

We live in a digital world, in which resources that were previously unavailable to schools are at your teachers' fingertips today. Consider one of hundreds of possible examples: when students read books that have been part of curriculum for generations—stories such as *The Diary of Anne Frank*—and the contrast between what was instructionally conceivable then and now.

Today students can actually view the secret annex where Anne and her family and friends hid, on the Anne Frank House Web site. Teachers can arrange video interviews between their students and Anne Frank House curators in Amsterdam in the Netherlands. The richness and immediacy that these opportunities bring to learning is difficult to overstate. And of all the digital resources and devices that may be deployed within your district, the Anne Frank example represents one of the more straightforward applications of technology in the classroom.





## Top Reasons Districts Transition to Digital

1. Increased student engagement
2. Project-based learning for student instruction
3. Personalized learning, and
4. Intervention for struggling students

Source: Learning Counsel 2015 Digital Curriculum Strategy Survey & Tool



# The Essential Importance of *a Digital Curriculum*

As a superintendent, chief technology officer, curriculum director, or other high-level school administrator, you know a digital curriculum that enables students to use resources that take them beyond the classroom walls is a more compelling way to learn. It also better prepares students for the ways in which they will access and use information in their personal and professional lives in the future. What students may need to know in five, ten, or fifteen years—let alone what they will need to know as citizens and employees throughout their lifetimes—is almost impossible to predict. But the ability to use a variety of resources, including digital materials and devices, to investigate, problem-solve, and think critically and creatively, helps students gain a foundation of skills and knowledge for 21<sup>st</sup> century success.

Consequently, when we discuss the challenges of a digital curriculum on a district scale, the question is not whether to use or continue to develop digital curriculum resources. Rather, the goal is to better understand how digital curriculum can create issues that undermine its effectiveness—and how to address those issues through smart and efficient management solutions.





## The Challenges of *a Digital Curriculum*

Many districts have embraced digital learning and, over time, have accumulated resources and management platforms. One or more student management systems may be introduced with the promise of greater convenience and accuracy in tracking students' progress. Depending on how much autonomy a district allows among its regions or individual schools, there may be multiple platforms across the district, with systems that duplicate services and may not speak a common system language. Teachers may be filling notebooks with usernames and passwords for all the different platforms they need to access for curriculum planning, instruction with students, and assessment.

Meanwhile, as curriculum standards are added or updated, the growing volume of digital resources must be vetted to ensure alignment with current standards. That project alone is daunting at the district level. The process may reveal lesser quality resources that have crept into the curriculum in individual classrooms and are potentially getting wider use as teachers share resources. On the flip side, it is possible that excellent teacher-created lessons and activities that are models for maximizing the learning value of digital resources are not being shared beyond a few classrooms or a grade level.

Viewed from a district level, other concerns can also emerge as digital curriculum resources and requirements expand. Some of the following may be familiar issues:

In the Anne Frank example, consider the world of possible resources on the Holocaust and World War II, as well as other related themes. It would be easy for enthusiastic teachers to spend too much time creating content, particularly if they're duplicating effort or focusing on certain areas of learning at the expense of others.

Teachers may lack the needed professional development to use digital resources effectively. Handing out devices and assigning digital resources does not equate to learning for either teachers or students. A digital curriculum still requires teacher-led instruction and guidance through discussion and reflection.



As management systems multiply, teachers may be submitting lesson plans on one platform and providing assessment data on another. The capacity to know how a lesson was actually taught, what was covered, and what was learned becomes difficult to track. In other words, are assessments checking what students accomplished during the lesson or measuring the skills and concepts they actually learned?

Other teachers may become resistant to an ever more complicated management process. When they have to go from platform to platform to access resources, plan their lessons, provide resources and devices for their students, and assess and monitor progress, some teachers can begin to opt out. They find shortcuts, so that platforms and resources are not fully utilized.

That's when the return on investment of all those management systems, devices, and resources that promise to revolutionize teaching and learning drops alarmingly. Ultimately, when resources are underused and the learning potential of a digital curriculum is not achieved, that's a huge loss for a school system—and, most significantly, for students.

