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Encouraging Consistency and Creativity as Keys to Success

Background

The Republic School District in Missouri is comprised of five elementary schools, a middle and high school. As the District moved toward one-to-one device access for students over the past several years, the adoption of Canvas was an important part of advancing its mission to embrace a student-centered instructional approach where technology is utilized in meaningful ways. Canvas also provided a way to engage parents as important stakeholders in the learning process.

DesignPLUS & UDOIT Cloud in Action

After the pandemic forced the District to rapidly shift to fully online learning and into "survival mode" in the Spring of 2020, Republic knew they had to do better for the following school year. While they had been successfully using Canvas pre-pandemic, the District recognized the need to significantly enhance their Canvas course designs to provide a better experience for students and parents, who could be accessing their classrooms remotely throughout the 2020-2021 school year, while also not placing the burden of this transition on teachers.

Implementing DesignPLUS from Cidi Labs was a key part of this effort. Stephanie Long, one of the District's Educational Technology Specialists, said that it was "something we were able to gift to the teachers to help ease the transition." By using the templating features in DesignPLUS, the District provided a time-savings for teachers by enabling them to simply add their course materials to the pre-built course shells. And for those teachers who wanted to go beyond the basic course design, DesignPLUS provided an opportunity to easily add more engaging and creative elements to their courses without having any knowledge of HTML or CSS.

Through these enhanced course design efforts, Republic also focused on providing a consistent look and feel across Canvas courses so that every home page for example contained the same elements and were organized in the same manner, again using the templating features in DesignPLUS. Additionally, DesignPLUS helped the District better organize information and resources within their Canvas course pages by providing advanced design elements such as styled headings and tabs to address the common issue they heard throughout the Spring from students and parents that it was hard to find the materials they needed in Canvas.

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Impact

A more intuitive and accessible online classroom experience for students and parents

Reduced burden on teachers in the transition to more online learning

Increased creativity and sharing of best practices across the teaching staff

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DesignPLUS & UDOIT Cloud in Action

All of this effort resulted in a more seamless experience for both students and parents across the many digital classrooms they have to access throughout the year.

In order to further promote best practices in Canvas course design, the District developed a full-day, hands-on workshop that teachers participated in over the summer. The workshop provided teachers with a checklist promoting a set of important course design requirements, many of which the teachers were able to easily meet that day using DesignPLUS features such as pre-built content blocks - like grading policies - that could be added to their course with just a few clicks. The training also leveraged the teachers who had more experience with Canvas and DesignPLUS, by having them serve as leaders that helped during the training and beyond as a more sustainable model for teacher support.

Pandemic aside, the District had also become aware of what was working well and what they could improve upon to better meet the needs of their stakeholders after using Canvas for several years. They identified the need to increase the accessibility of their online course materials to meet the needs of ALL students. The accessibility features in DesignPLUS have enabled the District to improve teachers' ability to build course materials that embrace the principles of universal design. UDOIT Cloud - a course-level accessibility checker - is currently used by the Educational Technology Specialists to regularly scan Canvas courses to ensure they meet the District's accessibility standards.

Results

Aside from students and parents who were happier with the online learning environment as the District transitioned from survival mode into a more strategic use of Canvas, the teaching staff has been happy with the great balance the District managed to strike between providing helpful tools and guidance throughout the transition, while also enabling autonomy and creativity. An unexpected but welcome result of this has been the emergence of teachers who have become excited by how much more they can do with their Canvas courses and a willingness to help others do the same. A culture of sharing course design ideas and best practices using DesignPLUS has emerged across the staff and is proving to be a real silver lining of the urgent needs brought about by the pandemic, as well as something the District plans to continue to expand upon going forward.