



Laying the Groundwork for Excellence

District Emphasizes Professional Development as Critical to Success Rochester, New York

Rochester City School District is an urban district of 58 schools with student populations that range from 200 to 2,000. Implementing a district-wide technology solution is a challenge in any district, so in 2004, when Rochester's Department of Instructional Technology decided to explore the prospect of a technology implementation for its 39 elementary schools, they knew there were a lot of variables to consider. For example, they needed to gauge teachers' existing technology skills, assess how teachers were most comfortable using computers, and most importantly, define the goals they wanted their technology solution to accomplish.

The team began by implementing district-wide standards for common applications to familiarize all teachers with computers and then directed their focus to academic software for students. "We had a Software Preview Day and invited two or three teachers and an administrator from each school to meet with representatives from the different companies," says Susan

Massar, Instructional Technology Resource Teacher in the Department of Instructional Technology at Rochester. Most schools sent a math specialist and a reading specialist, as well as the principal or assistant principal. "We asked the teams to come to the meeting with their goals and expectations in terms of student outcomes. At the meeting, we also discussed our expectations and defined what we required to ensure implementation fidelity," says Massar. Articulating expectations and goals in advance gave the district and individual schools a better idea of which technology solution would best meet their needs. "We wanted something that would inspire teachers and students, was a good instructional fit, and worked well with our district's technological infrastructure. Something the students would enjoy, that was highly motivating."

Half of the participating schools opted to implement CompassLearning Odyssey Math and Reading/Language Arts in the first year. Each subsequent year, more schools chose Odyssey as a software solution. Today, 26 of Rochester's 39 elementary and middle schools use Odyssey — some for math, some

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for reading, many for both. During the 2009–2010 school year, four more schools will be added to that number.

Over the years, Massar has learned the difference between an implementation that delivers results and one that doesn't: professional development. "When a school joins the CompassLearning group, we only put teachers in the program if they have had a full day of training," Massar says. They have learned that without at least a full day of training and hands-on experience, teachers aren't able to maximize Odyssey's value as an instructional tool. "We want them to be able to differentiate instruction, to target instruction to standards they're working on. We know that doesn't happen without proper support and background, so we say, 'You must have this training in order to use the program.'"

Professional development expectations aren't a one-way street, however. Massar knows that teachers have a lot of students, a lot of responsibilities, and very little time to spend in teacher-development sessions. That's why the district makes it as easy as possible for teachers to participate, offering to pay for substitutes during school days, as well as scheduling multiple sessions on Saturdays and all through the summer.

After a school joins the district's CompassLearning network, teachers are urged to use Odyssey with fidelity in the classroom or computer lab. Massar says that after they are fully trained, teachers are expected to use Odyssey with their students for at least 30 minutes per week, more if possible. Odyssey's versatility makes it valuable in a variety of settings in Rochester schools. "Some schools use it in a computer lab, and other teachers use it as a center rotation, utilizing laptops or desktops in the classroom," Massar explains. "A lot of schools use it for extended-day or Saturday school. For example, they'll have the ELA specialist

create assignments for each grade level on skills that the students need work on, as shown in our state or benchmark assessment."

Each school has established a "Compass Contact," a teacher to whom other teachers go with questions about Odyssey. Massar holds regular conferences with each principal and Compass Contact to ensure that Odyssey is meeting their needs. The Compass Contact, in conjunction with Massar, schedules teacher development sessions with the district's CompassLearning Educational Consultant, who throughout the year customizes professional development sessions to address exactly what that school's teachers need. As with foundational development, the department pays for substitutes while teachers meet with the Educational Consultant on everything from refreshing basic skills to advanced lesson building specifically geared to language arts or math teachers.

Teachers have embraced Odyssey largely because they see how engaged their students are when they are using it. Massar observes, "Our kids are digital kids. They love computers and technology, and this is one way for them to learn that is different every time they log on. They'd much rather do that than sit and do something with paper and pencil." Teachers also like being able to conference instantly with students about their performance on an Odyssey activity or assessment, since the Odyssey Manager updates students' scores the moment they finish. Teachers also like pairing Odyssey with an interactive whiteboard for engaging direct classroom instruction.

Massar credits the district's successful Odyssey implementation to the teachers who use Odyssey with fidelity and to Rochester's Executive Director of Instructional Technology, Tim Cliby. Cliby has backed the project from the beginning, ensuring that the time and monetary resources to adopt Odyssey have been available. With the district and its teachers functioning as partners in this technological voyage, there are indeed bright things on the horizon.

