IMS Campus Case Study

Interoperability Critical for Success of iLearnNYC

Leaders within The New York City Department of Education created in 2010 the Innovation Zone (iZone), comprised of a community of schools committed to personalizing learning in order to meet the needs, motivations, and strengths of individual students. A major initiative created within iZone was iLearnNYC, whose main objective is to better personalize learning for students through online and blended learning.

"We've just launched iLearnNYC with 124 schools this year," said Sandeep Chellani, executive director of product development for the NYC DOE. "We're only a few weeks into the new academic year, but surprisingly, things have gone pretty smoothly. There's a target of 25,000 students that are going to be using the system this school year and consuming a wide array of content. Right now, we're about a third of the way into our anticipated target enrollment."

Resources available through iLearnNYC are provided by content providers such as NBC, Cengage, and Discovery, as well as from publishers such as Pearson, Chellani said. The platform's largest use, he said, is centered on blended learning where pieces of the curriculum are self-paced and can be learned on a student's own, while other content is aligned with the way an instructor teaches and is designed for use in the classroom.

The NYC DOE serves some 1,700 schools and more than one million students as well as providing resources for 90,000 part- and full-time teachers. In terms of technology, Chellani said schools use a variety of learning management and e-portfolio systems which restricts the tools they can use and makes providing a seamless platform for distributing content to all the schools even more difficult.

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> – Sandeep Chellani, NYC DOE executive director of product development

"With different hardware and software systems, there is a great need for a standardized approach to providing content," he said. "We do see schools using a lot of disparate systems and they want to be using a lot of these cool products the vendors provide. But unfortunately, most of the industry is built on proprietary software. It limits the ability for the schools to implement a variety of different solutions so schools tend to stick with what they know and they also get locked into using the platforms they've invested in."

The department lacked defined standards to support aggregation and reporting across all systems. It also lacked the management of licensing and access across all of its vendors. "We hired a consultant from iNACOL (International Association for K-12 Online Learning) who was very versed in interoperability, and with the help of the IMS Global Learning Consortium, we figured out what we needed to do."

Chellani said IMS was very helpful in their understanding some of the interoperability standards, particularly after the department chose Desire2Learn as its preferred LMS platform. "D2L had already implemented the IMS standards, and IMS helped us figure out how to work with some of the other vendors. It was a big party so there were several sources of information."

The department used its buying power to encourage vendors to adopt content interoperability standards and more seamless management and distribution of content. They asked vendors to align their products with IMS Global's Basic Learning Tools Interoperability (BLTI) standards and launched at the beginning of fall semester with six vendors. For the reminder of the eight vendors, the content was either ingested into the platform or a short term custom integration was implemented until the provider could move to the BLTI standard.

The advantages of conforming to BLTI are obvious, said Chellani. Development costs are reduced for vendors, eliminating the need for custom integrations for NYC and other institutions. Meeting standards reduces development costs for NYC DOE, eliminating the need for custom integrations and enabling deep linking to other compatible resources. And adhering to BLTI also increases options for students and teachers in selecting learning applications.

"How important is interoperability? If you talk to educators, they probably wouldn't be familiar with the concept," added Chellani. "But if you talk to someone like me, who is in charge of getting the product launched, it's probably my number one issue. Getting all these

systems to play nice together is critical. Ultimately, choice and easy access are going to increase adoption and enable people to do some great things that they haven't been able to do before. Educators take a lot of what we do behind the scenes for granted. But it's the standards that enable things like access to the Internet to exist. The world of education is far behind when it comes to adopting standards."

Chellani believes vendors appreciate the importance of standards because they are forced to spend a lot of time custom integrating their products with school systems. The more they are able to align their products with interoperability standards like BLTI, and get school systems to align with those standards, the more time they have available to focus on improving their products. Unfortunately, lots of school systems are not as aware of the need for standards, or have not yet adopted them. Chellani said he hopes NYC DOE has established a benchmark for others to follow.

Schools within the NYC system have to apply to participate in the iLearnNYC program. Nearly 400 applied for the program, out of which 124 were selected. Chellani said the department has been very engaged with training administrators on the resources available, have provided 24-hour technical help desk support, and have put all sorts of protocols in place to ensure the initial rollout of the program goes smoothly. Chellani said the department intends to accept up to another 175 schools for the next academic year, bringing the total number involved to 300.

There is still work to be done in establishing technology standards, said Chellani, but he believes that organizations like IMS Global are on the right track. "The industry needs a governing body like this and IMS is definitely ahead of the curve. You need it to be independent, to be a non-profit. You need it to be autonomous. You need it to be smart enough to create the supply and the demand to come together to make this happen. For this to really take off, there needs to be a combination of more capital towards this type of work and industry acceptance and recognition of it from the vendor community that seems to be more aware of it than from the user groups. When I was at IMS' Learning Impact last spring, I was overwhelmed by the number of vendors that attended, but feel we need more grass roots support from district leaders. Getting K-12 CIO's engaged is really a challenge."

IMS has recently announced a new K-12 district leadership program, the Instructional Innovation through Interoperability Leadership Council (I3LC) to provide greater opportunity for district leaders to engage with IMS and each other. For more information, visit: http://www.imsglobal.org/I3lc/