

Communities through Instant Communications: Being in Two Places at Once

1. Innovative Use of Technology

Polk County Public Schools has saved money and expanded capacity for collaboration by launching use of two levels of video conferencing. **Microsoft Communicator for Instant Messaging** uses computers for real-time conversations across the miles, with or without face-to-face video conferencing. **Live Meeting** does the same for whole groups, and can record their work. Since Spring 2009, we have trained all levels of administration (190) and all instructional technology staff (607). Suddenly we can chat in virtual communities whose members are otherwise distant and disconnected.

Communicator for Instant Messaging has increased communication and collaboration for 160 network managers and 209 classroom technology coaches. These colleagues, principals and district staff have connected more than 50,000 times and all credit the new technology with increased collegiality and collaboration across the district. **Communicator** has allowed network managers and technology coaches to converse even though they do not have phones. This provides the means to partner on solutions between schools. Principals have enjoyed video conferencing with other principals and district staff where the benefit of visual conversation has added to meaningful collaboration and reduced the sense of isolation.

2. Improved Student Achievement, Increased Efficiency, Reduced Costs, and Increased Safety

Since its advent, **Live Meeting** has helped deliver professional development for 90+ volunteer coordinators, delivered in-service to principals on technology integration, provided information for selecting technology coaches, and hosted six monthly technical trainings for technology coaches. Since Polk is spread across 17 municipalities and our most distant schools are 42 miles apart, this means significant savings in both time and travel.

In addition, the two levels of video conferencing require less time than literal meetings, while providing accurate information and opportunity for feedback to all participants. Schools are safer because principals can remain on campus and attend to safety and instructional matters while receiving important information quickly and effectively through a **Live Meeting**.

3. Documentation of Improvements

Live Meeting has reduced presentation time by two thirds compared to an on-site professional development session. When we changed the screening procedure for volunteers this year, **Live Meeting** made it possible to communicate with all schools quickly and thoroughly, so they could ensure the ongoing safety of students. That meeting alone saved \$3,000 of personal staff mileage and 500+ hours of time spent in travel. The Assessment, Accountability and Evaluation Department, whose test center is seven miles away, has used **Live Meeting** to coordinate its internal efforts and as a primary means of communication with other administrators on using the district data warehouse.

Live Meeting has reduced costs of principal mileage reimbursements by \$22,117, over 4,500 hours of travel time, and \$7,120 in substitute teacher costs for technology coaches who no longer need to leave campus for meetings.