

Florida school district delivers more engaging education, easier assessment with Microsoft Surface

Real Impact for Better Engagement



To help teachers individualize education and better engage technology-fluent students, Sarasota County School District in Florida is deploying Microsoft Surface devices. The mobile devices, in conjunction with digital pens and Microsoft OneNote, serve as students' textbooks, notebooks, and assessment devices. Teachers are excited about using the technology to present information in new ways, and students love having a Surface that they can use to work digitally, collaborate with peers, and communicate with teachers in real time.

Help great teachers do amazing things

Like every other school district in the United States, Sarasota County School District in Florida is facing a dizzying array of changes in terms of how it teaches and evaluates student performance. The Common Core State Standards Initiative adopted by many US states requires that teachers explain the *why* of what they teach, not just the *what*. Students are encouraged to take ownership of their learning and teachers to provide differentiated learning methods to meet different learning styles.

To support differentiation and student-driven learning, Sarasota County Schools is deploying Microsoft Surface devices for student and teacher use. The district believes that Surface devices are a great way to enhance student-led learning, excite students, and extend teacher resourcefulness. "We have some of the best teachers in the state, and we want to give them tools to do even more amazing things in the classroom," says Todd Alexander, Manager of School Support Services at Sarasota County School District.

One device for content consumption and creation

Sarasota County Schools standardized on Windows operating system-based computers about ten years ago to bring order, efficiency, and economy to its vast technology holdings—about 35,000 desktop and laptop computers across 52 schools.

However, as computers on the market continued to get smaller, the district's teachers felt that tablets provided better support for individualized learning. Students can take them anywhere in

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Adam Gardner, Instructional Technology Specialist, Sarasota County School District



Company: Sarasota County School District
Website: www.sarasotacountyschools.net
Country: United States
Industry: Education—K–12
Employees: 5,000

Company profile:

Sarasota County School District serves the community of Sarasota County, Florida, which has a population of about 380,000. The district has 42,000 students, 52 schools, and 5,000 employees.

Software & services:

- Windows 8.1 Professional
- Microsoft Office 365

Hardware:

- Microsoft Surface 3
- Microsoft Surface Pro 3

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the classroom and use the keyboard or touch interface to more flexibly interact with information. Some teachers brought Android tablets and iPads into their classrooms, but they ran into roadblocks. "We thought iPads were great information consumption devices but did not lend themselves to information creation," says Joe Binswanger, Director of Information Technology at Sarasota County School District. "Teachers had to switch to Windows-based PCs to use Microsoft Excel, Word, and PowerPoint to create content."

Binswanger also felt strongly that the district should choose technology that prepared students for the world of work. "Nearly all students will encounter Microsoft Office at work, so they need to be fluent in those programs," Binswanger says.

In 2014, the district gave every single student, faculty, and staff member a free subscription to Microsoft Office 365, which provided all students access to the full Office suite on up to five devices. This helped bridge the gap between school and home, giving students 24-hour access to the tools they need to create, edit, share, and collaborate.

The district then introduced the Microsoft Surface 3 and the Microsoft Surface Pro 3 (with a larger screen and more powerful Intel processor) for students, teachers, and administrators. "We saw that the Surface provided the Windows operating system, the ability to run the full Office suite, and the most intuitive digital inking capability of any device we tested," Binswanger says. "In the Surface, we've found an adaptive device that is simple enough for a kindergartner yet is powerful enough for a high school math teacher."

Give students one device for everything

As a first phase, Sarasota County Schools has purchased 1,000 Surface 3 devices for students and about 300 Surface Pro 3 devices for teachers and administrators. Both run the Windows 8.1 Professional operating system. Every freshman and sophomore at the district's Suncoast Polytechnical High School will receive a Surface 3 at the start of the 2015-2016 school year. Instead of lugging around 60-pound backpacks crammed with heavy textbooks and notebooks, students have one small, lightweight device that contains everything they need.

Using the Surface 3 digital pen/inking technology and Windows 8.1 touchscreen, students take notes using the Microsoft Office OneNote note-taking program. "Both students and teachers consider OneNote a fundamental tool," says Adam Gardner, Instructional Technology Specialist at Sarasota County School District. "With the Surface and OneNote, students have a digital environment that helps us deeply engage them in the curriculum and in learning the twenty-first century skills they'll need for work."

The balance of the Surface 3 devices—about 600—are being distributed to teachers through an application process. Teachers will use them in all sorts of ways. For example, high school music teachers use Surface devices and OneNote to store and display

music. Students sing directly from the devices, which serve as electronic music stands, and use OneNote and the digital pen to notate and revise musical selections.

Some elementary teachers plan to use Surface devices and OneNote to create digital notebooks that will become students' primary means of learning and response. Interacting through digital devices gives shy students a way to contribute and helps engage less motivated students.

A high school math teacher will use the Surface and digital inking to similarly boost student engagement, motivation, self-esteem, creativity, and even attendance. "My goal is to create student-centered classrooms where students can accomplish more advanced mathematical tasks and acquire more meaningful and long-lasting learning experiences," says Brigid Rizza, Algebra Teacher at North Port High School. "My goal is to narrow the digital divide among students and create a positive and equitable learning environment for all."

Expand teacher collaboration

Teachers who are using Surface devices are sharing ideas through—what else—a OneNote notebook. "Before the Surface and OneNote, teachers were limited to collaborating only within their own schools," Gardner says. "With these devices, teachers can collaborate with colleagues across our very large district, taking collaboration to a whole new level. The shared OneNote notebook is a digital canvas where teachers can share ideas by dropping in handwritten notes, lesson plans, videos, web links, and other content. Our teachers have taken laptops as far as they can go. With digital inking, OneNote, and other Office 365 applications, new ideas are flooding in. Teachers are excited about how they can fundamentally change teaching and learning with these devices."

Accommodate state testing needs

Currently, standardized testing ties up many computers in Sarasota schools, because computers used for state testing require special configurations that disqualify them for regular instructional use. Binswanger plans to solve this problem with Windows and the Surface by creating two different user profiles for each device: one for testing and one for instructional use.

Binswanger's team uses its existing Microsoft management software to manage the Surface devices. "Androids and iPads have improved, but they're still not manageable in a Windows environment," says Binswanger. "We can manage the Surfaces as effectively as we can manage laptops and PCs, without adding support personnel, so it's a big cost avoidance."

The most important thing to Binswanger, though, is how the Surface improves learning. "We're seeing the Surface 3 making a big difference in students' education, and it will help them succeed outside of school in their careers."