ITS in the News

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Web access widens for students, parents

Miami-Dade County Public Schools will roll out a new version of its Web portal that will give unprecedented online access to parents, students and teachers.

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You can order groceries online, plan an exotic vacation and find lifelong love. Now, Miami-Dade parents and students can look up school bus routes, check grades and report dirty school bathrooms — all in one place.

The school district will unveil a new version of its Web portal Monday, an interactive online site that will give the school district's 53,000 employees and 342,000 students and their parents unprecedented online access to everything from textbooks to tutoring.

"I love it," said parent Raul Rodriguez, who attended a recent training session to learn how to use the site. "I wish they would have done this ages ago. It saves us a lot of guesswork."

School districts around the country are watching Miami-Dade's experiment with an eye toward getting more parents involved in their children's schoolwork. Educators say parental involvement is key to student success. The project has attracted attention from potential officials in school systems from Texas to New York wanting learn more about the $3.2 million initiative. Broward, Palm Beach and Duval counties have also expressed interest.

One hitch still to be worked out in a district where one in five students is foreign-born: The site will be only in English at first. District officials say that preparing the site with information in Spanish and Haitian Creole would cost "significantly more" than $1 million over five years, but with tightening budgets, that is not expected to happen this school year.

Done in partnership with Microsoft, the rollout on Monday will be the largest of its type that the software giant has done to date.

Sensitive to the fact that not all families have Internet access, district officials have also set up a phone system that will give parents the same information.

"It's fairly new technology," said Debbie Karcher, the district's executive officer for information technology. "It's not being used in any school district of this size."

While most parents, teachers and students are accustomed to using technology, they have traditionally accomplished their goals piecemeal — through discussion boards, educational content and online grade books all operated separately.

USES CONCENTRATED

Now, the portal ties them all together and puts them in one place, allowing interaction and customization.

For example, students will have a "My site" page that will allow them to collaborate with other students on class projects, participate in a discussion board, download homework assignments, and even read interactive versions of their textbooks.

"It's great," said Yeny Nuñez, 16, who is about to start her senior year at Barbara Goleman Senior High. "I can view everything I'm doing and how I'm doing. It's all organized."

And with the site monitored by the school district and access restricted, parents can breathe easier knowing that their children shouldn't be exposed to everyone on the World Wide Web.

"It's a very safe environment," Karcher said.

For parents, it's also convenient.

Until now, parents have had to conform to schools' hours of operation and teachers' availability if they wanted to know how their child was doing.

With the portal, parents can log on and get real-time information on how their child has scored on individual assignments, whether there are assignments missing, and how many times a student has been absent from a particular class.

NO WAITING

"The resources and technology are here for them to utilize on their terms, on their time," Associate Superintendent Alberto Carvalho said.

Among Rodriguez's favorite tools are features that give him up-to-date information on his 11-year-old daughter Valentina's grades and attendance. He doesn't like what he sees, he can look at her online textbooks to help her with homework.

"The older she gets, the more information I need," he said.

Not all students are as happy that their parents will have access to so much detail about their academic lives.

"I really don't like it," said Andy Vargas, 17, who is about to start his junior year at Barbara Goleman. "I can't tail a text and then make it up with another text. My mom can go on there and see it."

In addition, the portal will allow parents to apply for free or reduced-price lunch and sign up their child for tutoring services.

To set up an account, parents have to obtain a PIN number from their child's school. Parents must get a PIN number for each child and, for security reasons, must go to the school in person. "The schools know which parents belong to which children," said Debbie Graper, a technology administrator with the district.

While all teachers have been trained on how to use the portal, they are required to update only the grade and attendance part of it. Teachers may set up a discussion board and post homework for students. They can also tap into the portal for their own use, and monitor their paychecks.

BROWARD LAGS

Broward County has a similar interactive site, but its portal is geared more to teachers.

Plans are in the works to improve its usability for students and parents.

"They need to have an expectation that the school system will be responsive to the age of technology that they're growing up in," said Broward Schools Superintendent Jim Notter.

"It's such a powerful age of instant knowledge."

In Miami-Dade County, district officials are working with municipalities, businesses and postsecondary institutions to improve access for families that don't have the Internet at home.

"We are aggressively pursuing a number of initiatives," Carvalho said. He noted that the district hopes to expand the scope of the portal to allow parents to take courses as well.

"We'd like to see parent-friendly programs that prepare them to enter the workforce," he said. "This is creating communities one kid and one parent at a time."

Miami Herald staff writer Nina Shah contributed to this report.

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