



EXCLUSIVE REPORTS

Online programs help kids and teachers find answers

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The Business Journal

Arizona never has been lauded for having a top-notch educational system, but thanks to recently implemented technology, a great deal of Arizona's public schools are taking a step in the right direction.

Nearly half the state's K-12 school districts are using a Web portal created by a Utah company that allows educators access to a myriad of tools from online libraries and videos to professional development opportunities for the teachers themselves.

Arizona School Services through Educational Technology, or ASSET, has brought the service to schools by working with Salt Lake City-based iAssessment.

ASSET is a program of Arizona State University's public broadcasting service KAET, and since 1983 has been helping Arizona's K-12 educators integrate technology into their classrooms. Districts or schools pay per-student fees to become a member of ASSET.

ASSET has been working with iAssessment for a few years, but more in the realm of teacher assessment tools than bringing services directly to the classroom.

Kathryn Kilroy, executive director of ASSET, said the Gateway Presentation System smartPortal is of great convenience to teachers.

"We've developed an educational portal that is a one-stop-shop for teachers," she said. "It was critical that we had a simple solution for daily work."

Debra Lorenzen, assistant director of ASSET, said customization is a key feature of the portal.

"One of the reasons we choose iAssessment was because of the customization they could offer," she said. Lorenzen explained that regardless of what grade or subject an instructor may teach, the portal can be tailored to their specific needs and interests.

Professional development opportunities are another perk of the portal.

"Educators are required to complete a certain amount of hours for certification, and this lets them register for and keep track of the training they do," Lorenzen said.

Kilroy added that one of the portal's premier services is a library of 2,000 streaming video titles that can be downloaded for use.

"A teacher can select a two-minute segment of a longer video and incorporate it into a lesson," Kilroy said. "It's much easier than doing it all manually."

Students also can be given a password so that from home or the library they can catch up on work they may have missed.

Dan Cookson, chief executive of iAssessment, said his company first partnered with ASSET in the summer of 2001 with a tool called MyCompass. That product allowed ASSET to determine how well individual teachers and schools were using technology in the classroom.

Cookson said in continuing to work with ASSET, technology cycled into the system that now can handle everyday functions,

including transcribing, registration and enrollment. And teachers can access the portal via user name and password 24 hours a day from the Web.

"The individual educator can get online and get access to all the resources they need in a universal environment," Cookson said. "It puts the right info into the right hands so teachers can make the right decisions."

The portal is licensed for 25,000 users in Arizona, and Cookson hopes that over time many teachers and administrators will be using the system. IAssessment has similar arrangements set up in California, Wyoming and Indiana.

Cookson said his company manages the portal, but educators can choose exactly what they want to access.

"We make sure that we're not the ones who determine what the teachers get," he said. "We don't tell the clients what they can or can't have. We really focus on providing the user an experience that is specific to the individual. They control it.

"Where you are and what you do will determine how the portal looks for each individual."

Margaret Bowerman, a third-grade teacher at Kyrene del Milenio Elementary School, said the portal allows her to tailor instruction to individual students, and not always the class as a whole.

"One really good thing for me is that I can enhance what kids are learning," she said. "If a student is behind and needs to catch up, this helps a lot. Also, if a student shows a particular interest in a topic, I can easily direct them to more information."

Bowerman said she mostly uses the streaming video provided in the portal, and the videos all align with the state's educational standards.

"I can look at the standards and assess what I need for the students," she said. "It gives me a really handy tool. And teaching a new grade level this year, it really helps."

Get connected

ASSET: www.asset.asu.edu.

iAssessment: www.iassessment.com.

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