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Putting Paper in Its Place

If you get your school board to embrace electronic communications, the rest of the district will follow.



Our Board of Education once had a major paper addiction. We actually needed hand trucks for the delivery of fiscal reports, legal documents, grant outlines, newsletters, and other documents for each meeting. Factor in at least two meetings per month with nine board members, a superintendent, a business administrator, a solicitor, and two assistant superintendents. That's a lot of paper.

After numerous discussions among the superintendent, board members who were champions of paper-free meetings, and my network administrators, we decided to institute a new approach to the traditional school board meetings: We went electronic. The original goals of the online board meeting were to increase efficiency, eliminate paper, and conduct all communication via secure web sites and e-mail. But the board experiment produced a second benefit: It drove the district and the community at large to become more comfortable with the technology as well.

OUTFITTING FOR ONLINE

To start, the district provided the board with Dell laptops, power supplies for the board office and for homes, and software applications including Windows, Microsoft Office, Adobe Reader, and McAfee. For home connectivity, members have either dial-up or a Comcast account. Then came the challenge of training. The board was apprehensive

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initially but quickly learned to use the mouse and navigate the Internet. While the members' skills and comfort levels with technology improved, the amount of paper documentation decreased. Now, instead of thousands of sheets of paper, members receive one inexpensive CD or visit the secure web site.

CHANGE IS GOOD

At the same time, the online workings of board activities spilled out into the greater aspects of district business. School and district staff had to modify how they submitted information for approval. Staff members who were resistant to the change had to be gently reminded and coaxed into compliance. At times that required on-site training and assistance. Board members who had been the champions of the electronic board meetings discussed the benefits of the change with staff. We also required businesses that worked with the district to submit all documentation in electronic form.

The result: Overall communication throughout the district and community increased dramatically. Now, electronic communication is the primary means of conducting business, and what once took weeks to convey is often accomplished within minutes or even seconds.

As for the board members adjusting to the change: If I walk into meetings as the supervisor of technologies to solve any technological problems, they turn to me and ask, "What are you doing here?" And I'm glad to answer that I'm not hauling a hand truck.

Changing a district's culture is not easy. Actually implementing the technology is demanding and fraught with pitfalls. But if you can start with the people at the top, the trickle-down effect can take some of the sting out of the process.

Steve Dantinne, supervisor of technologies for Vineland (NJ) Public Schools for 11 years, presents nationally on technology strategic planning, development, and implementation. Visit the Vineland Board of Education online at www.vineland.org/board/ElecBoard/index.htm.

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