



Improving Communication and Bolstering Student Success through Smart Software Implementation

Similar to other faculty positions in small-school and single-school district environments, technology directors wear multiple hats – Lincoln-style stovepipe hats, baseball caps, sombreros, you name it. On any given day, their duties might include running the school Web site, repairing computers, installing software, maintaining and supervising the computer lab, ordering new products, training teachers and more.

In addition, as more and more parents and students expect schools to provide immediate and constant access to student progress information, school leaders are turning to their technology directors for guidance. Just as many of their small-school counterparts in public education, private and parochial schools find that implementing a large-scale grading and electronic communication system is not a viable option – considering both upfront and maintenance costs can be above and beyond their annual budget for technology purchases.

Forward-thinking Solutions Benefit Stakeholders

St. Vincent de Paul, a K-7 (soon to be K-8) Catholic school in Rogers, Ark., found a comprehensive, innovative, feasible alternative. By working together with Excelsior Software, they developed a truly forward-thinking model that fits their particular needs and capabilities – and those of their school community, as well.

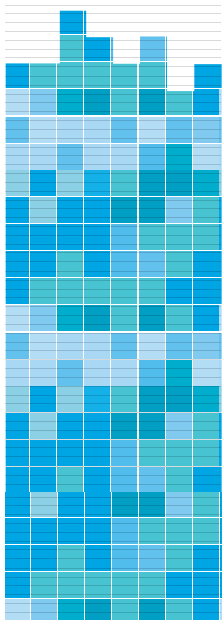
In these times of shrinking budgets and resources, many schools may find themselves struggling to meet the needs of all stakeholders in their school community, while coming to terms with the realities of the costs involved with implementing a project of this kind. Hardware purchases, costs associated with set-up, maintenance, and management of the system – along with finding staff members with the technical expertise to deal with network administration and security issues – can be a tall order to fill. A new option, pioneered by the St. Vincent de Paul team, finds the school partnering with Excelsior to host their Pinnacle system offsite.

Excelsior Software hosts St. Vincent de Paul's Pinnacle system at their headquarters in Colorado, allowing the school to utilize the web-based system without having to purchase or maintain servers, or hire and train technology staff. This model places the network administration, security issues and backup procedures in the hands of Excelsior's technical services team, freeing St. Vincent de Paul staff to focus on their students' educational experience.

Cathy Walker, Technology Director at St. Vincent de Paul, maintains more than 100 computers, runs the computer lab for 350 students each week and administers the network, among other things. She explained, "By collaborating with Excelsior Software to implement a hosted model, I was able to toss out one of my many hats."

Fine-tuned Implementation—and Collaboration

The Excelsior team believes that proper implementation is vital to the success of the model and therefore strives to be forward thinking and flexible during this phase. "Well-built software is significant, but the people who support the software – especially with a hosted model – are crucial to the success of the technology," Walker said. "Working with some companies to implement and maintain a program can be difficult sometimes. Fortunately, we collaborate with a publisher that is dedicated to the same things my colleagues and I are – our Excelsior team cares as much about our students' success as we do. Simply put, we work together for what's best for our students, their families and teachers."



As assessment is unique to every school and/or district, Excelsior works to customize their Pinnacle software to each individual school's requirements, whether they are internal standards or those set by authoritative organizations. In addition, the company worked with St. Vincent de Paul staff to provide the resources they need and took steps to make their teachers feel comfortable with the new technology.

"Giving our teachers time to really work in the program gave them the chance to learn how to weight individual grades," Walker said. "More important, it gave them the chance to make mistakes and learn how to fix them quickly and easily."

"Our Excelsior team worked with us to develop and tailor a customized implementation plan that addressed the needs of our specific project," she added. "In our case, we made the decision to wait until the second year to incorporate standards-based grading – we wanted to make sure everyone on our side was comfortable with the new technology before adding complexities."

Communication All Around

St. Vincent de Paul is located in a growing metropolitan area, with an ever-increasing student body that utilizes technology on a daily basis. And parents are relying on technology to learn as well – to learn about their kids. If school and/or district policy holds that parents should be able to clearly see how their students' grades are weighted – whether a grade is for a summative or formative assessment – and how grades relate to attendance, Excelsior's Pinnacle system is the ideal tool to communicate that kind of information in a secure, real-time environment.

St. Vincent de Paul's Pinnacle system gives their parents the opportunity to monitor their child's progress through assignment, attendance and discipline records. Via the Pinnacle Internet Viewer, student progress information recorded in teachers' gradebooks is automatically available for parents and students to view.

"The gradebook significantly increased communication among everyone – parents, students and teachers," Walker said. "It gives parents a chance to see grades and discipline notations in real time. It reminds students and parents when a paper was overdue. Miscommunications or errors are easily cleared up throughout the grading period, rather than waiting until the final grade report. And it gives teachers a chance to see what other teachers are documenting."

With grades accessible to all staff, teachers can easily view a snapshot of each student and see how he or she is doing across the board, including discipline notations. In this way they know if their student is struggling in other classes, or whether the student's challenge is particularly with their subject or teaching style. Teachers use Pinnacle as a tool to communicate and collaborate with one another, sharing instructional strategies and ideas to ensure the success of their students.

Creating Conversations, Building Invaluable Life Skills

One of the most unexpected and exciting outcomes of their implementation was the interest and enthusiasm of St. Vincent de Paul's students. Walker elaborated that school leaders, teachers and parents have found that allowing students to monitor their grades on an on-going basis not only keeps them actively engaged in their own learning, but gives them practical life experience, too. As students take on the role of tracking grades themselves, they develop and fine-tune self-discipline skills that encourage their sense of responsibility. Students are taking it upon themselves to speak with their parents and their teachers about their progress. "We've really seen a growing collaboration between students and teachers. As students and parents monitor their academic progress, what we call 'communication opportunities' are created," concluded Walker. "Pinnacle facilitates these conversations – it eliminates any potential for surprises at the end of the semester."

Giving Back

Customized reporting, online access to grades and attendance, and home-to-school communication were key factors for St. Vincent de Paul's administrators as they went through the process of selecting a grading and electronic communication system. But it was Excelsior's ability to deliver a forward-thinking solution tailored to the particular needs and resources of the school that made the solution such a success, beyond the criteria for functionality and usability. Having Excelsior host the solution allowed St. Vincent de Paul to get the complete solution up and running in a fraction of the time required for an in-house deployment. By centralizing hardware at Excelsior's off-site location, the school was able to avoid a costly investment in new hardware and technical expertise. Through this alternative hosted model, school IT staff are free to concentrate on their core tasks, rather than focusing on the practical and strategic issues of implementation and maintenance.

Overall, the Pinnacle system has received kudos not only from St. Vincent de Paul's technology staff, administrators, curriculum specialists, and classroom teachers, but also from the school's most important stakeholders: the students and their families. Pinnacle returns valuable time back into the lives of teachers and school leaders, ultimately allowing them to dedicate more time to their students, parents and the faith community.

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your school or district increase student learning.
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