Racing to the Top of Education Reform

The right technology can help fulfill America's promise to school children today and for generations to come.

Microsoft

With technology advancing exponentially, maintaining pace is no easy task. Many educators feel it's a race that cannot be won, but it doesn't have to be that way. Education reform that embraces tried-and-true best practices and the right technology solutions can help teachers, administrators and parents offer students an education that will help steer them and our nation to a bright and successful future.

Four Pillars of Success

One of the most exhilarating aspects of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is the historic incentive program called Race to the Top, which set aside $4 billion for states and educational institutions to compete for grants that promote innovation.

"Race to the Top is about rewarding the schools and people who aren't just checking boxes, but creating plans that are really making an impact," said John Halpin, vice president of strategy and programs for the Center for Digital Education.

The competition endorses four pillars of educational success: The first promotes common core standards and assessments across the entire U.S., so students are taught and measured against the same bar regardless of state or region. The second pillar encourages data systems that provide teachers, administrators, parents and students easy access to information that will help them improve learning outcomes. A pay-for-performance model that assists in recruiting, rewarding and retaining of good teachers is the proposal's third pillar. And finally, the fourth pillar involves bringing the lowest-achieving schools up to national standards. States with plans to reform schools using any or all of the pillars are eligible to compete.

Meeting the Challenges

Anyone who has ever attempted change can tell you it's not easy and Race to the Top demands ambitious standards be met. The competition offers an opportunity to make bold moves forward in education. Microsoft applauds this new vision for education — and is helping key stakeholders make the most of the opportunities the competition affords.

Letter from Bill Kilcullen,
director of business development, Microsoft Public Sector Education Solutions

Paradigm shifts are never easy — especially when our nation's future educational success is at stake. As Microsoft's business development director for Public Sector Education Solutions, I understand the challenges involved with educational policy change.

Anytime there is a big change to the status quo, it can be difficult for those affected to accept. That's the case in any industry — not just education. But Race to the Top offers teachers, administrators and students a real opportunity to improve the public education system. I think of Race to the Top as a catalyst — one that will change the way education works in the United States, fully preparing our nation's students for their future — and ours.

The right technology solutions can make all the difference — especially in an era where students are increasingly technology savvy. Today, students are the center of the education universe, and they communicate much differently than students did five years ago. And students five years from now will be different too. Schools need the right technology to keep up or risk falling behind.

No single application or software program can help maintain the pace. But a cohesive solution designed to transform along with changes while integrating existing systems and applications can help key stakeholders in the Race to the Top. Microsoft has the experience, expertise and technological capabilities to provide these solutions.

Microsoft has been committed to education since our beginnings as a company. And now, we're pooling all of our resources to help benefit education reform and Race to the Top. We've worked with schools across the country. We know the challenges educators contend with, and our services teams work with Microsoft partners to consistently build solutions that are ahead of the curve and ready for whatever the future brings. That gives us a unique position to help our clients in the education world meet seemingly ever-changing standards and requirements. And most importantly, it helps us play a part in making sure every student gets the best education possible.

"Getting your mind around change itself is one of the biggest challenges," said Halpin. "But leadership from the states to the school boards to the teachers and parents are starting to think about how technology can help. There are a lot of options these days. It can be daunting. But having a clear plan on what you want to do and an idea of how to do it goes a long way."

What are the biggest challenges to schools creating a plan for this competition? First and foremost, understanding the different user groups within an educational institution and providing them access to the information they need. Educators, students and parents vary widely in their technology skills — school information systems should support them all. These systems must differentiate between user groups to ensure that students, parents, teachers and administrators can access the information they need, and only the information they need. Working with a solution provider, such as Microsoft Services, lets schools tailor information systems to various users, allowing secure access to only the information they need.

The second challenge is connecting existing systems to a single platform. The Center for Digital Education's 2009 Digital School Districts Survey showed that most schools have at least a few technological systems in place. Perhaps it's a student information system on the mainframe, a reporting system required by the state

Customer Story

Kentucky implements Live@edu service statewide.

When the Kentucky Department of Education was faced with a nessecary upgrade to the existing e-mail service it provides to more than 700,000 students, teachers and administrators across the state, Chuck Austin, Product Manager for the Kentucky Education Technology System (KETS), thought they'd just go with an Exchange Server upgrade. But Microsoft Services, a trusted partner of KETS, suggested an alternative: Live@edu.

