



## Making the Leap from Textbooks to E-books

The Forney Independent School District (ISD), a suburban community 20 minutes east of downtown Dallas, is the fourth fastest-growing district in Texas. Because each year presents a crisis in the availability of textbooks, the district sought to establish a way to provide textbooks electronically and avoid chronic textbook shortages. Today, hardbound textbooks at O. B. Johnson Elementary School are a distant memory as all students now access their textbooks from their computers.

Students are issued a laptop with Microsoft Office products and state or national electronic versions of their grade level's textbooks preloaded by the district's technology department. The students' computers also can access the Internet, which is available wirelessly in all classrooms and the library. The e-learning program began in 2004–2005 with 150 fifth- and sixth-grade students at Johnson Elementary. Little did we realize that this was the beginning of a technology explosion and a new way to teach and learn.

Today's students are born into the electronic world, where most adults are considered immigrants. Staff members

are not chosen for their technology skills; they are chosen based on their willingness to take a risk on a new way of teaching and learning. Student engagement, excitement, and success empower and energize the teachers to venture further into the world of e-learning.

### Setting the Curriculum

Although the curriculum does not change unless updates are made by the Texas Education Agency, e-books, along with the Internet, provide an almost limitless source of information to teach the required knowledge and skills to students. What has changed, however, is the quality of instruction, the level of

students' engagement, and the pride the students have for enhanced learning. E-learning expands and enhances learning exponentially when compared with traditional textbooks and library material. Teachers no longer worry about "covering" the chapters in the textbooks. Instead, they search on the Internet for resources and use up-to-date information in their lessons.

In the Forney ISD, a new curriculum guide has been developed and is accessed in an electronic format. The district's instructional facilitators update the electronic curriculum guide with suggested Web sites, resources, and teacher-developed lesson plans incorporating the use of e-learning into the curriculum. Marco Polo and the Gutenberg Project are examples of the growing number of resources added daily to the curriculum guide to provide students with real-world connections.

Elementary students within the Forney ISD are allowed to transfer to Johnson to be a part of the e-learning program. The students report that "it's easier to stay organized," "technology makes work fun," "less weight to carry," "typing is neater," and "we will be pre-

pared for our jobs in the future.” Disadvantages to students include “paying for damages” and “technical difficulties.” Teachers are also frustrated by the technical difficulties; but just as they did when film projectors ate films and overhead bulbs blew out, they have found ways to let learning continue.

### Implementation Is the Key

Planning for implementation is a key to the success of any project, but essential in the e-learning project. Forney ISD voters recently approved the expansion of the e-learning project to more than 5,000 students in grades 5 through 12. Curriculum and technology staff are working together to make the implementation a smooth process. One primary consideration is providing the hardware to the teachers as soon as possible, with appropriate training on how to use the hardware, the software, and planning lessons, and how to troubleshoot problems. Also, plans are being

made for teachers from other campuses to observe Johnson teachers instructing in the e-learning environment.

A committee of curriculum and technology representatives determines what software is educationally appropriate and compatible with other e-learning resources. Outside software, games, and e-mail accounts are not permitted. A review of staffing is in progress to ensure that teachers have the support necessary to be successful in the e-learning environment. While implementing the project as soon as possible is desired by all, implementing it successfully is the highest priority.

Students at O. B. Johnson and all of the Forney ISD traditionally have performed well on the Texas accountability tests, so there is not a significant recent increase in scores. However, the students' level of engagement has increased and produced outstanding products in the classroom. This, in turn, has resulted in more students reaching

“commended” status by scoring higher than 90 percent on the state assessment. Good teachers have become great teachers, and good students have become exceptional students. 

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