

# Managing the Data of Education

Technology helps everyone stay safely connected

JULIE YOUNG

Computers will never substitute for human connection, but teachers need software programs to save time and energy, maintain control of their classrooms, and keep students safe.

Conferences abound with the latest and greatest tools to help your school get connected, but not every system will work for every institution. Once you identify your school's technology needs, you can match them to a user-friendly system that will help bring you into the 21st century.

## Improved Communication

Remember when report card day held an element of surprise as students and parents received an assessment of the children's work over the previous grading period? Report cards, progress notes, and parent-teacher conferences used to be the only way to track whether students were turning their work in on time, conducting themselves properly in class, and working to their full potential. Thanks to today's technology, however, report cards are merely summaries of what parents, students, and administrators already know.

Student information systems enable schools to track data, plan curriculum, develop scheduling, and improve home/school communication. Online grade book software also streamlines administrative tasks for teachers who used to spend hours manually entering grades and calculating GPAs. These systems move data seamlessly and allow parents to monitor their children's progress.


"The only thing it can't provide is the human component," says John Schreck of Rediker Software. Rediker

is the publisher of *School Office Suite* and *Administrator's Plus*, which are used in many Catholic schools across the country. Rediker partners with Edline to integrate its products with Edline's *GradeQuick* and website and portal solutions. "These systems enable parents to have a portal to the school, and when a problem does arise, everyone from the teacher to the administration has the same data on hand in order to find the best solution for the child. Our goal is to help foster a partnership between the parents and the school that will further support academic achievement."

Improved communication may be one of the primary perks of student information systems and digital grade books; but these software systems also provide time savings on other tasks such as curriculum planning, scheduling, and the sharing of student information without having to go through overworked office personnel.

"They can post homework assignments for students who are absent, keep parents abreast of what is going on in the classroom, and plan their classes for the course of the year," says Jenna Wood with Hunter Systems. "The scheduling, especially at the high-school level, has proven to be a big thing as well. What used to take weeks to hammer out can now be done in a few minutes with the click of a button for thousands of students. That has been a blessing to schools in terms of time savings."

However, when grades are not updated, when effort points are not tabulated, or when glitches skew the numbers, parents may be confused by what they see on the screen, and teachers may find themselves inundated with e-mails and phone calls from parents demanding



explanations.

Diane Knight, a Spanish teacher at Seccina Memorial High School in Indianapolis, IN, says programs such as *Grade Quick* can be helpful, but they have drawbacks as well.

"Sometimes I have not finished grading an assignment and they think the student hasn't done the work," she says. "There can also be questions regarding how much value an assignment has and why the information wasn't uploaded in a timely manner. It is important to communicate with parents that each teacher grades a little differently and that each grade book will look a little different."

Administrators say that the digital systems may allow some responsibility to slip through students' hands when they know Mom and Dad are double-checking their progress. Dr. Cameron Carlson, associate principal and academic dean at Kapaun Mt. Carmel Catholic High School in Wichita, KS, says he is a huge advocate of technology



in the classroom, but that it does take away from the student's initiative. He says in the old days, students used to work with their teachers whenever there was a problem before the parents got involved. Now, with these products, some of that has been lost as parents are often the first to know thanks to electronic updates sent directly to cell phones, Blackberrys, and personal e-mail accounts.

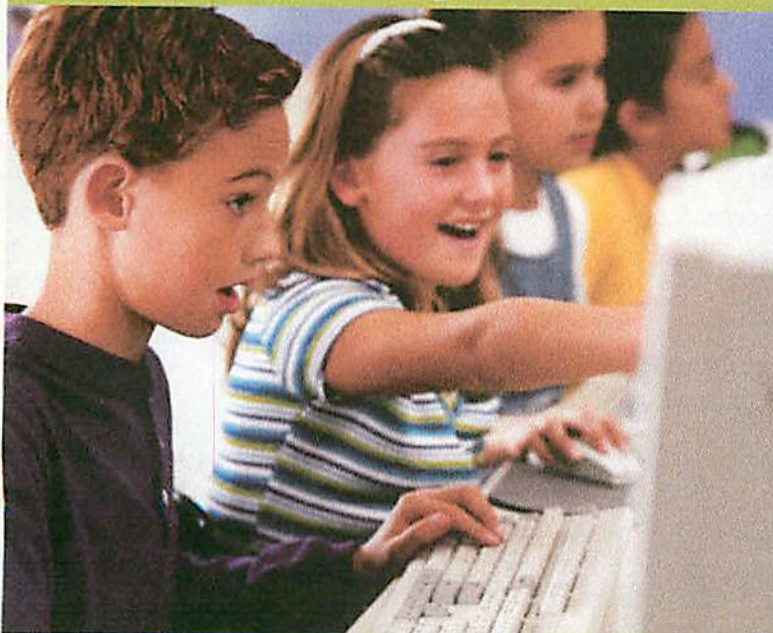
"In spite of the benefits, the software cannot take the place of parent-teacher interaction, and teachers cannot take for granted that all parents are using the programs on a regular basis," he says.

