A primary benefit of integrating technology into the K-12 curriculum is that it facilitates data-driven decision making. Educators can now use student performance data to personalize learning and improve academic outcomes. Used thoughtfully, technology can be viewed as the great equalizer in education. It can help affirm and advance relationships between educators, provide access to multiple sources of high quality content, introduce learning methods that promote active learning and collaboration, shrink long-standing equity and accessibility gaps, and adapt learning experiences to meet the needs of all learners.

Benefits of digital learning include increased student engagement, the ability to personalize learning and intervention for struggling students. In addition, 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 21st century success.
The Importance of Digital Learning

Technology has the potential to create educational equity where all students have access to the resources each of them needs for post-graduation success. However, transitioning to digital learning creates unique management challenges for districts. These challenges often begin with multiple platforms for curriculum planning, instructional practice, and assessment that overwhelm teachers and district administrators.

As digital 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?

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.

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 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.

It’s time consuming to implement curriculum changes, and cumbersome to track and compare students’ progress when there’s uncertainty about which standards are being covered in lessons or how and what learning is being measured. This often results in unreliable assessment data and problematic accountability.

Without teaching consistency, a district cannot measure student and teacher performance against common standards. Neither can the district identify best practices or individuals, groups, or subject areas that need special attention. Lack of teaching consistency often stems from how a district has implemented digital learning, and it can lead to a lack of alignment with curriculum standards and assessments.

One key to delivering teaching consistency is through high-quality curriculum management with a centralized system for housing digital resources. Another key is to help teachers, students, and administrators transition to a different way of teaching and learning. Technology is dynamic and exciting, but it also represents a significant change in teaching and learning.

According to the research group Project RED, schools that properly implement a digital learning environment outperform all other schools in measures such as:

- Reductions in disciplinary action
- Increases in high-stakes test scores
- Reductions in dropout rates
- Increases in graduation rates

DeKalb County Public Schools in Georgia is an example of how schools are improving student outcomes and delivering customized learning driven by student performance data tied to learning and assessment standards.

On a day-to-day basis, the district’s teachers must plan instruction for all of their classes, tie this instruction to rigorous state and national standards, assess their students’ understanding on an ongoing basis, evaluate the student performance data, and then adjust their teaching based on results. They also have to differentiate instruction for every child, foster deeper understanding among their students, address core content standards, and develop key 21st century skills, such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and problem solving.

“Teachers can’t do all of that if they’re constantly logging out of one software system and into another,” says Gary Brantley, chief information officer. “By using the itslearning learning management system, our teachers are able to create, share, and assign lessons to their students; build and deliver a variety of assessments and checks for understanding; track and analyze student progress toward learning goals; and extend their students’ learning beyond the school day with rich discussions and activities.”

A Framework for Teaching and Measuring Learning Outcomes

An effective learning management system (LMS) is the solution to these multiple challenges. An LMS provides a consistent framework for teaching and for measuring student outcomes. It also streamlines access to resources housed in a central location, facilitates alignment to standards, and generates reliable assessment data to support the instructional needs of every student.

Here are some critical elements for a successful enterprise LMS:

1. An LMS should be a one-stop-shop for commonly used IT systems, including curriculum management. The simpler and more intuitive a system, the more use it will get. Single-sign-on, curriculum guides, instructional frameworks, and resources for teaching should all be located in the same platform.

2. The LMS should provide a customizable planner to align curriculum to student learning objectives and to district, state, and national standards. This customized planner can be used to build out the scope and sequence of units, lessons, and courses. The planner should also be connected to a library of curriculum content that is aligned to standards.

3. An enterprise level LMS should provide access to lessons, resources, assessments, and learning goals across the district as well as a library of standards-aligned, searchable resources.

4. Flexibility to support multiple teaching strategies and personalized learning is basic to a district’s needs from an LMS.

5. Options to change and update curriculum with ease is also key to teachers’ use of an enterprise LMS. There should be easy controls for automatic content updates as well as immediate visibility of district-wide changes. Dynamic solutions ensure relevant supports for teaching and learning.

6. An LMS should provide extensive reporting features for tracking and advancing student progress. Multiple sources of information to assess student progress allow a more accurate, detailed understanding of areas of need and how best to address them.

itslearning is a next-generation learning platform that goes beyond the traditional LMS by allowing educators to easily plan and manage their curriculum. The interactive and flexible digital learning planner, coupled with a searchable learning objective repository, is designed to help every district reach its curriculum management goals. Itslearning facilitates and promotes best practices, tracks and advances student progress, and streamlines curriculum management.

Making Decisions about Your District’s Data

Before committing to any technology or platform, K-12 educators should reflect on the kinds of data that would make teaching more effective and improve learning outcomes; consider the systems that would allow them to collect and manage the data; and create a process by which the data can be shared and analyzed.

District leaders need to have robust conversations about how technology can support student-centered learning and how it can be used to support student-teacher collaboration in the classroom. Some districts have found it beneficial to bring together edtech specialists, IT developers, and curriculum experts early in the planning process. These conversations can help districts effectively strategize their instructional technology investments so products are purchased for the right reasons.

Houston (TX) ISD leaders wanted to build their digital landscape systematically to advance their educational mission while getting the full benefit of technology they were already using. Before making commitments to new technology, they asked themselves:

7. What kinds of data can help us make decisions to improve learning outcomes?

8. Which programs can help us collect valid data and manage it safely?

9. Is “adaptive” content always beneficial or is it sometimes more important to let teachers and students decide what comes next?

