenting on each other's writing, blogging about literature and practicing 21st-century skills all the time. They are accountable to each other and to me and their homework/writing/work is never left at home or lost in lockers," she says.

According to staff, students caught on quickly to the concept of sharing their work with their teachers and each other from the beginning; as a result, students' writing assignments more clearly reflect both teacher and peer feedback. Teachers are also seeing students work on documents just for the sake of improving them. Other students have taken the initiative to create sites on topics of personal interest. "These are just a few examples of the intrinsic value of learning that can motivate students to value learning beyond the assignment itself," says one teacher.

Korte says the Google technology is easy to use, and even teachers who've taught for decades have found adoption painless. "Teachers don't have much time for professional development," says Korte. "With the consistency across applications, intuitiveness of Google Apps, and the availability of online help, we were able to roll it out to a high volume of users without a lot of face-to-face training."

Korte adds that Google Apps has sparked enthusiasm and innovation among students and staff. "I hear comments like, 'This is new to me and to my grade 6 students, but between us we figure it out,'" says Korte. "That's the type of empowerment we're seeing among both students and teachers since we moved to Google Apps. Several teachers have commented: 'Where has Google Apps been all my career?' And for many students, Google Apps has resulted in improved learning and engagement."