**That's when *a district must take action.***





## Three Districts Close Up: *Tackling Digital Curriculum Management*

Meet three districts from around the United States and their specific challenges in tackling a growing digital curriculum.

## DeKalb County, Georgia

Located within metro Atlanta, the DeKalb County School District (DCSD) is the third largest in Georgia, with 103,000 students and 14,000 employees among its 136 schools. The district is made up of five regions, each with its own regional superintendent. Highly diverse, with some 160 languages spoken by students and families, nearly a quarter of the student population— approximately 24,000 of the district’s students—were born in other countries and have migrated with their families to the United States.

This large, complex district also has a history of allowing significant autonomy within its regions. Over time,

multiple Learning Management Systems (LMSs) were put into use by DeKalb County schools. Without a centralized system across the district, the process of accessing courses, delivering curriculum updates, and retrieving student data was a time-consuming and inefficient process for content area coordinators and other district-level personnel.

The DCSD’s instructional technology staff recognized that their ad hoc approach to technology integration had created an abundance of digital resources without a clear strategy for developing a robust digital curriculum that was fully utilized by teachers. There were pockets of success within the district that demonstrated the value of integrating digital resources. However, for many teachers, the uncertainty began with how to use the various platforms—how to log in, where to go, what to look for—and then how to use various digital resources to support and enhance their teaching.

DCSD also urgently needed a new and better system for tracking and managing student assessment data. The district began to consolidate its major challenges into four key needs:

- Assessment tools that would provide easier delivery of assessments and more accurate results to produce more reliable data analytics;
- Curriculum management tools that would support a district move to blended learning;
- Professional development tools to support the district's 6,400 teachers in understanding and teaching with a blended learning methodology;
- Communication tools to support the district's highly diverse student body and promote greater family involvement in student learning—as well the capability to enable non-English-speaking parents to learn along with their children.

# DeKalb County began looking for a more integrated, “one-stop shop”

LMS—one system that would fulfill these and other requirements for a successful 21st century digital curriculum. As Chief Information Officer Gary Brantley explained, the bottom line was that DCSD needed an LMS that would “facilitate better instruction: to make sure it’s seamless, engaging, and based off of the district’s curriculum.”

## Harford, *Maryland*

This suburban district northeast of Baltimore has 54 schools and 37,000 students. It's the eighth largest district in Maryland. For the last ten years, the Harford County Public Schools (HCPS) has been transforming its curriculum and instructional practices. The district adopted the Common Core standards, which morphed into the Maryland College and Career-Ready Standards, with major implications for English, language arts, and reading standards. The district has also transitioned to Next Generation Science Standards. It introduced a "Bring Your Own Technology" (BYOT) initiative. The district's decision to move to a digital curriculum impacted the changes in standards and the integration of technology devices.

