

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

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



QUICK FACTS

- 6059 students, 1891 of whom live outside the district and attend Westside Community Schools by request
- **Schools include:**
 - 10 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

PowerSchool Profile in Success

Westside Community Schools

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 Dr. Ken Bird, 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 to give students and parents access to 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 parents can log on to the web at any time, type in a password, and see data on their 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.

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. In a high school with an enrollment of more than 2,100, an average of 2,300 parents and students access their PowerSchool accounts via web or phone each day. Additionally, 2,100 parents have signed up for email notifications and half of these parents are from the elementary school- more than one third of the total elementary school parents. Between September 2006 and April 2007, parents and students made more than 800,000 separate inquiries into the system.

Sharlene Karbowski, PowerSchool system administrator, feels that there is a common misconception when it comes to elementary school parents not being as interested in online access as the secondary parents. “As I like to say- put it out there, and they will come.”

Karbowski 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 to me to talk about something that they gleaned from PowerSchool about their son or daughter- and about their appreciation of PowerSchool,” said Superintendent Bird.

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
- Dell PowerEdge 2950 Dual Core 3 GHZ Xeon server
- Wireless laptops for every 9-12th grader
- Wireless laptop for every K-12 teacher

Results

- Nearly 4 million separate inquiries into the system by students and parents
- More than 2,000 progress reports mailed to parents each week
- Anytime, anywhere access to grades and assignments for parents, teachers and students
- Comprehensive web and email reports with operational and significant information for parents, teachers and students
- Automated grade books enable integrated, uniform assessment tools

Parent communication

With more communication coming out of the district, it makes sense that more communication is flowing back into schools as well. PowerSchool helps parents become aware of issues as they emerge, rather than 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 their children stay encouraged, engaged and on track. Regularly scheduled parent-teacher meetings have also become more meaningful.

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 school students 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."

"Using PowerSchool over the years has helped schools, parents, and students enter into a true partnership," said Kingston. "Before PowerSchool, only one stakeholder had access to the student information and it was up to them to decide what was shared with the other stakeholders involved. Now everyone at the table is empowered with the valuable information they need to succeed."

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. 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.

While Westside continues to improve its standards, the district values PowerSchool for continuing to improve its features. In early 2007, Westside replaced its third party test score analyzer program with PowerSchool Premier in an effort to conduct more comprehensive and detailed data analysis. Karbowski feels that making PowerSchool the hub for all information is ideal for customization.

"The program allows for a customizable template in which we can ask specific, complex questions," Karbowski said. "Cookie cutter software can't provide key stakeholders the information they want and need."

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

Kent Kingston
Vice Principal
Westside High Schools

With this new functionality, once the template is created, the information sits on the desktop and is automatically updated. Karbowski is able to create a template in less than five minutes and download more than 60,000 test scores in three seconds!

“It’s a perfect match,” said Karbowski. “Having a partner dedicated to creating efficiencies across the entirety of our student information lifecycle has allowed us to realize increased time and cost-savings while enabling us to 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.

Kingston notes that many guidance counselors have cited more productive student meetings since the implementation of PowerSchool. “When they sit down together, the student can’t hold anything back,” said Kingston. “Students know what the counselor knows – and there’s no escaping that.”

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, more than one third of the students at Westside High School attend because they’ve requested to be there. They choose to travel outside the district 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, every teacher in the district has a wireless computer and even hall monitors hold wireless PDAs. At anytime, anywhere on the 400,000-square foot campus, they’ve got in hand all the information they need to make effective 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 gives us a home run,” said Bird.

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