



SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PALM BEACH COUNTY

LOCATION:

Palm Beach County, Florida

TOTAL ENROLLMENT:

50,000 high school students

PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS:

25 (up from five in 2008-09 school year)

SUCCESS METRICS:

- Cost-effective alternative to AP exams and technical skill attainment testing
- Resumé builder for college applications
- Portal to Web or graphic design employment



Break-even analysis of Classroom License purchase option supports district plans to expand the certification program to every high school

CHALLENGE

Industry certification became a key component of the Florida public education grading system this year (school year 2009-10). Along with the attainment of other core skills, state policymakers recognized the value professional credentials would offer students who seek careers in the state's burgeoning information-based employment sector, including multi-media and Web design. Schools and their administrators are now also evaluated, in part, by how well they integrate certification into the learning equation.

Even prior to last year, the benefits of Adobe® Certified Associate certification were clear to James Cooper, curriculum specialist of the School District of Palm Beach County. "It shows they're capable of learning in a business environment and the [tools] that are used within the industry," he said.

Cooper, who is also president-elect of the Florida Association for Career and Technical Education (FACTE), wanted to expand the certification program to every high school in the district. In the past, securing funding for such large-scale certification programs has been difficult. Traditionally, they have been cost-prohibitive and somewhat exclusive, especially because certification exams for most programs could only be purchased on a per-exam basis.

SOLUTION

With the Classroom License purchase option for Adobe Certified Associate, Cooper knew he could present a more feasible plan for taking the certification program beyond a few schools in the district that were leveraging it. But he also knew his superiors would need proof that the program could be taken to the next level without budgeting themselves into a hole. A break-even analysis presented to district decision makers demonstrated the decision to purchase the Classroom Licenses at the district-level made good sense.

"There is a tremendous cost-savings to us," he said. "[Our district's administrators] were extremely impressed with the cost of the district site license versus paying for every individual exam."

The Classroom License permits schools to use an unlimited number of certification exams within the confines 30-seat computer classroom. Students can take the same exam multiple times to pass or move onto the certification for Adobe Flash® after achieving Adobe Dreamweaver®, for example. Without a cap on the number of exams that can be taken during the yearly license period schools can funnel as many students as they can support to participate.

Seminole High School, located within Palm Beach District, has done just that. Rob Schwartz, the school's communications technology teacher, brought the Adobe Certified Associate program on board when it first launched in 2007. Right away, he noticed the difference in students who certified. They were more self-reliant and took on challenging assignments without a lot of hand-holding.

"The certificate works like magic," he said. "Number one, it builds a lot of confidence because it isn't just a grade or a teacher saying [they've] mastered something. ... Here's industry saying [they're] certified."

Schwartz uses a combination of Certiprep™ for Adobe Certified Associate practice exams and curriculum included in the Classroom License with some video tutorials he created to help prepare students to achieve the certification in the first half of school year. Last

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year, about 230 certified. He credits his ability to help three-quarters of the class achieve a certification last year to the unlimited exams in the Classroom License. “If the students [were] unsuccessful the first or second time we could go back and re-train,” he said.

Looking at Seminole’s results gave Cooper confidence that the program could succeed at a larger-scale, but he wanted at least a handful of schools to participate in a pilot before taking it district wide. He contacted Rita Jordan, a business department teacher at Palm Beach Central High School, and asked her to participate. As a 30-year professional in creative design, Jordan knew an industry credential would give her students an edge to land a job in a tiebreaker situation between job candidates with equally impressive portfolios.

“It could be the Adobe certification that [is] the advantage for you,” she said. “It documents that you are serious and committed to your craft.”

In her first year using the program, Jordan certified 95% of the students in her class. She focused on ensuring students were comfortable with the exam objectives taught in the curriculum and had them use the Certiprep practice exams repeatedly to get comfortable with the format of the exams before sitting for the real thing.

“It’s certainly a selling feature for our program,” Jordan said of the Classroom License. “You can come in and have access to these exams free of charge.”

RESULTS:

The pilot’s success using the Adobe Certified Associate Classroom License has helped push the program to a district-wide implementation that will include 25 public high schools—up from just five—in the current school year (2009-10).

Cooper sees significant benefits in helping each school become its own certification testing center. “We cut down on travel costs for students to go take exams in different schools or different locations,” he said. “It allowed us to test students right there in their class period.”

Furthermore, with the Classroom License, Cooper has found certification to be a less costly alternative to AP credit for high schools students. Earning Adobe Certified Associate costs the district roughly \$12 per student as opposed to \$85 per student for AP credit. And the certification program is recommended for college credit by the American Council on Education (ACE).

Back at Seminole High School, Schwartz has already heard back from certified graduates who have found their credentials have helped them land better-than-average part-time employment. He says their portfolios “speak loudly” with the Adobe Certified Associate certificate.

“For students who have been looking for jobs to pay their way through college, they have the confidence now to try out for a newspaper or a magazine instead of a burger joint,” he added.

Along with her students’ post-high school success, Jordan says she noticed an interesting, positive rivalry brew among students working to achieve the certification.

“It becomes a contest among the students as to who gets the highest grade,” she said. “I’ve never experienced that with any other class.”



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