

OVER 20,000 ENROLLMENT

Bridging the Digital Divide

Polk County Public Schools, Bartow, Fla.



SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENT

Hazel Sellers

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

Lori Cunningham
Kay Fields
Tim Harris
Dick Mullenax
Frank O'Reilly
Debra Wright

SUPERINTENDENT

Sherrie Nickell



Students and community members have access to computers and the Internet, thanks to Polk County Public Schools.

PROGRAM NAME

Closing the Digital Divide
Through Community Centers

DISTRICT DILEMMA

Polk County's population has a high poverty rate and limited Internet access. The eighth-largest county in Florida, Polk is not a typical metro area—61 percent of the population resides in unincorporated areas. Little more than 12 percent of the population is unemployed, 76 percent lives below the county's poverty level, and 61 percent of Polk County Public Schools' 92,000 students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. With a per capita income average of \$18,302, many households cannot afford computers or Internet access. As more jobs require computer skills and more correspondence goes online, many students and their families are in need of computer training and access to computers.

SOLUTION

To bridge the vast digital divide in the communities served within the school district, it established partnerships with neighborhood community centers and local Internet service providers. The Internet service companies provide either low-cost or free Internet access to the local community centers. The school board, upon purchasing replacement computers for the schools, turns around and donates refreshed computers with typical productivity software and sufficient technical specifications to use the online resources for students. The community centers use these donations to create computer labs to provide access for students as well as for community members. Furthermore, the school

board provides teachers for the centers to train community members in need of computer skills for job-seeking opportunities and to give after-school help to students. Polk's community centers have shown great usage from both students and community members.

THE BOARD'S INVOLVEMENT

The Polk County School Board authorized in 2004 a partnership with county community centers to develop computer resource centers for community access and training. The district replaces school computers every five years, and some of the older computers are still viable machines. The board determined the best plan was to donate these computers to community centers to create computer labs. Through the partnership agreement, the centers are responsible for the security, maintenance, and Internet access for the computers. The district provides money for teachers to train after school hours at those locations.

RESULTS

The centers serve students and the community at large. The program has grown to more than 30 community center partnerships throughout the county in neighborhoods where the need is most clearly recognizable. Centers log more than 100 users per week on a regular basis. One center averages 300 volunteer hours, logs from 50 to 600 students, and serves more than 2,500 adults each month. This is due in part to the economic downturn and citizens who lack resources to buy computers and pay for Internet access. Without this program, these community centers would not be able to afford computer labs. Students have a safe place to go after school to do research and participate in online learning. Adults are learning skills necessary to better their lives and those of their children. The program has generated more than \$400,000 in funding to support equipment and instruction. The benefits enhance the learning environment and help to lift up the lives of the folks in Polk County.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact Abdu Taguri, assistant superintendent of information systems and technology, at abdu.taguri@polk-fl.net. The district's website is at www.polk-fl.net.

Copyright 2012 National School Boards Association. All rights reserved. This article may be printed out and photocopied for individual or noncommercial educational use (50 copy limit), but may not be electronically re-created, stored, or distributed; or otherwise modified, reproduced, transmitted, republished, displayed or distributed. By granting this limited license, NSBA does not waive any of the rights or remedies otherwise available at law or in equity. By granting permission to use of our materials, NSBA does not intend to endorse any company or its products and services.