10. What kind of feedback is the most valuable for student growth?

11. When is an intervention a positive action and when does it eliminate constructive struggle, which is at the heart of deeper learning?

Since much of the data that districts collect now is unusable as it can’t be integrated with other data systems, dependable data transfer and data interoperability are key to using data to impact instruction. Where will the data be stored? Will it be easily accessible? How will teachers use the data to improve student outcomes? These are all questions that should be answered prior to investing in building a digital ecosystem.
Transforming Data into Insight

So many districts still have silos of data and information stored on multiple platforms. Lack of interoperability means data must be extracted from various sources and manually interpreted. This process is inefficient, incomplete, and inadequate. However, itslearning management system provides advanced reporting for teachers and administrators that serves as a roadmap for school, district, and student progress. The reports help teachers and school leaders provide remediation and close the gap between current and desired levels of achievement.

Specifically, itslearning helps teachers with all of the daily tasks needed to mold the next generation of leaders and thinkers equipped with 21st century skills:

- Curriculum planning is easier with intuitive onboarding. Teachers can build their first lesson plan in just minutes.
- Standards alignment can be easily added to track mastery of standards-aligned content.
- Trends and progress reporting go beyond the traditional gradebook and tracks student performance over time.
- Tailored recommendation engine shares personalized resources with students based on their performance.
- Standards-aligned rubrics allow teachers to easily assess and track student mastery of content.
- Curated content library includes more than two million built-in resources from publishers and open educational resources (OER).
- Seamless Google and Microsoft integration allows teachers to provide feedback directly on an uploaded document without ever leaving the platform.

When Houston Independent School District (HISD) wanted to close the achievement gap, they chose itslearning to power “the Hub”—a robust digital ecosystem where students and teachers could access exemplar courses and standards-aligned digital resources. They could also create, communicate, and collaborate and use data to drive their instructional decisions.

In HISD, 90% of schools who participated in the early HUB pilot had an increase in the number of students’ passing English scores, and 55% of schools had an increase in math scores, even as the STAAR test became more rigorous over the test periods. This success was driven by access to itslearning’s enterprise LMS platform for curriculum, learning standards, lesson plans, assessments, reporting, and professional development.

The itslearning LMS includes a digital library that contains high quality standards-aligned open educational resources (OER) as well as publisher resources. The platform gives teachers the ability to design high-quality curriculum and lesson plans that can be used to personalize or differentiate content; whether the learning is occurring at school, in a blended, or virtual environment. This ability to individualize, differentiate, and personalize is a key driver to improving student outcomes across all ethnicities and socioeconomic statuses.

“...student or a teacher can go to the digital library, put in a keyword and cross-reference the keyword with a standard and receive a number of results from different sources and object types just like you do with Google,” said Beatriz Arnillas, HISD’s former director of IT, Education Technology and a senior educational advisor with itslearning. “But with itslearning, the results that come up are highly curated materials that the district has adopted for digital content that is meta-tagged to learning standards.”

HISD continues to see positive results as they improve student outcomes and prepare their students for college and careers with “the Hub” driven by itslearning.
Using Technology to Create Educational Equity

As a guiding principle, equity sets a high standard for how students’ educational opportunities should be provided. In an ideal world, equity in public education means that learning opportunities are tailored to each individual’s needs so all students can succeed, but there are dozens of factors that impact this goal.

The most recent federal legislation, ESSA, is designed to provide states and districts with more flexibility to meet the needs of those students who are most disadvantaged: students in poverty, minorities, special education students, and those with limited English proficiency. ESSA’s goal is to support states and local districts as they create educational equity in their local areas to help all students prepare for college and career success.

As an enterprise-level LMS, itslearning not only supports ESSA’s primary focus areas, but it is a next-generation management tool that houses standards-based curriculum, learning objectives, assessments, digital communication tools, and collaboration and coaching support to help districts and states positively impact student achievement. Itslearning helps standardize planning and collaboration for better student outcomes; provides professional learning support for teachers; and improves teacher recruitment and retention while districts and states get the data they require to monitor student and school progress.

As states and districts implement their ESSA plans and leverage technology that puts the focus on helping more students meet their own learning goals, itslearning can provide teachers with the resources and support they need to improve their efficiency and efficacy, and districts and states get the advanced reporting they need to demonstrate compliance with ESSA regulations.

Conclusion

itslearning essentially connects the dots for districts that are looking for a learning management system for curriculum management and to provide advanced reporting for teachers and administrators to impact instruction and learning. While serving as a next-generation management tool that houses standards-based curriculum, learning objectives, assessments, digital communication tools, and support for collaboration and coaching, itslearning also generates reports that teachers and administrators find useful in driving instruction to improve student outcomes. The reports help educators close the gaps between current and desired levels of achievement. As a centerpiece to an effective digital ecosystem, itslearning can help districts move toward educational equity for all students.

About itslearning

With a passion for improving teaching and learning through technology, itslearning lives at the heart of education. The itslearning platform is the first LMS in the K-12 marketplace to offer content accessible from the cloud, including 5-million free and open resources, searchable, tagged with rich metadata, and ready to use. Established in 1999, itslearning serves more than 7-million users worldwide. For more information, visit:

itslearning.com