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## One-to-One Laptop Program

Students attending St. Theodore Guerin High School in Noblesville, IN, purchase their own MacBooks when they enroll because of the amount of e-learning that takes place in the classrooms each day. Teachers post assignments, use streaming video, have students engage in online discussions, collect assignments from a drop box, and administer tests and quizzes electronically.

Assistant principal and director of academics Dr. Peg Dispenzieri says school-wide announcements and assignment calendars are posted to each student's homepage; a parent portal allows Moms and Dads to view students' lessons, homework, and grades. She says teachers also use MacBooks to incorporate the available programs so that the students can have full access to their lessons in a secure environment.

"Guerin Catholic High School has a password-protected system within the school that is only available to those on our server. There are website filters designed

to keep students from accessing inappropriate websites, and administrators randomly monitor a remote desktop system to ensure that students are not downloading material that will interfere with the school's imaging process," Dispenzieri says. "Of course, our best allies in these matters are our parents, and by educating them in the use of the Macbooks and providing the tools to monitor their child's computer use, many of the potential problems are avoided."

## Taking Control of the Classroom

Computer-aided help doesn't end merely with streamlined record keeping and scheduling capabilities. With so many schools turning to technology-based learning, there has been a need to develop programs that allow teachers to interface with students' computers and enable them to maintain control over the classroom.

LanSchool offers teachers the capability to monitor a student's screen and view the active application and

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last website visited. The program can monitor texting and chatting capabilities while empowering the educator to block internet activity and manage classrooms more effectively.

Ben Cahoon, president of LanSchool Technologies, says the invasion of 21st-century technology—including laptops, software, digital cameras, and the internet—has brought huge management challenges to teachers who use ineffective methods against high-speed equipment. The goal is to provide students with the tools that help them succeed while keeping them safe at the same time.

Carlson chose LanSchool to assist with a laptop pilot program designed to allow students to check out their computers and take them home at night. He said the system records and monitors everything from keystrokes to questionable web pages.

“We all know that students can end up on the wrong site accidentally, and some internet filtering programs only work if the computer is on-site,” says Carlson. “We needed to find a system that would give them that same protection if they were at home. We even disabled Facebook from the system because we really wanted to emphasize these computers as learning tools, and you have to separate that from the social world.”

Bill Youngpeter at St. Michael’s School in Finley, OH, says teachers and administrators are often bombarded with a variety of technology packages at conferences, but he says the LanSchool system “blew him away” in terms of how easy it was to set up and use. As a 4-8th grade teacher and the technology coordinator for the school, he says the program revolutionized the way he and other teachers were able to teach a lab full of kids.

“You can turn the kids loose on a project, and when you need to explain another concept to them, you can turn their screens blue so that they are not distracted by their screens while you are trying to teach,” he says. “In addition, I can put my screen on their computer so that they can follow along with what I am doing, and then when I am ready for them to continue, I can free up their computers in seconds.”

Youngpeter says he is used to seeing teacher resistance to computerized programs in the classroom; he also sees a tremendous number of kids who are technophobic. One student was so afraid that she would cause problems in the learning lab that she literally hung on to the woodwork and refused to enter the classroom.

“It is sad because these are the things they are going to use throughout their lives, and they need to feel com-

fortable working with them in the classroom. The thing with LanSchool is that it allows you to go step by step in a way that is palatable for everyone and still gives teachers control over their classes.”

## Enter the Time Machine

For anyone who remembers attending one of those early computer literacy courses in the mid-’80s, there was always a healthy fear among students unaccustomed to working on technology such as the (then state-of-the-art) TRS-80 and teachers who were ill-prepared to handle potential problems that could arise. Youngpeter says he remembers those classes well and wants his students to feel good about playing with computers to see what they can do without fear of tragedy.

“No one reads manuals anymore, and they rarely go to help screens,” he says. “They learn all of these whiz-bang programs through trial and error.”

But trial and error can cause problems. Youngpeter found Deep Freeze, a program that allows him to lock in a computer’s settings on a given date. When that computer is rebooted, it is restored to that status with no ill effects. He said this program is a must-have for schools to empower their students while maintaining safety.

“It hardly costs anything, and there is so much peace of mind involved. It is like a time machine with the way it reverts back to the date you set it. It has become so much a part of the way we do things around here that I hardly think about it anymore.”

## Advantageous to Everyone

Some teachers hesitate to give up the pen-and-paper grade book or eschew computer-aided technology in the classroom, but Dispenzieri says the advantages far outweigh the struggles. Planning training sessions around the new programs and engaging computer-savvy teachers to assist others will help make a transition to an electronics-based school.

“There are occasional frustrations when internet connections or software programs don’t work properly, but teachers love the ease of providing quick assessments online to gauge learning,” she says. “Posting grades and assignments online allows students and parents to keep track of the needed work as well as to engage in timely communication with the teacher.” ▲

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