

Westside Community Schools



QUICK FACTS

- 5625 students, 1400 of whom live outside the district and attend Westside Community Schools by request
- Schools include:
 - 11 Pre-K sites with before- and after-school care
 - 10 elementary schools, grades K–6
 - One middle school, grades 7 and 8
 - One high school, grades 9–12

Think about grades, and the image of a teacher's little red grade book might come to mind. For many, it's an image surrounded by secrecy and apprehension. But it shouldn't be, according to Ken Bird, Ed.D., superintendent of Westside Community Schools in Omaha, Nebraska.

Bird and his colleagues believe that pupils and parents hold the keys to their own success at school. The district uses PowerSchool, a web-based student information system that gives students and parents access to their grades and evaluations at any time.

"It used to be that the little red grade book was secret," said Kent Kingston, vice principal of Westside High School, "But it has always belonged to the kids."

With real-time access to track their own progress, students are more actively engaged in their education. Pupils and their families can log on to the web at any time, type in a password, and easily see data on their own attendance, grades, and activities. Being able to take more responsibility for – and more pride in – their own schoolwork has led to a variety of successes in this Midwestern school district.

QUICK STUDY

Challenges

- Put students in a position to achieve scholastic success
- Involve parents in educational process
- Standardize grading practices

Solution

- PowerSchool Student Information System
- Dual 1GHz Power Mac G4 server
 - 44 million hits to PowerSchool server between 8/2001 and 2/2003
 - 600–700 progress reports emailed to families every week
- 737 iBook computers
- 14 PowerBook G4 computers
- 1724 other Apple computers
- 122 AirPort Base Stations

Benefits

- Anytime, anywhere access to grades and assignments allows students to take more responsibility for their own progress
- Website and email reports provide regular, meaningful information to parents
- Automated grade books offer teachers integrated, uniform assessment tools

Monitoring their own progress

Many educators at Westside Community Schools believe that students are performing better because they and their parents are more actively engaged in their own achievement. Today more than 95 percent of the 2600 Westside secondary students and their parents have accessed their PowerSchool accounts either via the web or by phone. Between September 2002 and February 2003, parents and students made more than 200,000 separate inquiries into the system.

Sharlene Karbowski, PowerSchool system administrator, said that at any given time, someone in the district is accessing PowerSchool, even on holidays and in the middle of the night. She said the district has set up a second server for testing because there is never free time to take their main server offline.

“Not a weekend goes by when a parent doesn’t come up to me and talk about something that they gleaned from PowerSchool about their son or daughter – and about their appreciation of PowerSchool,” said Superintendent Bird.

Parent communication

Now that more communication is coming out of the district, it’s logical that more communication is flowing back into the schools as well.

PowerSchool lets parents become aware of issues as they emerge, instead of just at the end of the semester, when it may be too late to make positive changes. Parents have become more proactive in emailing, telephoning, and meeting with teachers. Their involvement helps keep children encouraged, engaged, and on track.

Regularly scheduled parent-teacher meetings have become more meaningful, too. Before, parents met teachers to get a report on their child’s progress. Now, since parents already know about their children’s progress, they can talk substantively about furthering their children’s learning.

Having school profiles just a few mouse clicks away has helped Westside families balance school with other parts of their life. For example, some parents call PowerSchool their “Friday night keys,” according to Vice Principal Kingston. He said when high schoolers ask if they can go to a dance or a party, parents frequently answer, “Let’s go to the computer and see how you’re doing at school.”

PowerSchool, a good match

Westside began with a vision to create an environment where students are stimulated to think and perform at their highest levels. To help achieve this goal, the district adopted PowerSchool.

“We have normal students, but they are doing extraordinary things.”

Sue Manuel, Ph.D.
Executive Director of Technology
Westside Community Schools

“We would have a revolt if we had to go back to working the old way.”

Kent Kingston
Vice Principal
Westside High Schools

When Westside first rolled out the system, they appreciated the fact that it was easy to learn. “We told the teachers, ‘Everyone will use the technology, period.’ But the technology was not threatening,” said Sue Manuel, Ph.D., Executive Director of Technology. Vice Principal Kingston agreed. “The teachers very quickly went from, ‘How do I use it?’ to ‘How did I ever live without it?’” he said.

Westside continues to improve its standards, and it values PowerSchool for continuing to improve its features, too. “It’s a good match,” said Karbowski. “We need a partner that is fluid with us and can help us achieve more than just the status quo.”

Evaluating success

Since implementing PowerSchool, many traditional scholastic measures have begun to indicate academic improvement. “Attendance is better than ever, discipline is better managed, and discipline reports are down,” said Manuel.

The district has the same challenges as most urban, landlocked American schools. But instead of the declining test scores that are common in schools with similar demographics, Westside test scores are consistently above the national average and among the highest in the state of Nebraska.

Student success, however, is not an exact science, Superintendent Bird pointed out. “We can’t say that our wireless labs or PowerSchool directly improves test scores, but the convergence of all these things has put our students in a position to be achievers,” said Bird.

Success attracts

Word of the high standards at Westside Community Schools has spread throughout the Omaha area. Currently about one quarter of the students at Westside High School attend because they’ve requested to be there. They choose to travel outside the district just to be a part of Westside’s positive learning environment. “We have normal students, but they are doing extraordinary things,” said Manuel.

Teachers and administrators are attracted to Westside because of the satisfaction that comes with student achievement. “Employees want to come to the district,” said Vice Principal Kingston.

Today all high school teachers have wireless iBook computers and even hall monitors hold wireless PDAs. At any time, anywhere on the 400,000-square-foot campus, they’ve got in hand all the information they need to make good decisions. Kingston joked, “We would have a revolt if we had to go back to working the old way.”

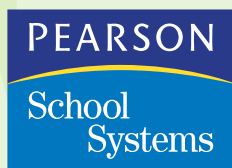
Teachers and administrators also appreciate the cross-platform flexibility of PowerSchool. “One of the things that really drew us to PowerSchool was that it was Internet-based and supported both platforms,” Karbowski said. Staff members can use either a PC or a Macintosh computer to gain access to PowerSchool information.

Standardizing grading practices

When they began using PowerSchool, teachers had to put thought into standardizing their grading practices. Because students' grades were now visible all the time, not just three times a year, teachers needed to make grading more systematic.

Teachers were motivated to communicate with one another and share techniques. They worked to make their grading scales uniform and more clearly communicate their expectations to students. They held healthy discussions about the role of school and the value of grades. As a result, the students now have a better understanding of what is expected of them and take more responsibility for their own progress.

Superintendent Bird believes that students' grades ultimately belong to the students. But grades are just one facet of a student's life. Citizenship, physical fitness, and effort are also important. Nevertheless, grades are the traditional measure of success. "As long as we are going to live and die by grades, PowerSchool is a home run," said Bird.



PowerSchool

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