

# **The Daily Star**

## **The Newspaper for the Heartland of New York**

### **Some area schools put records online**

**By Mark Boshnack**  
Staff Writer

Regina Meno, of Sidney, used to have to wait for report cards to be issued to see how her children were doing in school. But now that's changed.

Now, she can use the Internet to log in to a Sidney Central School portal that allows access to up-to-date information about tests, grades, assignments and attendance.

"It's great," she said. "We can see how their grades are and make sure all assignments are turned in," she said.

Sidney is one of a growing number of school districts using a brand of software that allows parents to find out more about what's going on in their children's academic life.

PowerSchool, a product of Pearson, an international media company, offers Web-based information for staff and administration that can also give parents an Internet portal into the school day, several school officials said.

This is the fourth year for the software at Sidney, where technology coordinator Mike Dionne said parents of students in grades 6-12 can get relevant information on their children's academic performance. The earlier grades should be added by next school year, he said.

The school was one of the first to use the system through Broome-Tioga Board of Cooperative Educational Services, he said. The offering started with four schools and there are at least 20 in the region now, he said.

He doesn't know how many parents and students are signed-up to use the system without running a special report, but he said the system had 581 hits Thursday, by early afternoon.

At Cooperstown Central School, the system has been used for three years, according to Mark Lavalley, network systems coordinator.

Besides providing a database that keeps track of such information as grades and attendance in one system, in the middle of the last school year it started providing parents that information.

There are about 1,050 students in the school and more than half, in grades 6-12, are eligible to use the system.

About 125 parents have signed up for the service so far, he said.

For students in the upper grades, "it provides a 24/7 online report card with some unique capabilities," said Lavalley. In the younger grades, it is used mostly for attendance.

When a parent checks a result, for instance, if a student has an 85 grade in English and a parent wants to see what that includes, all they have to do is click on the grade to learn what quizzes, tests and homework assignments make up the total.

As teachers regularly update the electronic grade book, parents can check on such items as what assignments a student has missed.

If they have a question, there is a link so an e-mail can be sent to the teacher, he said.

The system has the same type of security as any bank or business.

"We are aware that some people may not have access to computers," but the traditional ways of communicating between parents and teachers are still in place, he said.

While there is not enough analysis done on the impact of the system on student grades, he said, "it has to help."

This is the second year the system has been open to parents at Richfield Springs Central School, said technology coordinator Jim Hill. "Its a great communications tool," he said.

All that parents need to do to access it is to obtain a user name and a password, and they can see how their student is doing in a number of areas. There are about 639 in grades K-12 at Richfield. About half of those families who are eligible have signed up, he said.

In grades K-4, only information such as lunch balances and attendance will be available. But a more complete picture can be reached for students in grades 5-12.

There is a newly added student portal as well, he said.

The school will be doing a survey to see how many families don't have access to the Internet. It could put them at a comparative disadvantage, but they can access it at a public library.

Implementation of the system "is probably one of the most positive PR steps the school has taken in years," he said.

Sue Smith has children in fifth and seventh grade at Richfield Springs and she agreed.

"It's a wonderful tool" that allows parents to keep track of how their children are doing, she said. It can also track lunch balances and provide access to daily bulletins in case students forgot to mention something.

"It's an exciting way to keep track" of student performance, she said. "If I'm away at a conference, I can still keep track of things," she said.

"Since they know you are keeping really close tabs, it helps them excel even further," she said about its effect on students.

Her son, Ben, who is in seventh grade, agreed. "I think it's a good thing. It makes me try harder to get better grades." He does not have a student portal.

Dionne, in Sidney, said the school hasn't done any analysis on its effect on grades," but that the comments from both parents and students have been overwhelmingly positive.

Meno, who has a couple of students in secondary school, said she started using it when it first became available.

The best feature has been the ability to e-mail teachers to see what needs to get done, if there is a problem, she said.

Previously, parents had to wait for report cards before they could take action, she said.

"Now we can track and catch it," she said.

Her daughter, junior Stephanie Meno, said she hasn't had the time to sign-up for the access, but "I already try to keep my grades up."

But if there is a problem it will show up when her parents look at the records, but that hasn't happened yet, she said.

Mary Pate said she would like to sign up so she can check-up on her son and see if there are any assignments, "so I can give a little shove."

Her daughter, Sarah Pate, said she uses the student portal to check up on her grades. "It's a quick overview that is accessible before your progress report. Its really convenient."

The system is still being researched at Oneonta City School District, said director of technology Bonnie Nobiling. We are hoping to make a decision this year about a new student management system such as PowerSchool that can receive BOCES aid to help offset the cost, she said.

Several districts said software costs about \$20,000, with annual expenses amounting to several thousand more, including support and training. Much of that is offset by state aid, which varies between district from about 70 to 80 percent of the cost.

The Oneonta district uses a program called Administrators Plus for student management, but the way it is being used, it doesn't meet the need to have district-wide data in one place, Nobiling said.

"I don't want to invest any more, if we are going to change," she said.