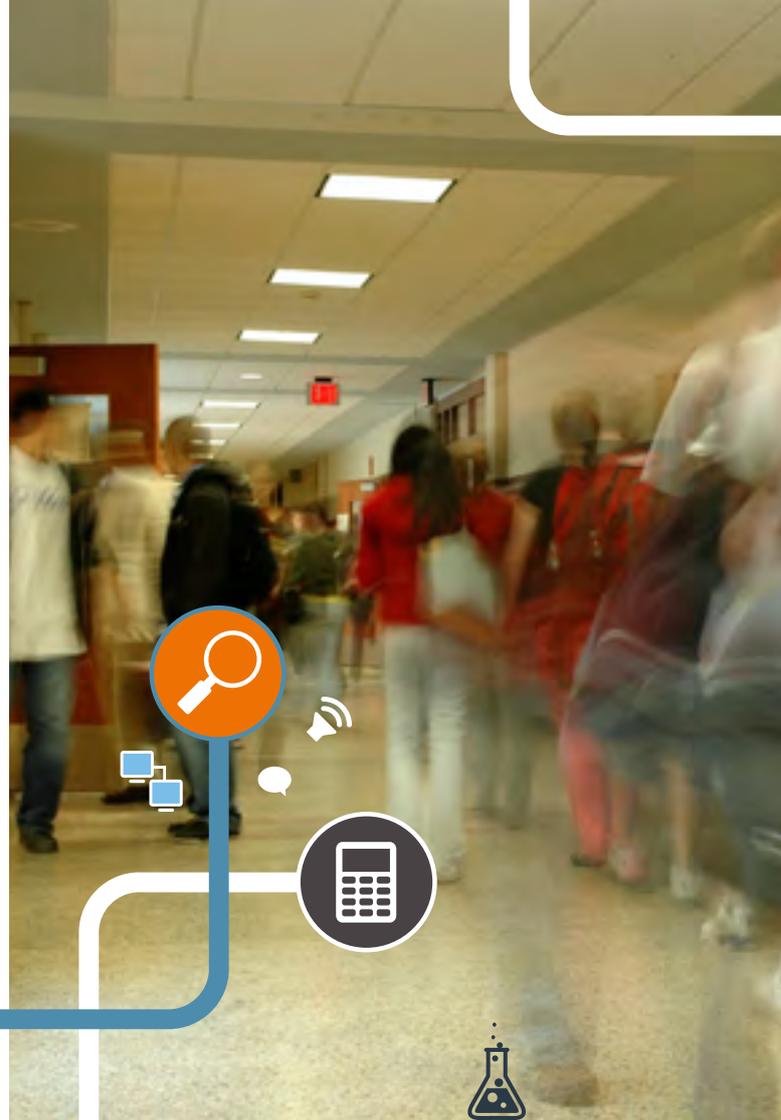
The challenge for Harford's district curriculum and technology leaders was choosing the best curriculum to use. They understood early on that the approach could not simply be taking a curriculum binder and loading it onto a system platform. Nor would it be enough to hand teachers a curriculum integrated with digital resources and expect that they would know how to proceed. Harford also recognized that, despite most students' total comfort with technology, it could not be assumed that students would automatically know how to learn with digital tools.

*"Students are digital natives, but they don't necessarily know how to utilize technology in terms of work efficiency. The teacher's role has to change for that to happen."*

**Susan Brown**, HCPS's Executive Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment.

For Harford—as for DeKalb—that changing role is one of the greatest challenges of moving to a digital curriculum and, consequently, the need for an effective curriculum management system. *“We don’t want students just sitting in front of a laptop or a computer or their phones and not engaging in discourse,”* notes Brown. *“We needed to make sure that our teachers have the professional development to really understand what it means to work with a learning management system, and then how to implement that from a less traditional sense.”*

Harford went in search of an LMS that would enable teachers to access and manage curriculum clearly and effectively and enhance instruction. The district wanted a common-sense system that allowed teachers to set the sequence for learning and gave students the capability to access the same platform. To ensure teacher buy-in, Harford wanted a smart and efficient learning management system.





## Wayne Township, *Indiana*

Wayne Township is located close to Indianapolis and is one of nine townships in Marion County, Indiana. Wayne Township's Metropolitan School District has some 25 schools and programs serving 16,400 students in Pre-K through Grade 12.

