

New York school district designs collaborative, integrated online curriculum with Google Apps Education Edition



At a Glance

What they wanted to do:

- Create a collaborative and accessible curriculum planning system
- Reduce paper, save resources, and take steps to become more “eco-friendly”
- Empower teachers and students with 21st Century resources

What they did:

- Built an integrated district curriculum with Google Calendar, Google Docs, and Google Sites
- Established Google Docs as a platform for joint lesson planning

What they accomplished:

- Fostered cross-district teacher collaboration, community, and professional development
- Saved printing of thousands of papers for thick curriculum binders
- Integrated lesson plans and shared resources across grade levels district-wide

Organization

Clarkstown Central School District, located 20 miles north of New York City, is a suburban central school district containing ten elementary schools, three middle schools, two high schools, and one K-12 school. The district, which employs some 2,300 people and serves nearly 10,000 students, sees its mission as engaging in a mutually respectful partnership with the community and creating a secure environment that motivates and enables students to become lifelong learners and productive, ethical contributors to an ever-changing global society.



Challenge

Like many school districts, Clarkstown Central used a patchwork of unrelated applications, both network and Internet-based. This often caused frustration as staff spent time managing revisions and ensuring appropriate access and permissions as solutions and versions evolved. But John Calvert, the district’s Technology Learning Facilitator and Google Certified Teacher, and Director of Instructional Technology John Krouskoff, wanted to use technology to provide the teachers and students with 21st century tools. Calvert explains, “We made a commitment to prepare our students for the technology rich future they will inherit.” To keep this commitment, Calvert and Krouskoff worked with representatives from all aspects of the district to streamline processes and extend online tools, empowering all of the district’s teachers to communicate and collaborate using Google Apps. The first phase of this large-scale change was the creation of a content-rich, easy-to-understand curriculum resource portal created with Google Apps.

“Constructing lesson plans and unit plans is no longer a solitary activity. It’s a collaborative process that’s happening not only with teachers on a building level team, but with teachers at a grade level from a variety of schools. Our teaching is made better as a result of this collective intelligence.”

—John Krouskoff, Director of Technology

Solution

Calvert and Krouskoff started with Google Calendar, included in Google Apps, as the first step. “Google Calendar was an instant success because it did what paper could not,” Krouskoff explains. Although teachers and administrators relied on traditional calendars every day, desk planners and printed calendars weren’t eco-friendly, didn’t facilitate collaboration, and quickly became out of date. Calvert and Krouskoff set out to simplify certain scheduling tasks for the entire school,

creating centrally controlled calendars for each building and for the entire district. The online calendars freed teachers from having to add events to their personal calendars, and updated times and locations as changes were made.

Next, Calvert and Krouskoff worked with Dr. Deborah O'Connell, the district's deputy superintendent, and curriculum coordinators to create scope and sequence calendars, mapping out unit dates and allowing teachers to subscribe to each content "calendar" for the subjects and grade levels they taught. Clicking on a curriculum event showed lesson plans and links to site pages for each unit. Thus, a fifth grade teacher could turn on and view curriculum calendars and lessons for the month based on where she should be in the curriculum.

Then, using Google Sites – coding-free web page creation and publishing included in Google Apps – the team built resource sites for every curriculum area within each grade level, organized by unit. These online pages were linked to the appropriate calendar events and displayed curriculum notes fed directly from the district's mapping website. The pages organized links, documents, and other resources, providing consistency across schools, grades, and curricular areas. Google Sites was also used to support professional development, showcasing efforts and tapping in to the collective intelligence across the district.

Teachers started creating unit plans and other resources collaboratively in Google Docs and sharing them as web pages with their colleagues. "For the first time in the history of the district, we built a platform for sharing work, ideas, and professional development across our 14 campuses and 16 buildings," Calvert reports.

Kelly Dowd, a learning facilitator in the district, recalls her experience getting started with Google Apps. "It's a fantastic way to share ideas and resources," she says. "During in-service days, the teachers were able to work together to build units. It has been really great to show the teachers how easy it is to navigate and share ideas. The best part is that the teachers are using it and loving it!"

Benefits

"The project has been a resounding success," says Calvert. "The faculty is more connected to the curriculum than they have ever been." The use of Google Apps for collaborative curriculum coordination has gained the buy-in of administrators and teachers, and the district will soon expand beyond the elementary curriculum to the secondary grades. To date, more than one thousand documents have now been added to or created in Google Docs. Since all of these are maintained and linked online, documents are always up to date and the coordinators do not need to track down old versions across disparate systems.

"The new system has given our teachers a completely new way to access the curriculum and learn from each other. Everyone involved has been won over," adds Krouskoff. "Our work has inspired many of our teachers to bring Google Apps into their teaching." In response to this enthusiasm, the district is introducing a Student Apps portal, built on the Google Apps platform, this fall, delivering what Calvert calls "an incredible learning platform" to the district's high school students.

Kristin Hanley, a third grade teacher at Clarkstown school Woodglen Elementary, reflects, "The success comes because this is technology being used exactly the way people imagine. The work that our district has been doing with Google has done just that. Each staff member has access to information when they need it, allowing teachers to share our greatest work and encouraging us to reflect and improve. It's truly an exciting time to be working in Clarkstown."

Krouskoff cites another benefit: reduced paper and resource consumption.

"In the past, the curriculum was distributed to our teachers in a hard bound binder, using thousands of sheets of paper which were not easily updated, searched, or collaborated upon," he says. Today, paper consumption – and the expense associated with it – is down, enough that Krouskoff now sees the Google Apps solution as "an essential part of our Green Schools initiative."

About Google Apps Education Edition

Google Apps Education Edition 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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Calvert adds that the most noteworthy success of the new system is in teamwork. "The system gives our teachers unrestricted access to district resources," he says. "Some of these have existed for years but teachers weren't aware of them. Now that information is online and available through Google Apps, teachers are familiar with these resources, and can keep copies in Google Docs, making improvements, and re-submitting them to curriculum coordinators. Constructing lesson plans and unit plans is no longer a solitary activity. It's a collaborative process that's happening not only with teachers building-to-building, but at grade levels across the district. Teachers leverage the best of themselves in this process, and our teaching is made better as a result of this collective intelligence. We're on the right course with Google Apps."

