

Meeting the Need

Facing a laborious testing system, this Nebraska district created its own online assessment system – and then sold it to other districts.

\\ BY PAUL EKBERG

TFrom outside of one of our computer labs at Chase County Schools recently, a group of enthusiastic students could be overheard. “Wow,” “Outstanding,” and even “That’s more like it,” filtered out of the room. Were they sidestepping the district’s network controls and playing games?

Actually, it wasn’t surprising to find out that not only were the students doing nothing wrong, they were in fact taking the Nebraska State Assessment tests on computers. The reason for their reactions was obvious. Thanks to the district’s new online assessment program, they faced a mix of multiple-choice questions and Flash-based performance activities, and they received their results as soon as they completed the test.

The Nebraska standards process was unique because at the time the state did not have a statewide test. Rather, each district was charged with designing its own set of

standards and creating assessments for math, science, language arts and social studies in grades four, eight and 12. Each June, administrators report all the achievement levels for each standard to the Nebraska Department of Education.

Before Chase County developed its Web-based testing process, students were assessed with paper and pencils, teachers graded all assessments manually, and administrators compiled the state report by hand. The frustration level was so high that teachers talked openly about taking early retirement or switching grade levels to avoid the work. Even administrators were trying to find a way for someone else to help with their work.

Designing the Future

The solution was obvious: This system needed to be put online, from test questions to immediate grading to self-generated state reports. The work to create this system and get teachers trained to use it was much more complicated.

After the administration agreed to undertake the project, work began to create the Online Management Assessment System. Current and former students were gathered to assist with programming and network management. Teachers were interviewed to identify who should help start the program.

The district started small, with one server in 2001 and a set of six questions for each math standard. In less than 30 days, math teachers added four more questions. The project was all Web-based, with an open-source databank of questions. Because today’s test of


15 questions takes less than 10 minutes to complete, the district uses its wireless network and five computer labs to handle each student easily.

Because every district in the state faced the same time-consuming methods of compiling reports, from the beginning Chase County officials thought there was a good possibility that if its homegrown assessment system was effective, it could be sold to other schools. For that reason, a private company, Online Management System, was created to market and sell this program. Creating a company also allowed the schools to pay the students for the work they were doing after school and during school breaks.

Getting Bigger

The first consortium of schools that would use this assessment was put on one server. As other schools were added, more servers were purchased. In all, the district now serves 100 schools on five servers with RAID drives. Each server is coordinated by a steering committee composed of administrators and teachers from that particular geographical area.

To avoid making the assessments a de facto statewide program, each consortium has its own set of assessments for all four core areas. Chase County constantly improves the system by writing more efficient programs, implementing the latest software enhancements and adding new features to assist teachers and administrators. Additions include school improvement and remediation modules to assist schools and students.

Besides the educational benefits, financial gains from the online fees are used to bolster Chase County Schools’ technology and support a one-to-one notebook program. 

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Bringing in Big Money

While selling district-created software to other schools isn’t technically fund-raising, it is a somewhat unusual way for schools to raise money. In recent years, these schools have found other inventive ways to try to bolster their school’s budget.

- Two Seattle elementary schools started charging parents \$2,000 to send their children to full-day kindergarten, instead of the district’s mandatory half-day program.
- The Albertson Foundation in Idaho promised the state \$35 million over five years to help build a student information and reporting system.
- Manchester, Vt.’s attempt to avoid sending the bulk of its local taxes to the state backfired. The town sent a discretionary “bill” to all homeowners to help fund its schools, but problems ensued when about 400 of the town’s 2,700 residents refused to pay.



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Getting Buy-In

Here are six ways to get both teachers and students to become part of your district’s next project.

- Create a true need for their involvement.
- Have them actively involved, not as passive learners.
- Be a facilitator in their learning, not the sage on the stage.
- Be able to answer the question: What’s in it for me?
- Have the latest technology needed, in working order and with training in its use.
- Provide new opportunities that will build trust and opportunities for teachers and students.