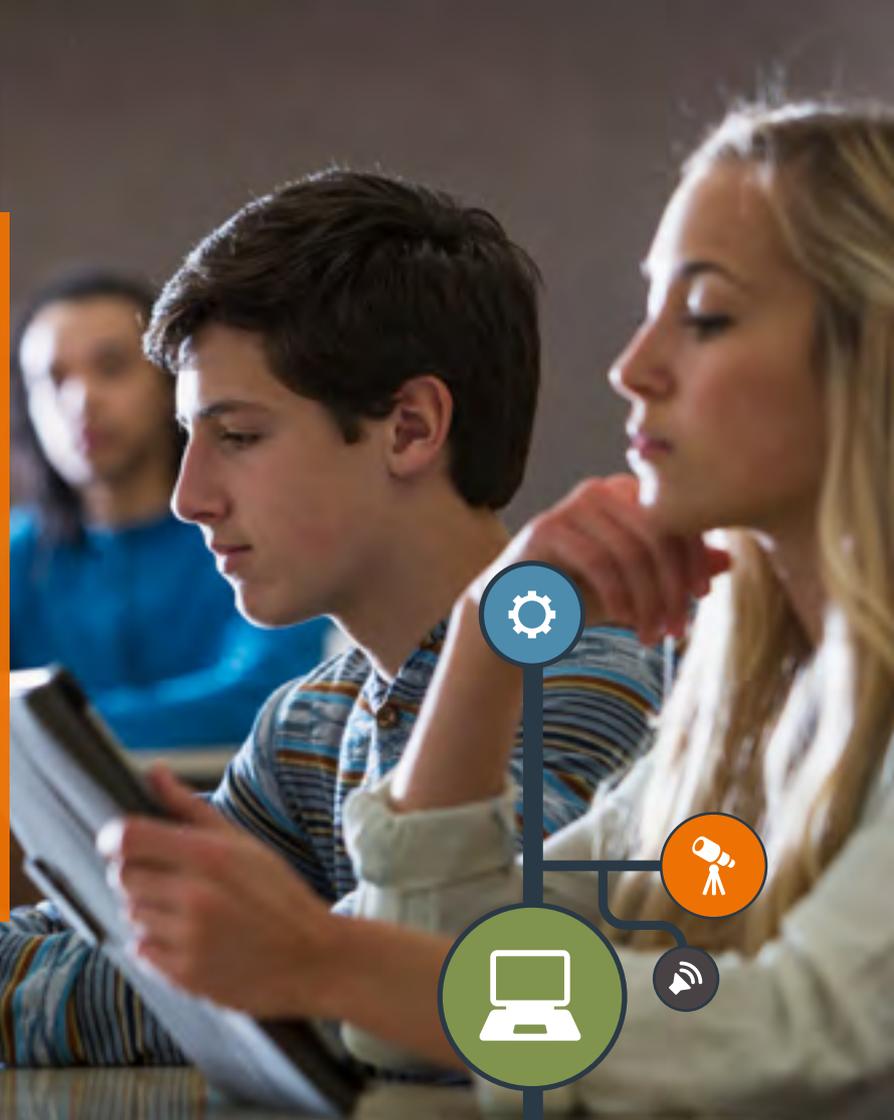
Although significantly smaller than DeKalb or Harford, Wayne Township's curriculum management challenges were similar. Teachers were not accessing approved digital resources with the existing platform. The question became how to make the process of accessing and integrating digital resources simpler and easier for teachers. In the search for an answer, Wayne Township saw the opportunity to go beyond trading one LMS for another. District leaders recognized that with the right LMS—one that would provide a unified platform for curriculum planning, instructional practice, and assessment—the issue of how to engage and support teachers in moving to a digital curriculum would be resolved.





*“As the CTO, it’s not my job to say where curriculum tools should be. It’s to provide the best platform possible. I love operating under one roof to be able to keep it simple for the staff.”*

**Pete Just,**  
Chief Technology Officer for the  
Metropolitan School District.



## Many Management Challenges: *One Solution*

There are many challenges for districts in implementing and managing a digital curriculum. But one of the primary issues is how to help teachers, students, and administrators to transition to a different way of teaching and learning. However dynamic and exciting technology devices and resources may be, they still represent a significant change in teaching and learning. And because change is often incremental, initial shifts to using new resources and teaching methods are frequently imperfect.

Solutions, then, are often found in evolving systems. For all three featured school districts—in DeKalb County, Georgia; Harford, Maryland; and Wayne Township, Indiana—the answer to their challenges has been the same cutting-edge solution: **the itslearning curriculum management solution.**



itslearning is a K-12 LMS that enables schools to better facilitate instructional delivery. One integrated platform allows—and empowers—teachers to easily and efficiently develop course and lesson plans, distribute assignments, mark tests, and share reports and information. This district-wide solution meets teachers', administrators', and schools' digital needs in one fully functional interface.

*For more specifics, read the itslearning Digital Curriculum Management eBook.*

## About *itslearning*

Designed specifically for K-12, itslearning is an enterprise LMS that allows districts to support the shift to personalized learning by putting curriculum resources, instructional strategies, standards-based lesson plans and assessments, as well as professional learning, all in one central location for easy access. itslearning is a cloud-based learning platform that connects teachers,

students, parents, and school leaders both in and outside the classroom. The platform provides countless ways for teachers to create engaging lessons and resources, makes teacher collaboration and sharing of materials easy, and automates routine tasks so teachers have more time to focus on their students.



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