



VA Beach County Public Schools Speaks to Schoolnet



Dr. Jared Cotton, Assistant Superintendent, Department of Research, Evaluation and Assessment at Virginia Beach City Public Schools speaks to *The Netter* (Schoolnet's newsletter) regarding their implementation of Schoolnet's Instructional Management Suite and what's happening in their district.

Can you tell us about you district best practices with data a few years back to today?

We already had a very data-driven culture in place as we had a lot of data that we were utilizing and disseminating to all stakeholders. However, our process for sharing data was challenging and time consuming at times. It did not place the data directly in the hands of teachers in a timely manner in order to effectively inform classroom instruction. What was really an impetus for finding an instructional management system was that we wanted data all in one place, a one-stop-shop, where everyone could access necessary data in a timely manner. Moreover, we had to ensure that teachers had direct and immediate access to the information they needed to do their important work.

What are some of your immediate results from having the data all in one place?

We now have the ability to disseminate our curriculum materials and resources to teachers online. For the past several years, we have provided comprehensive curriculum to assist teachers with delivering high-quality instruction. Today, we continue to provide these valuable resources, but we no longer utilize "hefty" binders that can be overwhelming to teachers. Since the content is now online, we can easily access it and keep it updated in real-time. We update our curriculum frequently (adding lesson plans, etc.). We make the changes right away and send out an email notification to teachers who are impacted by the changes, as opposed to having everyone make copies to update their binders whenever there is a change.

Moreover, it has really changed how we handle local assessments and the analysis of the results.

Before the move to online assessments, our students were taking local assessments using scan forms or bubble sheets. Each form had to be scanned and results had to be sent to central office as a data file. Unfortunately, the scanners often had to be serviced frequently. Moreover, central office had to spend time compiling the data to produce division-wide, school-level and Item Analysis reports for schools.

Because of this process, schools frequently had to wait three to four weeks for this information! The data were sent to the principals in PDF and Excel formats and principals would, in turn, disseminate the results to their teachers. By that time, teachers were already three to four weeks into new instructional material. Now, through online testing, we get the reports and results immediately into the hands of teachers. Once we were able to put assessment data directly to teachers in a timely manner, it became important to ensure that we didn't just provide teachers with data for informational purposes only. We need teachers to use these data for action. As a result, we created data protocols to assist teachers in analyzing student achievement data and to really look at individual students and their specific needs. This has been our focus this year and we are already seeing some positive effects.

Currently, all our secondary local assessments are being administered online through Schoolnet. In addition, we are encouraging the elementary schools to "opt-in" to use the online assessments this year but next year all elementary schools will be required to conduct assessments online. So far, most have opted in as they see the value in receiving immediate results.

In addition, we are in the process of creating even deeper reports so that ultimately we will have just one data source for all our reporting needs.

What are some other types of data, besides curriculum and assessment, that you can now also access via the one system?

We now can more easily access disciplinary data, attendance data and student demographics.

What about historical student data?

We loaded three years worth of data into the system for the initial roll-out. These data are now readily available in the Student Profile and teachers have this information at their fingertips. There is no longer a need to go to the previous teacher or the cumulative student folder that is stored in the office.

Did you have to convince teachers to use the data?

Not at all. We implemented the system using a strategic approach, starting with the secondary teachers the first year and elementary teachers the second year of the implementation. We actually started with a group of secondary teachers that served as our "test drivers." We gave them access, training, and homework! They provided valuable feedback which was used to inform the elementary rollout.

We have heard quite a bit about the work the district has done to reduce the achievement gap for African American males. Will you talk to us about that?

We have always disaggregated data by subgroups, including ethnicity and gender. As a result, we uncovered a large disparity when we compared the academic achievement of African American males to all other males in VBCPS. The elimination of this gap was initiated by our School Board and quickly became one of our main objectives in our recently adopted strategic plan. The reports from Schoolnet drill down to ethnicity and gender and provide central office and principals the ability to easily and personally monitor all the subgroups. Thus, the information is now more readily available and continues to be on everyone's radar screen. We can now keep the achievement of all our students, especially our African American males, in the forefront. In fact, we have already seen improvements in the academic achievement of our African American male students.

21st century skills is also a major part of your district strategic plan, can you tell us more about that?

We have defined the 21st Century skills for the Virginia Beach Outcomes for Student Success as follows: to be academically proficient; to be effective communicators and collaborators; to be globally aware, independent, responsible learners and citizens; to be critical and creative thinkers, innovators, and problem solvers.

We cannot assess these outcomes with multiple choice tests. So, we have identified those skills and aligned them to our growing curriculum. We determined that we can create performance-based assessments and utilize scoring rubrics to evaluate student mastery of these important outcomes. We are currently testing this with a few schools and hope to implement division-wide next year.

We are also thinking about surveying our students at the end of the online assessment to get their feedback. We have never done this but think that it would be very valuable information as students are our most valuable stakeholders

Are your teachers using the classroom-based testing tool yet?

We are currently field testing the ETS Item Bank for online classroom assessments. As mentioned earlier, we are very strategic in how we implement and rollout new initiatives. We have identified 10 schools, and asked each school to select a grade level or department to work with staff from central office to create common assessments for each grade level. The method is as follows: assess students using common assessments; analyze the results using data protocols; plan for necessary intervention; and reassess as appropriate. If this proves effective, then we will consider releasing it to all schools next year. We want this initiative to be closely tied to the work that we are doing with Professional Learning Communities. This is the reason why we are emphasizing the importance of developing common assessments across departments or grade levels as this will give teachers common student data to discuss. We don't want teachers to work in isolation because it is important to continue to promote effective collaboration around student learning.

Are you using the parent portal?

We opened the parent portal up to parents of secondary students last year. We are witnessing an increase in parent participation and feedback has been very positive overall. It has created an open dialogue between parents and teachers. Parents are also able to see the gradebook. We don't use Schoolnet's gradebook, but parents can easily access our gradebook through the Schoolnet Parent Portal.

We are also looking to utilize the Student Portal this year so that students can follow their own academic progress and not just use the system to take assessments. In fact, we found that students were asking for it! One student in particular exclaimed, "You don't need a Parent Portal, you need a STUDENT Portal!" Many students use the Parent Portal to see their grades and what their parents are seeing! Giving students access to their assessment results and daily progress is important to helping students develop into independent and responsible learners.