Hillsborough County Public Schools standardizes on Microsoft Education technology to empower educators and enhance student learning.

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Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS), the eighth largest district in the United States by student population, required better technology investments in the classroom. The district implemented a long-term strategy of technology transformation and has since introduced many elements of Microsoft 365 Education into the classroom. With Microsoft Translator, Reading Progress, and Reflect in Microsoft Teams—the district now provides increased access to a more personalized education for over 220,000 children.

Hillsborough County Public Schools focused on solving a short-term move to remote learning as the catalyst for implementing improved instructional technology. "There was a moment where we realized that the capacity of the hardware in our classrooms and our teachers' skills using technology in instruction needed to be standardized and enhanced respectively. We took advantage through the CARES Act and ESSER Fund awards to define a new standard for how technology impacts both our students' ability to learn and our teachers' ability to design engaging lessons," says Christopher Holt, Supervisor - Technology Training at Hillsborough County Public Schools.

The district required educational software that could enable students to catch up, keep up, and get ahead. This software needed to run on all educator devices, student devices, and classroom displays—and it had to be manageable at scale by the existing IT team.

What's more, HCPS leadership required a plan for standardizing technology in the classroom, a program for training educators on how to optimize it, and for students to get the most benefit. "Instruction drives our technology decisions, not the other way around," says Holt. "That is why we made professional learning our first main point of focus. This way, if teachers move from school to school or class to class, their technology and their understanding of the classroom remains constant."

HCPS also wanted to embrace AI as an educational aid to all teacher-directed instruction. "We need robust technology that does not attempt to take the teacher's role, but instead helps alleviate some of the demands on their time, allowing for more individualized student instruction, rather than less. This becomes even more imperative as AI grows in its role in classroom instruction moving forward," says Holt.

For all these needs, HCPS looked at Microsoft.

Getting the word out

Already a Microsoft district in terms of technology, HCPS knew Microsoft 365 Education had many of the solutions it wanted to implement already built in. Microsoft Teams, for instance, incorporates Microsoft Translator, Reading Progress, and PowerPoint Live—all of which can be used to increase engagement and understanding in the classroom. HCPS also discovered that the Surface Laptop Go met its cost, longevity, and management needs, as well as the technical needs of its educators.

To efficiently integrate these new technologies with Canvas, the district's learning management system, HCPS enlisted the support of Microsoft and a coalition of experts from PowerUpEDU and Connection. Both partner companies are members of the Microsoft AI Cloud Partner Program, which is Microsoft's Global Training Partner Program, and Microsoft's Education Partner Insider Community (EPIC).

Together, Microsoft, PowerUpEDU, and Connection created a training roadmap for educators and administrators across the district.

"Even if we'd gone to one school a day, it would have taken over a year to get this information out through traditional training sessions," says Holt. "So, we developed the Hillsborough Influencer Academy instead, through which schools nominate teachers or administrators to be their influencers." Educators from 25 schools made up the first class at the academy.

The professional learning curriculum focused first on pedagogical excellence developed through the lens of teaching and learning. It explained specifically how educators can leverage technology to enhance teaching methods that improve student learning. The curriculum also included segments on how to prepare and elevate content to enhance student learning experiences more efficiently and effectively. The entire course was developed through the lens of teaching and learning.

Influencers learned methods to elevate engagement using PowerPoint Rehearse with Coach and Sway, how to leverage accessibility tools like Immersive Reader and Translator, and how educators can improve reading comprehension and success with Reading Progress.

"We really focused on the instructional priorities of the district and aligned those priorities with the vast resources available through Microsoft to make the work of the teacher more efficient and effective, ultimately leading to improved learning experiences for students," says Maggie Phillips, Head of Professional Learning and Teacher Engagement at PowerUpEDU.

Maggie and the training team focused on where influencers should start their training when they returned to their school—and discussed how to introduce it to elementary, middle, and high school cohorts. "Then we showed them some examples of how it works in practice. From there, the lights went on, and the influencers started to come up with their own ideas, which was the kind of agency we wanted them to develop," added Nicole Caldwell from Connection.

