



# PINNACLE PLUS™ gives Okaloosa Schools instant access to data district-wide

## challenge

Implement a multi-functional, automated, scalable, electronic assessment system providing immediate access to real-time information for administrators, teachers, parents and students that can grow and adapt with the needs of a large, multi-faceted school district.

## solution

Install Pinnacle Plus™ from Excelsior Software with its modular flexibility in the district—utilizing Pinnacle's electronic Gradebook module, Pinnacle Internet/Attendance/Principal/Student Viewers, Pinnacle Tech and District Data Manager to improve access, productivity and communication in a centralized terminal server environment.

## results

Centralizing student performance, attendance, discipline and demographics into one flexible, district-wide database solution with real-time information has provided greater access and knowledge to teachers and administrators to make data-driven decisions; allowed teachers to eliminate repetitive, administrative tasks — returning hours of hands-on time in the classroom; dramatically reduced technical problems and provided faster problem-solving; created an avenue for increased parent and student involvement; and significantly raised achievement scores for students — earning accolades for academic success.

*After making the most dramatic learning gains since the state started grading schools, Okaloosa County Public Schools (Florida) now have a larger share of "A" schools than sixty-six of Florida's sixty-seven counties. In fact, twenty-six Okaloosa schools have earned Florida's highest accolades for academic performance. Pinnacle Plus™ software is doing its part to contribute to their impressive accomplishment by centralizing grades, attendance, and other student information into one flexible database, with instant access for all.*

Okaloosa County Public Schools (OCPS), like several other nearby districts, subcontracts its technical services to Titan Corporation. Marie Summerlin, a senior network engineer with Titan, says OCPS implemented Pinnacle Plus from Excelsior Software in 2001, beginning with the electronic Gradebook module. "We do soup-to-nuts tech support for the Okaloosa schools," she explains. "LANs, file servers, WANs — it's all outsourced to us."

OCPS is using Pinnacle in all 38 of its schools: 21 elementary, eight middle, four senior high, and two K-12. "We also have two grade book systems operating for the Department of Juvenile Justice," she continues, "and one Vo-tech school, in which we're installing Pinnacle Tech. All told, we're using Pinnacle with about 33,000 students."

In addition to Pinnacle's Gradebook, the district also employs other Pinnacle modules: Principal Viewer, Student Viewer, Pinnacle Internet Viewer, Attendance Viewer, Pinnacle Plus, and District Data Manager.

## SAY GOODBYE TO BUBBLE SHEETS

OCPS implemented the data management solution because their administrators wanted to be able to see things at the district level, according to Summerlin. “It began with the teacher academic help desk and wanting to do grades online. They researched a few products, then selected this one,” she explains. “Before, the teachers had paper grade books, and at reporting time they filled out bubble scan sheets. The student administrative system runs on an IBM AS400, so the teachers would turn in the sheets to the data processing department for scanning. The data processing staff would print out verification reports, send them back to each school for teachers’ review, make changes, and then report cards could be printed.”

Those bubble sheets are now a thing of the past, thanks to Pinnacle. “Gradebook has essentially eliminated those scan sheets, taking a five-day process down to just three days,” Summerlin says. “At the end of the grading period, now the teachers simply click on the ‘Submit Grades’ option online. I run the exports and follow the same established procedures. The teachers don’t have to do anything except submit grades, which Pinnacle has already calculated — it’s that fast. When you consider the number of teachers and the number of students involved, that’s a lot of time saved.”

## HESITANT TEACHERS WERE QUICKLY WON OVER

Although the district had thoroughly researched Pinnacle before they purchased the system, Summerlin was still surprised by some aspects of using the product. “I was really caught unawares at some of the teachers’ initial resistance to learning new software. But eventually,” she says with a chuckle, “the lack of bubble sheets won them over. It was a matter of ‘build it and they will come.’”

