

Johnston County Schools



Johnston County Schools is one of the largest and fastest growing school districts in North Carolina. As enrollment increased, they wanted to communicate more frequently and effectively with families. They also needed a way to deliver urgent messages quickly to a large population. They chose Blackboard Connect to meet their communications needs. More recently, as parents in the district have sought more options for obtaining school information, Blackboard has provided greater choice with the enhanced capabilities of Blackboard Connect™ 5.

CHALLENGE:

Offer More Frequent and Effective Communication, While Also Providing Choices for Parents

Johnston County is located approximately 25 miles southeast of the state capital of Raleigh. Johnston County Schools (JCS) is the 6th largest school district in the state. Their 4,000 employees serve nearly 33,000 students and their families through its 44 schools.

As a rapidly growing school district, JCS was concerned about delivering important information to parents. It was clear that previous methods, such as backpack flyers and other printed materials, were not only ineffective, they were becoming cost-prohibitive. JCS also needed a method for communicating rapidly with families in emergency situations. In addition, parents were seeking more convenient methods of receiving information from JCS.

SOLUTION:

Upgrade to Blackboard Connect 5 and the Connect Access Portal

JCS found the transition to Blackboard Connect 5 very easy to make. On-site training provided by Blackboard allowed district staff and school administrators to upgrade seamlessly and smoothly. The new features and capabilities of Blackboard Connect 5 immediately improved communication between the district, its schools, and the families they serve. Parents appreciate the options

QUICK FACTS

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- ▶ 44 schools.

that the Blackboard Connect Access Portal offers, allowing them to receive important school information in the manner which best suits their needs.

In her role as Public Information Officer at Johnson County, Terri Sessoms noticed the need for better communication with families as the district grew. "We wanted to increase the amount of communication between school and home, as well as improve the quality of that communication," she says. "We realized that sending paper home not only was not economically feasible anymore, but also wasn't always getting the message home to parents. We also needed a system for emergency or crisis communication, something that would deliver immediate information to parents. In addition, we were looking at ways to improve our bilingual communications, as well as provide parents with options on how they would like to have messages delivered."

RESULT:

Improved Communication, Delivered the Way that Parents Want It

Several years ago, JCS turned to Blackboard Connect for rapid notification. Since then, the district has expanded their use of the service into other areas. "Our principals use Blackboard Connect almost every night," says Sessoms. "Whether it's for attendance messages, lunch balance messages, or announcements to parents about upcoming events. We have an average of 30 schools per night that send home some type of message. Our data managers who track attendance are using it on a daily basis as well."

The district is also using Blackboard Connect to improve revenue collections. "Our cafeteria managers are now using it more and more to deliver lunch balance information to parents," according to Sessoms. "This is saving our Child Nutrition department a great deal of money, because they are able to make sure that children have lunch money when they need it. Our Child Nutrition Director tells us that Blackboard Connect makes a vast difference between the department staying in the black and being in the red."

Improved parent involvement has been another result of the communication delivered by Blackboard Connect. "Our parents tell us that it allows them to keep tabs on their children's attendance at school, as well as making sure their students have adequate lunch money, so that they're not caught unaware," says Sessoms. "More parents attend school meetings, and they tell us that they

like the weekly announcements that our principals make. They appreciate being able to keep up with events at their school."

In recent years, parents have begun expressing the desire to get school information delivered in different forms. "In the last two to three years, we've looked at our own survey data and saw that parents had different preferences, whether text, email, or telephone, but they wanted choice. When I discussed this with our representative, she told us about Blackboard Connect 5."

Johnson County upgraded to Blackboard Connect 5 in September 2011, and in February 2012 launched the Connect Access Portal. With assistance from Blackboard Connect Client Care, JCS notified parents about the Connect Access Portal and provided instructions for how they could set up their own accounts and manage their contact information. The response from parents has been overwhelmingly positive.

"Parents who have signed up for the Connect Access Portal really, really like it," according to Sessoms. "They like having that choice of being able to determine if they're going to get their messages via phone, email, or text. So far, the feedback has been really good."

Individual schools are using the Connect Access Portal to meet their particular needs. "Each school has created their own groups," says Sessoms. "Some of the schools have set up groups for bus routes, so that if a bus is running late, they can contact those parents. They also have PTA membership groups, as well as groups for various subject areas."

This summer, Johnson County plans additional training for principals, showing them how to expand the use of the Parent Portal to create and conduct surveys, attach newsletters to parent messages, and enhance communication with parents. In the upcoming school year, the district plans to establish a social media presence and use Connect 5 to deliver messages through those channels.

Johnston County Schools has been extremely satisfied with Connect 5. "As a large school system, the thing that makes Blackboard Connect 5 stand out for us is the speed with which messages are delivered," says Sessoms. "Any time that we've had a question, the technical support has been awesome. Blackboard Client Care is always so user-friendly whenever they help us troubleshoot any concerns that we may have."