

Automated Employee Training: Efficiency and Effectiveness

By Laurie Boedicker



New legislation or modifications to existing federal and state education legislation often mandate more training for district staff and more documentation to prove compliance. These regulations come with heavy penalties for non-compliance; yet these initiatives are usually unfunded, thus making it difficult to ensure that staff members receive the training they need.

Highland Local Schools in Ohio faced these challenges during the past couple of years. In addition to providing standard training “refreshers” about issues such as bloodborne pathogens, sexual harassment, and hazardous materials, Highland had to provide expanded

safety and violence prevention training in accordance with legislation enacted in 2007. According to House Bill 276, elementary certified staff required training in child abuse detection, violence prevention, substance abuse prevention, and positive youth development.

Highland is a small school district, so it is difficult to coordinate design and delivery of this kind of training. Responsibility for executing these legislative mandates tends to funnel down to one person who is already stretched thin.

Responsibility for executing the mandates issued by different state or federal agencies tends to funnel down to one person.

The challenge intensified when the district had to comply with two 2009 state laws: House Bill 1, which expanded HB 276 to include middle and high school certified staff; and House Bill 19, or Tina’s Law, which extended the safety and violence prevention training for staff to include the identification and prevention of teen dating violence.

Employees must complete at least four hours of the in-service training within two years after beginning employment and every five years thereafter.

This situation became a challenge for Highland because we do not have the resources to hire an administrator for personnel. To address this need, we replaced most of our live, site-based, training with online staff development.

Going Online

Highland Local Schools introduced online training to faculty and classified staff in August 2009. It proved to be the right choice for our school district. Initially, we had concerns about the online training, such as whether staff members would be able to work comfortably with the online technology and whether these Web-based courses would be effective.

EFFECTIVE ONLINE TRAINING

Here are some points to consider when implementing online training systems in your school district:

- Look for a vendor who closely monitors existing and new state, local, and federal education legislation.
- Ensure that the online modules are easy to use. We arranged the demonstration as a precaution, but most of our staff would have been able to click through and complete the modules without the demonstration.
- Make computers available so employees can access the online courses and ask questions if needed. We plan open lab time during which staff members can complete the required training with assistance available.

School districts have lagged behind other industries, businesses, and professions in using online technology to streamline important functions, such as training. However, only 3 of more than 350 staff members requested assistance and there were no negative responses to moving the live training online.

Much has been made of the fact that while today's students are digital natives, the adults running schools are best described as digital immigrants. To address the concern that district staff might be uncomfortable with the technology, we provided a brief demonstration of how the new system worked. Once participants learned how to log in using their unique passwords, they found the point-and-click format easy to navigate.

With regard to the effectiveness of online training, individuals who had attended training in the 2008–09 school year said the new online model was much more engaging.

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Highland previously used a train-the-trainer model for all professional development. The district sent a team of teachers for training and then had those teachers train the rest of the staff. However, staff members admitted that when they were sitting in a room listening to the

annual refresher course on bloodborne pathogens, they didn't pay attention.

The online courses require users to interact with the content, which means they need to focus in order to get to the end of the module. With the online courses, users can quickly review the information they already know and concentrate on the information they had not retained, which is the purpose of a refresher. The built-in questions checked for understanding and documented more than seat time.

All assigned modules met with the approval of in-house experts. For example, our head school nurse examined the system's courses on first aid, students with diabetes, seizures, and so on.

Time Savings and Compliance

The state set a deadline for staff to complete the refresher courses and the new safety and violence prevention training, so Highland had to ensure that all teachers were trained by that date. The new training system provided five modules so teachers could do one module per week. Since part of the training time window was during the winter break, staff members could train at their own convenience.

Employees who were on leave received emails with links to their compulsory courses so they could fulfill their training while they were home. The new system also allowed employees hired in the middle of the school year to complete the training within a limited time window to ensure compliance with the laws.

We previously had to spend a great deal of time manually verifying the participation of each staff member. Now the system automatically tracks who completes a particular course, and at the end of the year, we print out specific tracking reports to send to the appropriate agency or file as required. Using the capabilities of its new system, Highland Local Schools achieved 100% compliance with its training requirements in the 2009–10 school year.

School districts receive little if any guidance from relevant state agencies regarding the implementation of policies and training. In these days of shrinking budgets and staff, it is imperative that administrators find the most efficient methods for delivering quality professional development and documenting compliance.

Highland Local Schools has realized the benefits of automated online training, which frees up administrators' time and resources so the district can continue to focus on improving student achievement.

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