**Pinnacle Gradebook has essentially eliminated scan sheets, taking a five-day process down to just three. Grades are done electronically, so there's an immediate cost savings.**

**“Pinnacle opens up a world of information to parents. The surprise is that students use it more than parents do — it lets them keep up with their own grades.”**

— Marie Summerlin, Titan Corporation

OCPS is enjoying the many perks of centralized data, including aggregated reports and faster problem-solving. “Okaloosa used Microsoft Windows terminal services technology to manage this,” says Summerlin. “Every school has its own Gradebook database, but when you’re using Gradebook for the entire district, you want to see data at the district level. Pinnacle’s District Data Manager lets us combine data from different schools into one SQL database so we can run reports at the district level.”

## REMOTE FIXES ARE FASTER AND CHEAPER THAN DRIVING

Centralization of information has also resulted in faster fixes to technical problems. From her desk at work or home, Summerlin can log-in to any school’s Gradebook system and fix problems remotely. “I don’t have to get in my car and go to the school site in order to support teachers in their classrooms or make adjustments to the system,” she says. “With Gradebook Manager, 99.9% of the problems are solved from our office without my going to the schools. That means faster response time, so the district gets a better value—they pay us for working rather than driving. The district definitely saves money doing it this way.”

Pinnacle Internet Viewer modules are a big hit with Okaloosa’s parents and students, says Summerlin: “They really jumped on board!” Now parents can log-in daily and see what assignments their children are missing. “It opens a world of assessment information including grades and attendance to parents,” she continues. “The surprise is that students use it more than parents do, because it lets them keep up with their own grades. They can see how they’re doing and know what they have to do to go from a C to a B or an A. If the student’s out sick, they can go online and

see what they've missed. That kind of student use is something I didn't anticipate."

## **PARENTS, ADMINISTRATORS MORE INVOLVED**

The district's administrators are equally enthusiastic. "One district administrator saw the high school Gradebook reports and realized that the principals have access to real-time grades — they can see who's failing, who's super-achieving," explains Summerlin. "That means the principal's knowledge of achievement scores is as good as the teacher who inputs the grades. That particular district administrator was really excited about this feature — I simply configured his computer to give him access. I showed him how to look at different schools, students, classes."

At first, faculty members were apprehensive about allowing parents access to student grades and attendance, according to Summerlin. But the success of parent involvement has won them over. "Before, parents had to rely on reports coming home in the backpack. Pinnacle gives the parents more opportunity to be involved. For the student with borderline achievement, concerned parents can check online and call only if there's a problem. Now, there's no excuse for parents to not know their student's status until report card time."

## **TRAINING AND TESTING ESSENTIAL TO ROLLOUT**

Teachers also had to deal with a learning curve, but a solid training program dealt with that issue. Says Summerlin, "We had a very aggressive rollout: just two or three months. There was a testing phase, with training, first. Teachers got to use Gradebook and get comfortable with it before the school went live. We defined 'going live' as a two-stage process: the school got to export grades at the end of the grading period, and then we implemented Pinnacle Internet Viewer."

At the Department of Juvenile Justice, Pinnacle was installed Christmas 2002; for now, Gradebook is being used but not Pinnacle Internet Viewer. Installation at the Vo-tech school required a specialized Pinnacle module to support its specific needs. Says Summerlin, "Our Vo-tech school is vastly different from our other sites. Grades there are project-based, more focused on start- and end-date. It is really more of a skills-based evaluation, so there's an entirely different set of data elements involved. Pinnacle Tech has the ability to

handle the roll-up of these skills, as well as to address state reporting [WDIS in Florida]. The WDIS report is very time consuming and elimination of that report really got the vocational teachers' attention. When we installed Gradebook in 2001, they didn't jump on that bandwagon. When they saw Pinnacle Tech, they said 'that's us!' — Pinnacle Tech caters to those specialized assessments."

