Five Years after Hurricane Katrina: Eight School Districts Transformed

After helping with immediate relief efforts in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in August and September of 2005, Cisco and its employees wanted to make a longer-lasting commitment to the region. They chose schools. “Helping to improve the quality of education in communities pays big dividends, because academic achievement can lead to economic development,” says Mary de Wysocki, Cisco’s director of Internet business solutions for education and economic development.

The result was the 21st Century Schools (21S) Initiative, launched in 2005. A four-year, $80 million effort, 21S was conceived to help eight districts in Mississippi and Louisiana transform teaching and learning in affected schools serving more than 100,000 students. One goal of the initiative was to provide the tools for school districts to integrate technology into class lessons and teaching methods, helping prepare students to thrive in a global economy. Another was guidance on cultural factors, such as modeling and promoting openness, educational excellence, and continuous improvement.

Technology—And Guidance to Make It Count

Twenty Cisco employees left their regular Cisco jobs for one to three years to work full time on the initiative, most of them moving temporarily to Mississippi or Louisiana. This group of “21S Fellows” worked with district leadership on new learning approaches, including incorporating social media such as podcasting, blogging, and wikis into the curriculum.

“We know you can’t just put technology into students’ or teachers’ hands and say ‘There you go,’” says de Wysocki, who directed the 21S initiative for its final two years. “You have to help education leaders articulate their vision for teaching and learning. That means describing the day in the life of a student and then working together to create real, practical, yet aggressive plans to make it happen.”

Five-Year Report Card

Five years later, the initiative to bring new ideas and technology into Louisiana and Mississippi classrooms has yielded tangible results:

- Increased performance: As one example, between 2005–2006 and 2008–2009, the percentage of Jefferson Parish School System eighth graders scoring basic or above increased across all four subject tests. The largest gains were seen in mathematics (16 percentage points) and English/language arts (12 percentage points).
- Rising graduation rates: High school graduation rates are steadily increasing. In the Jefferson Parish Public School System, dropout rates have decreased by 52 percent.
- Empowered and energized teachers: Technology has helped the districts adopt more student-centric approaches to instruction. On average, teachers in 21S schools use technology tools or software in 76 percent of the periods that they teach. In Mississippi, half of all teachers rated themselves as highly proficient or approaching highly proficient at integrating technology into their teaching practices. A district leader in the Jefferson Parish Public School System said, “I think the greatest impact [of the Cisco® 21S Initiative] is a change in culture, an appreciation for technology as a tool for enhancement.”
- Increased parental involvement: In the Hattiesburg Public School District, attendance at Parent Teacher Association meetings increased twentyfold, from 147 parents in 2006 to 3256 in 2009. In Jefferson Parish, the percent of parents reporting never having missed a conference with their child’s teacher increased from 60 percent in 2008 to 78 percent in 2009.
- More efficient interdistrict collaboration: Two-thirds of administrators reported greater efficiency in administrative tasks, and a significant change in the use of data for management, accountability, and instructional decisions. What’s more, 97 percent of administrators and 91 percent of teachers agreed that discussion of how to achieve school goals has become a regular part of their faculty meetings.

De Wysocki concludes, “Many teachers and education leaders enter the education field to change lives. Helping them bring their vision into reality with technology reinspired them and helped them realize that they could not only recover, but transform. The experience has been life-changing for those of us who had the privilege to help.”

To watch videos about the Cisco 21st Century Schools Initiative and the experience of the Jefferson Parish Public School System, visit: www.cisco.com/go/21s.