

Austin Independent School District and Learning.com Partner to Meet Instructional Goals

The Austin Independent School District is a fast-growing district in the Texas capital. With more than 80,000 students, the district's mission to "Educate every student every day" packs a significant punch.

The district's instructional technology department is known for their tenacity and innovation in meeting their instructional goals, and, more specifically, in helping their students meet the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for Technology Applications, Texas' technology standards. The team's ultimate goal is to "foster student achievement through the implementation of technology in collaborative, student-centered environments." A four-plus year partnership with Learning.com has helped them meet this goal.

EasyTech, Learning.com's online-delivered K-8 technology literacy curriculum, first entered the district in early 2001. Zilker Elementary, a diverse city school where close to half the 430 students are economically disadvantaged and one out of five is classified as "at-risk," volunteered to pilot EasyTech.

"I searched for years to find a tool for teachers to integrate technology into the curriculum," says Ramona Treviño, then Zilker Elementary's principal.

The Zilker staff embraced EasyTech as a fundamental part of the school's strategy to raise the bar of student achievement while promoting technology literacy. The Learning.com staff partnered closely with educators at the school and district levels to successfully implement the program.

The EasyTech curriculum helps K-8 teachers and students develop foundational technology skills, and then apply those skills to enhance learning across core subject areas. Zilker students were able to quickly master different computer

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—Bill Lewis
Technology Project Coordinator
Austin Independent School District

hardware and software skills. They learned to use word processing applications, and then were able to revise and edit their writing, and even add relevant graphics to their reports. Students sorted and categorized information on animal habitats using spreadsheets. They also learned how to compose emails by sending messages to President Bush with ideas about improving their community.

As students developed technology skills, Learning.com also helped the Zilker staff integrate EasyTech into their lesson plans. The teachers received hands-on training on EasyTech's easy-to-use management system that allows them to assess and report individual student progress. Together, teachers and students grew more confident in using computers in class.

Another class reaps the rewards

In Yvonne McKnight's second-grade classroom, the seasoned veteran from Austin Independent School District's Casey Elementary School doesn't profess to be a technology whiz. She doesn't need to. With EasyTech, learning how to use technology is easy—and something she and her students look forward to delving into as often as possible. “They look forward to using EasyTech,” she declares. “If they aren't able to get on the computer, they actually pout!”

In second grade there's already a lot of technology to learn, McKnight knows. Twice each week, she assigns her students computer time to work on EasyTech keyboarding lessons. McKnight then uses EasyTech to review student records, see how they're doing, and adjust her lessons based on their performance. EasyTech, she asserts, makes her job easier.

She also gives students time each week to work on any EasyTech lesson they choose. “I even have a few students competing to complete lessons!” she exclaims, and attributes her students' excitement to EasyTech's interactivity and ease-of-use. “‘I know how to do this!’ they say. And ‘Can I help her with that?’”

McKnight likes that EasyTech fits right into her existing lessons. She also looks forward to exploring some of the advanced lessons herself and is intent on developing her own technology skills so she can reinforce them with her students. McKnight challenges her students to learn more, too, by exposing them to third-grade lessons so they know what's ahead of them.

For the time being, the skills McKnight's students are mastering with EasyTech help them with the biography reports they work on every Friday. “They're using EasyTech at home and even at the public library to finish assignments. It makes me feel really good,” says McKnight. “They are always very proud of their work and they want to show me.”

When she needs a little guidance herself, McKnight has no qualms about picking up the phone and calling Learning.com with questions. “Even at the beginning, when I couldn't remember my password,” she admits, “I was treated excellently. ‘We'll walk you through it,’ they'd say so patiently.”

“I'm learning. I try to be helpful, and I try to help my kids learn what I learn,” the budding technology wizard utters. “The best part is,” she laughs, “that they won't forget like I will!”

Initial successes lead to a district-wide implementation

EasyTech's immediate, impressive impact in Zilker and Casey Elementary Schools soon spread to the city's other schools. EasyTech was so successful, in fact, that the district expanded the program to all elementary schools. In November 2002, Austin broadened its subscription to include middle schools. EasyTech is now available to nearly 58,000 Austin students from pre-K through eighth grade.

What continues today is a creative, reciprocal relationship between Austin Independent School District and Learning.com. It's a relationship that helps the district meet its instructional technology goals and helps the company continue to evolve and refine its product offerings to meet the needs of Austin ISD and other districts across the county.

Mapping out instructional success

With successes in schools and classrooms around the district, EasyTech was clearly an integral tool to help Austin ISD meet its instructional goals. So, the district turned to Learning.com for help creating a curriculum map. A curriculum map takes a resource such as EasyTech and pinpoints when and how the skills addressed in that resource best align with instructional goals across the curriculum.

In 2002, Austin ISD and Learning.com first tackled a technology curriculum map that covered EasyTech and technology skills, leading to the creation of a custom scope



and sequence. Next came the expansion of the curriculum map to include core subject area TEKS in addition to technology skills. Finally, in 2004 Learning.com teamed with the district to embed EasyTech in Austin's Instructional Planning Guides.

EasyTech serves as the district's technology textbook, making it easy for teachers to make technology an integrated part of everyday instruction. "There are a lot of teachers who feel uncomfortable delivering heavily integrated technology projects in core content areas," explains Bill Lewis, Technology Project Coordinator with the district. "EasyTech is able to address and support just about every scenario."

Austin teachers like EasyTech because it doesn't feel like an "add-on." Instead, they recognize that EasyTech enhances the content they are already teaching and that the technology curriculum satisfies many standards while reinforcing core concepts.

Echoes Lewis, "Everything is based first upon state standards and tests. But the biggest challenge with integrating technology is that teachers already feel that they have so much on their plates. With EasyTech, using the same lessons and time constraints, you can teach the required curriculum with new tools—and teach new skills. These are skills that are important for kids in today's world."

A partnership based on give and take

From the first discussions with Austin ISD to the broad implementation today, the partnership between the district and Learning.com has been mutually beneficial.

"We definitely view Austin ISD as a partner much more than a customer," Bill Kelly, Learning.com CEO, sums up. "The relationship we've built together over five years has been incredibly successful. The bottom line is our desire to support students and teachers. Through our partnership, we are able to support students and teachers as they use technology to enhance learning, and we're able to help district administrators meet standards and satisfy accountability requirements."

Lewis adds, "The give and take on both sides has been pretty obvious. Learning.com is a company that listens to schools, and that's a great thing. The customer support we have received from Learning.com has been friendly and helpful. I never had a complaint about service, and Austin is a large district. It's been a positive experience on all levels. Learning.com has a remarkable sense of understanding."

Much more than business as usual

When schools sign on with EasyTech, it's not business as usual. It's much, much more. The relationship between the Austin Independent School District is a shining example of how industry and educators can partner to achieve important results for students. Today, both the school district and Learning.com are proud to say that their relationship is a true partnership, one that continues to flourish—and help students thrive—year after year.

