



Michigan ESA's Deliver Statewide Online Testing

The education industry has no shortage of cynics - people who believe that every couple of years a new project comes along that is massive in scale and is doomed to failure. Their cynicism is based mostly in experience, but this spring, Michigan flew in the face of that cynicism.

After three years of preparation, the state instituted voluntary online statewide assessments this spring. With 80 percent of districts participating, there was not one glitch. Everything worked perfectly.

That success wasn't easy and it wasn't quick. Beginning in 2012, the Michigan legislature appropriated about \$45 million each year for three years to get the state schools ready for online testing. For technology and infrastructure, they turned to the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators. The group's executive director, Bill Miller, in turn hired Tim Hall to direct the project and he began the arduous task of making the idea of online testing a reality.

"It took a huge amount of cooperative behavior among people who were not used to cooperating before," Hall said.

The state's Department of Assessment and Accountability handled the software while Hall and the ISDs worked on the hardware. Hall created a team of state and private experts who identified problems and solutions, then made sure they were ready by spring 2015.

The first problem was making sure all districts had access to online bandwidth that could handle the test during the high-volume test days. The difficulty was statewide - rural districts needed access, urban districts needed repair to aging infrastructure. Hall and his team worked from the Upper Peninsula to downtown Detroit to get every district online.

Hall and his team developed a web site where each district could test its' online capabilities. If it didn't meet test-day standards, they could make necessary adjustments.

Another issue was equipment. Many districts had too few computers, too old computers or no computers at all. Again, a district-by-district assessment and judicious use of taxpayer money got each district up to speed.

The next issue was training both teachers and students on the use of the computers. This was the easiest part of the project since most students were ready and most teachers were tech-savvy enough to get up to speed quickly.

Through this three-year process, the state's ISDs were the boots on the ground, Hall said. They had leaders step forward and make online testing work. "They were hugely critical to the success," he said.

There was no way to go through a dry run because of the legislature's tight timetable for implementation, but both Hall's team and the software developers were able to do onsite visits in many of the schools to make sure the software and technology worked and, most importantly, alleviate many concerns of school personnel.

This year was the first year for online testing and the legislature allowed districts to opt-out at will. Even so, 80 percent of the districts went ahead with online testing.

In preparation for the event, Hall and the team knew that, given Michigan's size, any glitch that couldn't be fixed by tech support on the ground could mean at least a six-hour delay until his team could get to the school. To shorten the response time, they developed "tiger teams" and dispersed them throughout the state. If any district had trouble on test day, a team could be on-site within an hour and a half and at least some testing could be concluded.

Perhaps the biggest sign of success is that the tiger teams weren't needed. With 80 percent of Michigan's 1.5 million students online for statewide assessment, there were no glitches. The entire day went off without a hitch.

Hall is pleased with the success of the online assessment rollout, but he knows difficult work is ahead. The remaining 20 percent of districts that opted for paper and pencil tests this year will be more difficult to assimilate than the first 80 percent. Most of these chose to eschew the online tests because they weren't technologically ready or their training wasn't up to par yet, so they will provide difficulties.

"But this year went smoothly," Hall said. "We'll see how many of that 20 percent we can get on the bandwagon next year."

John Fitzgerald
Education Reporter