

Washoe County School District Optimizes Teacher Time with Computer Literacy E-Learning Solution from LearnKey

--Large School District Graduates Only Computer-Literate Students--

Background:

Every high school student in Nevada must pass a computer literacy class in order to graduate. It's the law.

The Washoe County School District, located in and around Reno, Nevada, wanted to not only meet legal state graduation requirements, but significantly upgrade the quality of computer instruction for its students. Additionally, the District was anxious to provide its teachers with a state-of-the-art learning system to leverage their teaching time and expertise.

Challenge:

The Washoe County School District serves over 60,000 students, including 15 middle schools, 12 comprehensive high schools, an alternative high school, a magnet high school and a technical institute. The District developed an extensive list of requirements to determine how it would choose a cost-effective learning system.

The ideal learning system for Washoe County would:

- Provide a versatile tool that teachers could use as a principal instruction resource, a supplemental resource for struggling students and also as enrichment for outstanding students.
- Be easy for teachers and students to learn and use.
- Allow students to work at their own pace in the school's computer lab or at home.
- Support outcome-based learning vs. time-based learning for students with learning difficulties or those who needed to complete the course rapidly to meet a graduation deadline.
- Include prescriptive assessment tools and exams to evaluate student knowledge and skill gaps at the beginning and end of a section. Ideally, the system would identify test questions the student missed and direct them to the lessons addressing those questions.
- Support IC³ standards for students who desire formal certification of their computer skills.
- Operate across limited bandwidth school district networks.

Terry Fowler, Teacher on Special Assignment to Career and Technical Education, drove the Washoe County project and summarized the problem. "Computers require hands-on instruction. When you're giving that kind of instruction, different people definitely have different styles and different paces of learning. Instead of keeping a class in lockstep where everybody has to be on the same page at the same time, students should be able to go get what they need."

Solution:

Following a search among several vendors who specialize in computer literacy training, the Washoe County School District, with input from their Career and Technical Education Advisory Committee members, chose LearnKey because it was a reputable organization and exceeded their requirements.

“The really good thing about LearnKey is that it supports the independent learner. It’s a way of providing high-quality resources across the district so it levels the playing field between schools. It’s a way to deliver current information and current technology everywhere. Instead of buying a book, we buy LearnKey. LearnKey is different because when a course is upgraded, we get the upgrade immediately without buying a new book,” Fowler said.

As a teacher, Fowler appreciated LearnKey’s flexibility. “It’s a tool that we can use to help that teacher do a good job of educating the students in computer literacy. We can assist them in finding a place where it fits in with their teaching style.”

LearnKey provides teachers the ability to tailor instruction to an individual student amidst a class full of students. Fowler says, “It empowers the teacher. You’ll have a student, and there is usually one or two in every class, who is more advanced, has more experience, and really is computer literate already. This student still has to take the course because it’s required. The teacher can offer the student some independent work where they can extend and go further or look into things they’re really curious about.”

In a pinch, LearnKey can also provide an entire lesson. With the voice of experience, Fowler says, “Every teacher has days, times, situations, where we’re really in what we call ‘survival teaching mode.’ We just need to get through a class because something is going on where they need to extend the lesson. When the teacher has extra time and needs to fill that time with a worthwhile program, LearnKey can fill in for that situation as well.”

Outcomes-based learning is an emerging educational trend. Fowler explains, “I believe that every child can learn. However, some students need more time or learn at a different pace than everyone else. Instead of scheduling seat time to structure learning, we can focus on objectives and outcomes. One way this might work is during summer school. Instead of structuring 60 hours of seat time at school for a course, we could build a program with 30 hours of seat time and require that the student spend at least 30 hours using LearnKey on their own, in their home. LearnKey supports this kind of independent learning. Whatever the student needs, they can find. They have to be motivated, they have to do the work, but it’s right there for them.”

Regardless of where the student is located, LearnKey tracking features can validate how much time a student spends using the training. This allows a teacher to monitor time spent on class work at home and assign advanced or enrichment work on the LearnKey system for students who finish their basic assignments quickly.

LearnKey incorporates comprehensive assessment tools for each segment of the course. In addition to providing a final grade, these tools pinpoint a student’s skill gap and direct them to the appropriate review material. “Before they start a section, students can take an exam covering that section and see what they need to work on. They can then print out the study guide and very efficiently get the instruction they need. In terms of reaching mastery, students can keep taking that test until they do reach mastery and pass the test. Some students are up against a deadline and really need to get this unit finished so they can get on with their life and graduate from high school. They can take the test and then print their own personal study guide. It will point them right to what they need to look up and study. It makes very efficient use of the students’ time,” Fowler said.

Outcomes:

Fowler and his team introduced the LearnKey system in a day-long training session for all computer literacy teachers. LearnKey conducted the training session and the system was well-received. Fowler says, “That was a pretty interesting training session. People heard about it and it was very much in demand.”

Fowler emphasizes that LearnKey adapts to an individual teacher's style. "It's a tool." After several months of use, various teachers are integrating LearnKey into the way they already teach. Advanced students are moving quickly to competency and beyond. Students with learning difficulties are directed to specific resources which help them increase their progress and confidence at maximum speed.

Fowler has ambitious plans to extend LearnKey's capabilities to their maximum potential. "We really want to use the heck out of it. We really want to be able to tell our state legislature that we spent their money wisely. We are excited to tell them that we bought a product that made a difference."

About The Washoe County School District:

The Washoe County School District operates 91 schools spread over a county larger than the state of Delaware. Total enrollment is more than 62,000. The district includes two schools in the communities of Gerlach/Empire, one in Wadsworth, three in the resort area of Incline Village (north shore of Lake Tahoe), and 85 in the Reno/Sparks metropolitan area. Currently there are 61 elementary schools, a special education school, 15 middle schools, 12 comprehensive high schools plus Washoe High School (an alternative school), Truckee Meadows Community College Magnet High School and the Regional Technical Institute. For more information, please visit www.washoe.k12.nv.us.

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