



Gwinnett County Public Schools

IBM Connections software helps teachers improve instruction and enhance professional development

Overview

The need

As part of its digital Content, Learning, Assessment and Support System (eCLASS) program, Gwinnett County Public Schools wanted to help teachers and school leaders collaborate more effectively on ways to improve curriculum and sharpen instructional skills.

The solution

To support information sharing within and among schools, the district worked with strategic partner IBM to deploy what they called a “Collaboration tool” based on IBM Connections software.

The benefit

GCPS now uses the Collaboration tool to coordinate formal staff summer training, and the eCLASS online communities provide an opportunity for new and veteran instructors to collaborate and share information with ease.

Located in the metro Atlanta area, Gwinnett County Public Schools (GCPS) is the largest school system in Georgia and continues to grow. The district’s approximately 20,000 employees serve more than 175,000 students in 136 schools spread over 432 square miles.

Building out the digital program

Working with its strategic partner IBM, GCPS is transforming teaching and learning through a multiyear digital Content, Learning, Assessment and Support System (eCLASS) program. For teachers, the electronic Gradebook program was an early success, allowing them to easily manage student grades and attendance records. GCPS leadership sought a collaboration solution to help teachers accelerate their professional development and make it easier to share ideas and resources aimed at improving curriculum and instruction.

Through digital eCLASS collaboration communities, GCPS is changing the way teachers and school leaders innovate and learn from one another.

“IBM Connections tools open up lines of communication and help our teachers take greater control of their professional development,” says J. Alvin Wilbanks, CEO and superintendent, GCPS.



“Our LSTCs [local school technology coordinators] quickly saw the value of the Collaboration tool for sharing best practices. Within months, the LSTC community grew to 155 members nearly half of whom are unique contributors.”

— Dr. Matt Waymack, director of eCLASS Development, GCPS

Creating eCLASS collaboration communities

Collaboration has always been essential to the GCPS culture of continuous quality improvement. However, it was limited to meetings, working sessions, and formal, in-person, professional development. To share information and ideas outside of meetings, teachers, administrators and support staff relied heavily on email and shared drives. As their inboxes and drives grew unwieldy, some teachers and leaders began using commercial social applications for professional online collaboration.

Realizing the increasing value of social media to connect teachers, GCPS sought a secure, reliable solution and turned to IBM, its strategic partner on the eCLASS program. Consultants from IBM® Global Business Services® and IBM Global Technology Services® helped GCPS formulate the vision for the eCLASS program. They were also involved in the planning, implementation, management, and analysis of technology solutions required to achieve that vision. “One of the big challenges in a large district is that whatever technology we use must be robust,” says J. Alvin Wilbanks, CEO and superintendent of GCPS. “As our strategic partner, IBM helps us screen and choose systems and software that we can be confident will operate at the level needed.”

The IBM team created a “day in the life” demonstration showing how a science teacher could use IBM Connections social business software to participate in online discussion forums, track activities as part of a collaborative team, find and share resources, and connect with other educators through online communities. The district’s leadership agreed that Connections software had the depth and flexibility required and could be instrumental in supporting implementation of other eCLASS applications.

“We wanted people thinking carefully about what they sought to accomplish with online communities. So we had an approval process in place, requiring that schools demonstrate an interest in and need for the Collaboration tool.”

— Dr. Matt Waymack, director of eCLASS Development, GCPS

The GCPS and IBM team deployed the Connections application to a pilot group of 30 schools before making it available district-wide. Calling the application the “Collaboration tool,” the team integrated it with the employee portal to streamline teacher access to online communities, forums, activities, and files and to facilitate seamless linkage of collaboration features with new eCLASS technology components as they became available.

To encourage adoption, the team created a series of communities to “seed” the Collaboration tool with initial content. In addition, the team enrolled local school technology coordinators (LSTCs) in a central online community for collaborating on technical and training issues arising from their daily support of employees using eCLASS tools.

Fostering a community approach

Following the initial success of the LSTC and pilot school communities, GCPS established a process to make the application available to any school whose principal requested access. The district also mandates that only LSTCs and lead innovators (school technology champions) at a school are allowed to create new communities. This process is designed to foster active, inclusive community participation by emphasizing collaboration on instructional practice and encouraging broad knowledge sharing. “We didn’t want people building communities that just sit empty and unused on a server,” says Dr. Matt Waymack, director of eCLASS Development at GCPS.

Within a year of solution deployment, the number of unique communities has grown to more than 2,000. Nearly all of the district’s 12,000 teachers and administrators have access to the Collaboration tool and communities specific to their roles.

Capturing information as it unfolds

An immediate benefit of the solution is increased communications efficiency as teachers and staff members move discussions from email to online communities. “People involved in a forum or activity see one continuous stream of information as it unfolds,” says Waymack. “With email, all it takes to break the communication chain is someone accidentally hitting Reply instead of Reply to All. Now, using the Collaboration tool, everything is captured in one place.”

Solution Components

Software

- IBM Connections V5.0

Strategic Partner

- IBM Global Business Services®
 - IBM Global Technology Services
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“A teacher may be the only one teaching a specific course at a school, but at other schools in the county, someone teaches that same course. Connections is making a huge difference by helping these teachers collaborate across the district.”

— J. Alvin Wilbanks
CEO and superintendent, GCPS

Enhancing professional development

The district is using the Collaboration tool to keep in-service staff development sessions relevant during the school year. Once each quarter, more than 250 GCPS eCLASS lead innovators collaborate on ideas within the Curriculum and Instruction (C&I) community. “We present some ideas to our innovators and ask what other topics they want covered, and then they vote,” says Waymack. “We use this polling approach regularly and base session content on the feedback.”

In addition, many GCPS departments now coordinate formal staff summer training through eCLASS communities. “We offer intensive training to approximately 1,000 instructional staff each summer,” says Waymack. “Every last detail is now run through the communities, including what is offered and who is scheduled to go where for what.”

Improving curriculum and instruction

GCPS also benefits from information sharing and increased collaboration within online eCLASS communities among new and veteran teachers from low- and high-performing schools. For example, the C&I tool community offers forums where people regularly post questions, share ideas and follow blogs on successful instructional practices using technology to engage students. And, the Office of Student Discipline community provides information on positive student behavior interventions, a key communication tool when it comes to supporting student success. The Collaboration tool also helps reduce feelings of isolation among staff members who are the sole teachers of certain courses at their schools. High school Latin teachers, for example have formed a cross-district Latin teaching community.

Among instructional staff members surveyed in one recent small field test, almost 90 percent read or posted to forums in the Collaboration tool monthly and 25 percent shared files at least once a week.

Going forward, Waymack expects participation to continue increasing as younger teachers and leaders who are more comfortable with social and collaborative tools embrace an open, transparent solution for collaborating to improve instructional outcomes.

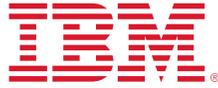
For more information

To learn more about the IBM Social Business solutions, please contact your IBM marketing representative or IBM Business Partner, or visit the following website:

ibm.biz/ibmconnections

To find out more about GCPS innovative eCLASS initiative, visit:

www.gwinnett.k12.ga.us



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Produced in the United States of America
October 2015

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