



MOBILE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM



Distance Learning Eliminates Disparities in Learning Opportunities for one of the largest school districts in the United States.

Using TANDBERG video communications, the Mobile County Public School System provides access to high-quality instruction and coursework that would otherwise not be available to high school students in the region.

CHALLENGE

As one of the largest school districts in the country, the Mobile County Public School System has an enrollment exceeding 65,000 students. Its 100+ school buildings are dispersed across an area covering more than 1,644 square miles. As a result, there is an uneven distribution of high-quality instruction and coursework, with many high school students lacking the opportunities provided to others. In 2005, Alabama Governor Bob Riley and State Superintendent of Education, Dr. Joseph B. Morton, initiated the ACCESS program — **A**labama **C**onnecting **C**lassroom, **E**ducators and **S**tudents **S**tatewide. ACCESS is a distance learning program focused on bringing true equity in instructional opportunities for all Alabama high school students, regardless of where they attend school. They do this through video communications and distance learning.

As Kay Johnson, Instructional Technology Coordinator for Mobile County Public Schools Information Technology Services explains, “ACCESS provides the ability to connect classrooms and teachers across the state to level the playing field for students. We have a lot of very small schools and a lot of very large schools, and this program allows students to receive instruction that they otherwise would not have the opportunity to get, such as honors courses and, in some cases, even required courses for advanced diplomas.”

“For example,” she continues, “in Mobile County, a student may need AP Calculus to graduate, but the course schedule conflicts with other required courses. With ACCESS, the student can fit it into his schedule and take advantage of other courses to receive the advanced diploma he’s seeking.”

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SOLUTION

In 2005, Mobile County was accepted as a pilot participant in the ACCESS program, receiving state funding for interactive videoconferencing (IVC) equipment at Alma Bryant High School. Choosing equipment was the next step. As Chief Information Officer David Akridge recalls, “We researched several types of equipment. The state accepted TANDBERG and Polycom, so we could install either. We were working with a vendor who had been working with TANDBERG and preferred them, so we chose them as well.”

While ACCESS is a state-funded program, there are opportunities for grants at the district level as well. Johnson points out that “Until this year, we did not have another ACCESS grant recipient in our district. Now we have thirteen schools in our district that are recipients of an ACCESS grant.”

Johnson continues, explaining that “We match e-rate funds with district funds and state funding. We have placed videoconferencing equipment in a total of 21 of our middle and high schools. We also used district funds to purchase and place equipment in three more high schools. Our goal is to have IVC in all 17 of our schools that serve high school students.”

“The Governor’s initiative is that by 2010,” adds Akridge, “every high school in the state will have one distance learning lab. We’re way ahead of that — all of our thirteen high schools have a video-enabled classroom.”

RESULTS

With high schools widely dispersed throughout Mobile County, distance learning through interactive videoconferencing is fast becoming a welcome addition to the curriculum. For gifted students in rural areas, the impact is significant.

“IVC is allowing gifted education teachers to service schools that they otherwise cannot get to, given the distance and time it would take to reach them,” remarks Johnson. “Plus, there are not enough gifted education teachers. Now, they can teach in a classroom at one school and provide instruction at another school 70 miles away, at the same time. They are where they need to be through videoconferencing. The wonderful thing is it enables us to work with a population that heretofore was underserved.”

Rickey Corker, a Technology Resource Teacher, agrees, pointing out that “Personnel-wise, three or four schools can’t afford gifted education teachers. With IVC, we can take one teacher and serve all those schools.”

While such a practice reduces overall costs, Corker says “It’s really about serving students — giving every student in this district the opportunity to take any class they need to prepare for college. It’s all about spreading the wealth.”





In addition to providing advanced courses and gifted education across diverse geographic areas, videoconferencing technology helps students who may miss class or need additional assistance.

"We can record classes and put them online for students to review," notes Corker. "If a student is absent or didn't fully understand, the teacher can continue on without taking extra time away from the rest of the class to bring that student up to speed. The student can review the class by playing it back on the Web. No one misses a thing."

IVC is also proving useful for staff development, as Corker explains: "We have 103 sites and seven Technology Resource Teachers in the District. For our meeting, instead of having the teachers from all 103 sites travel to one place, we had them report to one of nine sites; then we all connected over video and each site presented. We also recorded the meeting so people all over the state can watch it."

Akridge mentions eliminating the need for teachers "to travel 30 or 40 miles for a one-hour meeting. Now they can travel 5 minutes to a school in their area. This saves mileage costs."

It also helps with logistics," interjects Johnson. "If you're bringing 100 people to a location, you have to consider parking, the space to have the meeting and chairs for seating. It's a lot easier to find space for 20 people than it is to find space for 100 people."

"We have a school on Dauphin Island, which is in the gulf," she continues. "To get to a central location, they would have to leave well in advance, which in the past required paying a substitute teacher. With IVC attendance, this expense has been eliminated and teachers don't have to be away from their schools."

"Utilizing technology for the transfer of information will also have long-term benefits for the students," says Johnson. "When these students leave high school, they will go into college or the work world and understand how to use technology so they can compete."

"We're giving our kids the skills to compete in a global society," Corker concurs.

Akridge adds, "We are providing opportunities to students that otherwise would have never been afforded them."

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– RICKEY CORKER

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