"We really wanted to upgrade the services we had. Our mailboxes were limited in size, and it was hard for our shop to manage more than 200 servers deployed across the state," Austin said. "Our partners at Microsoft suggested Live@edu. They'd host it, users would have 10 gigabyte mailboxes and we'd get a lot more than just e-mail. On top of all that, they then told me it was free."

That service offered Kentucky a huge opportunity — not just for saving already-stretched tax dollars but also for giving educational users Web 2.0 applications including e-mail, calendars, collaboration tools and Microsoft Office Web applications.

What's more, working hand in hand with Microsoft Services to complete the implementation, KETS ensured students and teachers could keep the same kind of user experience they were accustomed to. And the services team managed to migrate KETS' active user base — from all 174 state school districts — on the same day.

The feedback from the change has been universally positive — students and teachers appreciate the access to new tools and bigger mailboxes while the state is pleased with the service from the Microsoft Data Center hosting the platform.

"I tip my hat to Microsoft's commitment to education," said Austin. "They are a revenue-generating company. And if we had simply upgraded our Exchange Servers, they would have had revenue from the hardware and licenses. Instead, they came to us and offered a great, free solution that could help us better meet our needs and still maintain the enterprise features we were historically accustomed to. Microsoft was truly looking out for what was best for our schools, our students and the Commonwealth."

or an internal calendar application. More likely, it's a combination of systems that must be maintained even in the face of new technology. Rather than rebuild systems that already work, it's more important that new technology platforms play well with existing applications. The integrated solutions built by Microsoft let existing information systems be built into the overall architecture. This means one point of access for all data. This integrated approach provides a single point of access to enter test scores, grades and other important data, and enables dashboards and analytical tools that give educators an accurate snapshot of an individual student's progress, a classroom's progress or even a teacher's progress at any given time. This is important for teachers looking to assess student needs and for administrators to manage pay-for-performance teacher reward programs.

The final challenge is to create a sustainable platform that will grow with your institution. The trick is creating a platform that connects all the elements required by the four pillars — not a laundry list of stand-alone solutions that require individual maintenance. And creating such a system requires an integrated solution that can support the technologies of yesterday, today and tomorrow.

In today's world, a high-quality education is a prerequisite for success, both for every student and the future of our nation's economy. Race to the Top encourages states to create ambitious yet achievable plans to ensure these goals are met. An experienced partner like Microsoft Services gives schools the technology solutions they need to effectively support these plans.

Customer Story

Miami-Dade County Public Schools gives stakeholders single point of access to relevant data.

They say it takes a village to raise a child. And as any good teacher knows, it takes a community to educate one. Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS), the fourth-largest public school district in the United States, was looking for a way to consistently deliver relevant information and services to its students, parents, teachers and administrators — literally millions of education stakeholders.

"In the past, people had to look in many different places to get information," said Deborah Karcher, chief information officer for Information Technology Services at M-DCPS. "Teachers used one system to access e-mail messages and calendars, and another for teaching resources, and had to ask someone in the school office for data from our student information system that runs on the mainframe. Similarly school principals had to use five or six different systems in a normal day's work. We have several good systems and applications, but we needed to give people a better way to take advantage of them."

These different systems and applications meant that educators were spending too much time trying to track down the data they needed — and relying too much on outdated and time-intensive paper systems. To streamline the process, M-DCPS partnered with Microsoft Services, which took the district's existing systems and integrated them into a single point of access Web portal. With critical identity management services in place, teachers, administrators, parents and students are now able to use a single log-on to access all the information necessary (and only what they are authorized to see) to understand an individual student's educational progress on any given day. And users can customize the information they want to display on the portal page when they log in. What's more, Microsoft Services built the portal faster and at a much lower cost than expected. The resulting deployment has been a huge win for M-DCPS — especially for M-DCPS students.

"Teachers and administrators are more productive and effective; parents are participating more actively; and students are more empowered to help manage, influence and direct their own educations," Karcher said. "These capabilities have a strong, positive impact on student achievement."

We work with local, national, and international education communities to use Microsoft technology, tools, and programs, to create solutions that help address education challenges, while improving teaching and learning opportunities.

We believe that the evolving demands of the global economy make education vital to sustainable social and economic success. We also believe that education is a fundamental human right and is the single most important investment in the future of individuals, communities, the nation, and the world.

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