**"With Gradebook Manager, 99.9% of problems are solved remotely, from my office, without my going to the schools ... The district definitely saves money doing it this way."**

— Marie Summerlin, Titan Corporation

## **DATA DOWNLOADS EASY AND INFORMATIVE**

The district is currently working on importing standards into Gradebook, which will help it generate standards-based report cards. "We maintain our FCAT [the statewide Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test] scores on the AS400, but teachers have no access to that. We took two years of FCAT scores and imported them into Gradebook. Now, teachers can double-click on a child's name in Pinnacle and see whether their scores have gone up or down."

High-stakes test scores weren't the only data the district gained better access to through Pinnacle. Says Summerlin, "We imported a lot of other data from the AS400 that we thought teachers would want to have access to without having to ask the front office to run a report. Now the information is right there at their fingertips and it really helps in delivering more effective instruction."

## **FLEXIBILITY ALLOWS FOR CUSTOM USAGE**

Summerlin appreciates the flexibility of Pinnacle Plus. "You have to customize Pinnacle for your needs," she says, "but it's relatively easy to do that. Gradebook will support a variety of situations. The school calendar, the attendance codes...we easily modified those.

"Our elementary schools use S, N, and U letter grades instead of ABCDE. The district had to develop a percentage

scale to put numbers to the letter grades. Pinnacle Gradebook is so configurable, we were able to easily implement that, too.

“Pinnacle is a very flexible product,” Summerlin continues. “It lets us process multiple functions and accomplish a lot of goals from one software application. We have one server for middle and high schools and one for the elementary schools to break up the work load.”

### TERRIFIC TECH SUPPORT A PLUS

A senior network engineer herself, Summerlin gives top honors to Excelsior’s technical support for its Pinnacle products: “I’ve got to hand it to Excelsior’s support people. I’ve worked on help desks myself, so I know what that takes. Excelsior’s customer support is absolutely fabulous! They know their product, they’re always friendly, they have a good response time.

“One of my coworkers went to Excelsior training in Key West, turned on her laptop, and realized she was missing something she needed to teach a class the next day. Excelsior bent over backwards to get her what was missing. They were really top-notch. In my case, some of us missed training one day due to an emergency, but the implementation was continuing on schedule. We had to keep up, and our learning curve was steeper. Excelsior’s tech support did a great job helping us. Working with Excelsior has been a very positive experience.”

Excelsior Software extends its deep appreciation to Marie Summerlin, Titan Corporation, and the Okaloosa County Public Schools for their invaluable assistance with this case study.

### DISTRICT-WIDE DATA ACCESS IS EMPOWERING

As the Okaloosa County Public Schools continue to explore Pinnacle’s abilities, other ideas and goals are being sparked. “When we first started with Gradebook in our school system,” explains Summerlin, “the idea was ‘let’s get rid of bubble sheets and open up communication with parents.’ Now that we’re getting into it, so many other things are developing. Students wanting to know how they’re doing — I wouldn’t have guessed that. When has an administrator ever been able to get online and look up students’ grades? And if a problem with grades gets escalated to the administrative or school board level, we can get the data and prepare before the parent comes in for a meeting. We’re empowered with that information ahead of time. It allows us to be proactive in dealing with assessment deficiencies before high stakes testing.”

**Pinnacle's abilities are sparking new ideas and goals. “When we first started, the idea was ‘let's get rid of bubble sheets and open up communication with parents.’ Now that we're getting into it, so many other things are developing. We're empowered with information.”**

— Marie Summerlin, Titan Corporation

Getting data at the district level has been made easier with Pinnacle’s District Data Manager. “We can take a district-level look at FCAT scores and target certain students with extra teaching in whatever area they’re having problems,” says Summerlin. “The information is there for teachers to use. And I don’t need to combine data from multiple schools. I didn’t envision this, but we’re moving toward a district-level perspective. There’s a lot of buzz about that.”

Instant access to information district-wide, immediate cost savings, ease of implementation and rollout — it’s no wonder there’s “a lot of buzz” about Pinnacle Plus in Okaloosa, Florida.

for more information

[www.excelsiorsoftware.com](http://www.excelsiorsoftware.com)  
[www.okaloosaschools.com](http://www.okaloosaschools.com)