

Report From The Field: Communication Technology in a New Jersey High School

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State of the art communications technology has made its way to schools in New Jersey and around the country. Educators are looking for the rewards which telecommunications networks can provide in allowing for better communication among all involved in an individual school, or an entire school district.

Those in the field of education are realizing that efficiency of communication can be promoted through technological means. It has been indicated that, "telecommunications [networks]...is a strategy that has effectively engaged parents and teachers in supportive and collaborative roles" (Swick, 1991). It is the creative use of telecommunications networks which will build partnerships among parents, teachers, administrators, and students (Bauch, 1990). Technological advances are now providing better methods of communication and some schools and districts are making the effort and commitment to be creative and tap these new technological resources.

WANs (Wide Area Networks) and LANs (Local Area Networks) are becoming increasingly popular in schools and school districts due to their evident success, as the school communities in which they are used become more communicative communities of learners. At the Spring Branch Independent School District in Houston, Texas, a WAN is being used to enhance communication throughout the entire district. The WAN allows teachers, administrators and support staff to become more efficient and effective in facilitating and managing the learning environment (Gifford, 1994).

At Jefferson Davis High School, also in Houston, telecommunications networking among all involved in the school has been successful in motivating students through a LAN. The network is being funded through a project titled, "Connecting The Home, School, and Community."

In one particular New Jersey school a telecommunications network has been implemented for over one year and has garnered very positive results. In addition to using a WAN, the High Technology High School has creatively used telephones, televisions, and video cameras to enhance the network. The High Technology High School is a magnet school for science, mathematics and technology based in Monmouth County which draws students from different academic levels and various interests.

The school uses a computer bulletin board system, enhanced telephone software and television links throughout every classroom that allows the members of the school's system to communicate at any time of the day, night or weekend. With the aid of an advanced integrated system ("Integra") administrators relay messages and information to

staff through in-house computer networks. Faculty talk with other faculty through the same links and students speak with staff via home computer modems. This communications network has allowed all involved with the school to keep abreast of events, notices and reminders almost as soon as they become public information as teachers, administrators and students are in constant communication during the school day and after hours. A bond among all the constituents of the school has formed which has promoted a healthy "community of learners."

Teachers can access the High Technology High School Bulletin Board Service from their desks since every computer in the school is networked. Oftentimes, teachers access the bulletin board in the late afternoon to send "mail" to students at their homes, or to leave a message for the building or district administrator.

Parents who wish to confer with a teacher about a particular pupil problem can leave a private message on the personalized phone mail answering system. Teachers can retrieve the message from any telephone in the building (there are telephones in every room) or access their "mailbox" from home by simply dialing to the school.

The integrated system of communication provides many advantages, besides fostering better understanding and articulation. Absent teachers or students can easily obtain messages of any kind by dialing in to the school with a modem and telephone. Everyone involved in the school can be mobile and still remain in constant contact with anyone else concerned with the building's system.

Since the system has fully been in place in the Spring of 1994, the enhanced communications network has led to an increase in the frequency of pupil/teacher contact. When students are not in class, instructors may still follow-up discussions in class, problems encountered and/or provide necessary remedial help. The increase in pupil/teacher contact has prevented students from falling below the 70% passing rate. In fact, the median grade average of the Class of 1995 is 87%. The top 40% of students in the class average at least a 90% grade. In 1994 100% of all Juniors taking the High School Proficiency Test passed all three subsections. In 1995 98% of students taking the annual test passed as well. The school has a 100% graduation rate and 90% of the school's seniors have recently moved on to colleges and universities with a mean combined SAT score of 1041. The network is keeping all parties involved in the school in close contact with one another and has been one important factor which has provided for academic success.

Carolyn Sadowski, whose daughter Lauren currently attends the school, attested to the fact that the network has enabled her to keep in very close contact with teachers and the administrator, "I am definitely hooked on this form of communication. I use it to communicate with teachers in reference to Lauren's progress in class...and notify the school if Lauren is going to be late or ill." Jonathan Schwartz, a Senior at the school, utilizes the network like many other students at the school do, relying on it for vital information, "My science teacher regularly posts assignments for the week on the on-line bulletin board...also, if you forget your assignment at home, some teachers will let you

mail it to them through the computer." Besides its use as a vital utility, Jon realizes the advantage of the network, "technological communication at High Technology High has enriched my high school experience."

Effective communication can foster successful schools as ongoing analysis, collaboration of concepts and trustworthy experimentation becomes a significant part of the school's operation (Glickman, Gordon, Ross-Gordon, 1995, pg. 40). Educational ideas are now being passed through technological means, as telecommunications networks are fostering cooperation among all who are involved in the school's system.

WANs and LANs are becoming increasingly popular as the success of such networks is made evident. The West Ottawa School District (Michigan) has just recently implemented a network with the objective of "enhancing instruction, improving learning, fostering active involvement of students and staff, and improving communication between everyone involved in the educational process." Funding of the network is a result of successful passage of a public bond referendum aimed at garnering money to implement the network.

The success and popularity of telecommunications networks is leading school districts across the country to improve communication in their schools through technological means. Teachers, parents, students, administrators and community leaders who relate on a personal basis are now working with each other on electronic ground as well.