Influencers also received additional refined training content and support resources created by PowerUpEDU and Connection before they headed back to their schools to share their new knowledge. "We couldn't have managed a project of this scale without the aid of PowerUpEDU, Connection, and Microsoft," says Holt. "Each organization delivered experts with teaching backgrounds who not only gave us the capacity to reach everyone in the district but the added expertise of their own experience with technology in the classroom."

Delivering the benefits to students and teachers

As the influencers brought their learnings back to school, they further tailored how they shared their knowledge to the needs of their peers. Some schools had broad success with PowerPoint Live and Translator, for instance, while others had focused more on Reading Progress and Reflect in Teams. "The most enthusiasm we've seen across the district is for Translate in PowerPoint Live," says Holt. "It meets teachers where they are on their technology adoption journey and automatically adds subtitles to presentations for non-native English speakers."

Christopher Holt co-spearheaded the professional learning program that enables personalized learning for students across HCPS. "The partnership between Hillsborough Schools, Microsoft, Connection, and PowerUpEDU was the catalyst for being able to develop training that could be delivered at scale by teacher influencers across the district," says Nicole Caldwell, Professional Learning Specialist at Connection.

"Together, our teams set aside any differences in our market positions and thought about what teachers and students needed to be successful in implementing these new technologies into their classrooms. Our ability to collaborate and work toward the common goal of helping Hillsborough create support structures and resources for the Classroom Technology Standard is what made this project a success."

Students who could otherwise be left out of a shared classroom learning experience now have more opportunities to engage through Translate. This extends to group work as well, where Abby Roberts from PowerUpEDU has seen teachers begin collaboration sessions between monolingual students on their mobile devices.

"Students speaking different native languages tend to recluse from collaborative conversations in the classroom due to the language barrier, but Translate bridges that gap for students, regardless of the language they feel most comfortable speaking," says Roberts. "We have also seen this bridge the language barrier in communication with teachers and parents as they partner together for student success."

For Karen Boone, Second Grade Teacher at Colson Elementary, a CTS pilot school, Reading Progress has been a major benefit during parent-teacher conferences. "It's hard sometimes to provide parents with proof of student progress in reading," she says. "With Reading Progress, I can play parents actual recordings of their child reading in class. I can show them a printout that highlights pauses or run-on sentences. It's a wonderful aid."

Boone has also used the AI-powered Reading Progress to track student progress over time, even identifying periods when, during remote learning, some fell behind in their comprehension. With this information, she can tailor work better to the needs of each student, helping them catch up after what was an unprecedented and unexpected change to their learning process.

Other teachers are beginning to use Reflect, a student wellbeing tool populated by research-backed interactive Feeling Monsters who display emotions and allow students to relate how they feel during class. "Reflect is a lovely resource," says Holt, "and it allows students to share not only what they learned and how they learned it, but how they're feeling about their learning process."

A student-centered vision of the future

Teachers at Hillsborough Schools can now confidently create, translate, and share learning content for their classes with ease. They can provide families with additional AI-assisted information and resources regarding the education of their children. They can even spend more time on meaningful student interactions during the day, thanks to the aid of automation. But teachers are not the only beneficiaries of the program.

Students will soon be empowered to take control of these same technologies, which will enable them to create their own presentations for class in the same way they have seen teachers demonstrate. "For so many of our teachers, the first benefit that came to mind centered around what students would be able to do with it," recalls Holt. "We have heard so many times things like 'my students can use this,' or 'this will help the children so much,' which I find really encouraging."

Roberts sees another benefit equally as important. "In addition to standardizing the technology in the classrooms of HCPS, we have aimed to alleviate some the many pressures facing teachers by

showing how Microsoft tools can give teachers and school leaders time to focus on the most important reason they are there—the students."

Holt sees the district's progress as a success. Today, more than 115 schools have gone through the influencer training process, now with 250 influencers district-wide. "We've already seen a benefit to our student learning outcomes through thoughtful implementation of Microsoft technology," he says. "We only expect that to grow as more of our influencers repeat their newfound knowledge to their peers in the weeks ahead."

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Christopher Holt: Supervisor - Technology Training
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