

Nationally recognized district adopts OnCourse Lesson Planner

On standardized tests, students in Gainesville's Alachua County Public Schools consistently outperform their peers throughout Florida and across the country. The district has a highly experienced and credentialed instructional staff. And, for six years straight, the school system has earned national accolades for meeting parent-established criteria across a range of categories. In short, Alachua County Public Schools is a top-notch district—and it's always in search of new and better approaches to educating students.

So when Sandra Medeiros—then principal of the district's Terwilliger Elementary School—spotted a magazine advertisement for OnCourse Lesson Planner, she promptly called the company for a trial of the product. After getting an enthusiastic response from a fourth-grade teacher who "test drove" the tool, Medeiros purchased it for her staff of approximately 50 teachers for school year 2004-2005.

Although she didn't mandate that her teachers use the tool, Medeiros explains that it quickly caught on: "Once the first teacher demonstrated it for other teachers, they were excited. It sold itself."

Medeiros also made sure she shared OnCourse Lesson Planner with Deputy Superintendent for Curriculum, Sandy Hollinger. Hollinger immediately recognized the power of the web-based tool, which automates the creation, management, and sharing of lesson plans and provides access any time from any Internet-connected computer.

"I'm always looking for resources to better meet the needs of our principals while meeting directives from the state," Hollinger says. "Viewing lesson plans has long been a requirement of our principals, and with OnCourse, we have a better, more efficient way to do that."

Starting with school year 2005-2006, Alachua County Public Schools has made OnCourse Lesson Planner available throughout the district.

"We've done a good job of introducing it and letting teachers work together to use it," she says. Much like the word-of-mouth success at Terwilliger, Hollinger adds, "Once one teacher says, 'This is really great,' it has a life of its own."

According to Medeiros and Instructional

Florida's Alachua County Public Schools:



Deputy Superintendent for Curriculum
Sandy Hollinger

Former Principal, Terwilliger Elementary
Sandra Medeiros

Instructional Technology Trainer
Joyce Thompson

Media Specialist, Littlewood Elementary
Dr. Mary Hall

■ Solution:

Web-based OnCourse Lesson Planner

■ Results:

- Greater flexibility and productivity for teachers and principals
- Ability to analyze lesson plans, supporting data-driven decisions
- Improved communication between administrators and teachers

"If you're looking for a lesson-planning tool that is aligned to standards and facilitates interaction between principals and teachers, OnCourse is the tool you need."

— **Sandy Hollinger**
Deputy Superintendent for Curriculum, Alachua County Public Schools

“[OnCourse Lesson Planner] is easy to use. It’s not something for older principals to be concerned about trying to use. It’s very intuitive.”

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Technology Trainer Joyce Thompson—who developed and implemented OnCourse training for the district’s administrators and teachers—another key advantage is ease of use.

“[OnCourse Lesson Planner] is easy to use,” Medeiros says. “It’s very intuitive, and it makes reviewing plans so much easier—even for principals who are less computer-savvy. With OnCourse, if you don’t get to plans one day, you can look the next day or even from home.”

Thompson agrees: “When I first looked at [OnCourse Lesson Planner], I looked at it with the eyes of a teacher. My initial reaction was, ‘This is easy. This is just like my plan book.’

“The second thing I noticed was the navigation. You can easily go forward and backward in time to write, copy, and review plans,” she says. “The third thing I thought would be helpful for teachers was the template—not having to type every single thing every time.”

In addition to ease of use, OnCourse Lesson Planner also helps enhance communication and collaboration among teachers and between teachers and their administrators. As a former principal of a large high school, Hollinger says she is very familiar with the burden—and limitations—associated with reviewing a large quantity of lesson plans.

“When you’re principal of a large high school, your ability to talk to teachers about their lesson plans is pretty minimal,” she says. “Now, my high-school principals tell me they can sit at their computers, pull

up each teacher’s lesson plans, thoughtfully review them, and then comment directly to the teacher.”

Hollinger also lauds the data reporting and analysis capabilities that OnCourse Lesson Planner offers. “Our principals can go through and perform a broad analysis: are all the standards being taught across a curriculum level or, in high school, across a content level?” she explains, adding that Alachua’s principals are “very data-conscious” and therefore welcome any tool offering assessment and analysis capabilities.

Some schools in the district are also taking advantage of another feature within OnCourse Lesson Planner: the ability to create and maintain classroom websites. For instance, at Littlewood Elementary, Media Specialist Dr. Mary Hall says many teachers have created their own websites for communicating with students and parents.

“They really like being able to link documents, homework, and pictures,” she says. “It’s a great way to improve communication with parents.” Hall adds that, as Media Specialist, she asked that all teachers include a link to the school’s online media catalog—which also includes links to purchased databases that students can access from home.

As more Alachua County schools adopt OnCourse Lesson Planner, more will realize the benefits of increased flexibility and productivity, as well as enhanced communication, collaboration, and analysis. •



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