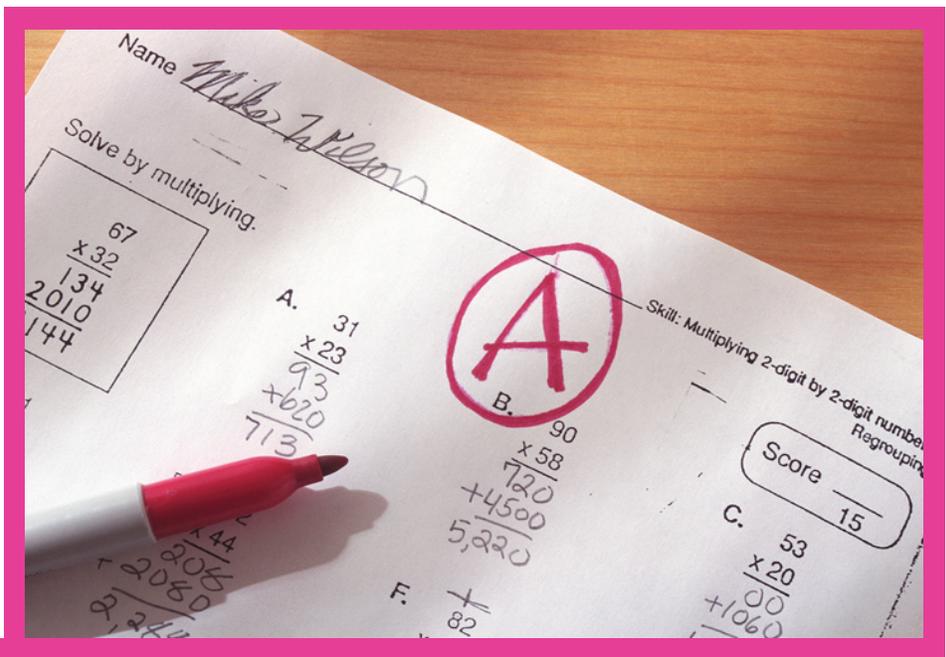


RISO Snapshot of Success

"Technology opens exciting new doors to the educational process, and I believe that education should drive technology—not the other way around."

Tom Snell, Superintendent



Union Parish School District

For several years, Union Parish School District, www.UnionParishSchools.org, has been a leader in its home state of Louisiana in the use of technology in the classroom. In 2004, the district became the first in the nation to integrate two powerful learning and assessment tools—RISO's Assessment Solutions and PLATO® Learning's online assessment courseware—to boost student achievement. Its success with this unique program also paved the way to a significant federal grant that will enable the district to extend its innovative approach to all students in grades 3 through 8 and expand it to include new curriculum.

Using Technology to Boost Achievement

Union Parish School District is based in Farmerville, Louisiana and encompasses ten schools in the north central portion of the state. Superintendent Tom

Snell, a lifelong resident of Union Parish, has always had a clear commitment to boost student achievement. His experience as a teacher, coach and administrator for 20 years has also given him a unique perspective of what he believes it takes to help kids succeed and what tools teachers need to be as effective as possible. Technology is one of those tools.

"We started using PLATO's PC-based online assessment courseware about seven years ago in pocketed areas of the district, with good success. We began testing student progress every other week to give us an idea of where teachers needed to focus their strategies for student improvement. To do this efficiently, we tried using an online assessment tool that was built into the system," he says.

However, while the concept of frequent testing and online assessment was on target, the

PLATO platform required that the students go to a school lab where they could take the test on a PC. While each school has a lab, getting all the students in place posed a logistical problem.

To get around this issue, Union Parish then tried the "paper and pencil" approach to testing, but found the process too cumbersome. It also failed to provide results in a timely fashion. "It often took two weeks to compile the information and get it back to the teachers. We wanted to provide quicker feedback and also needed to find a less labor-intensive solution," says Snell.

Then Snell heard about a new tool from RISO, its Assessment Solutions. This system combines RISO's digital printing technology with specialized software that enables schools to not only print customized test sheets for a fraction of a cent per page, but more

Snapshot of Success

importantly, scan tests into the system and automatically grade them. This new tool puts results in teachers' hands within just a few minutes, not only giving them critical information about each student's performance, but also flagging areas where the entire classroom needed to focus. "We really liked this approach and set out to find a way to combine our online PLATO curriculum with the RISO product," Snell adds.

To achieve this goal, Union Parish worked on creating an alliance between RISO and PLATO. The result was a pilot program that would be funded by Federal Earmark appropriations made possible through the efforts of United States Congressman (5th District), Rodney Alexander.

Exceeding Expectations

In early 2004, Union Parish implemented the pilot. The initial program was limited in scope, focusing solely on math, the district's weakest area. Additionally, it was implemented only in grades 4 and 8.

The pilot proved to be a tremendous success. The first year's results proved the effectiveness of the program, even exceeding the district's goals. After the first year, overall LEAP (Louisiana Education Assessment Program) math scores rose 14 percent for 8th grade students and 5 percent for those in the 4th grade.

"The LEAP tests itemize achievement into four categories: unsatisfactory, approaching basic, basic and proficient/mastery. We hoped for a 5 percent increase in math scores in all of these categories. What we saw was a 10 percent increase from 'unsatisfactory to approaching basic' and 'approaching basic to basic' plus a 45 percent increase from 'basic to mastery'. The kids in the latter category are good students to begin with, and we found that the testing with remedial curriculum prescriptions helped focus them even more," Snell notes.

New Federal Funding

The success of Union Parish's pilot program resulted in more than a boost in student achievement. In October 2004, the district was awarded a Fund for the Improvement of Education (FIE) grant totaling close to \$500,000 for it innovative online testing program. The grant is being used to fund the second year of Union Parish's online assessment and interactive instruction program, enabling the district to expand the testing program to language/arts curriculum and include all students in the district in grades 3 through 8.

Union Parish has developed other technological tools to compliment the online curriculum and testing program. For example, parents can now check their children's scores on

a password-protected page on Union Parish's Web site.

Enhancing Teacher Accountability

Another byproduct of the program was improved teacher evaluation. "After students took the first series of tests, we were able to see how each classroom was doing. We provided this overall feedback to the teachers so they could address problem areas. The information was presented to direct them, and give them time to take remedial action with their students. But the data also increased teacher accountability. In some cases, this meant that we shifted a teacher to a different grade and hired a new teacher more proficient in math. Moreover, we were able to make these decisions early in the school year because we had the data," he notes.

"Technology opens exciting new doors to the educational process, and I believe that education should drive technology not the other way around," says Snell. "Partnerships and alliances can and should be formed with state and local resources to further the common goal of educating children in the most effective way possible. Our experience at Union Parish points up the power of such collaboration in achieving best practices, and the benefit of using the right kind of technology to improve the education process."