



SAKAI IN K-12 A CLIENT SUCCESS STORY.

In 2003, the Board of Regents for the state of Rhode Island instituted new graduation regulations for its K-12 schools. These regulations require high school students to provide demonstrable proficiency in high school coursework as a requisite to graduation. In response to these regulations, the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) developed portfolio components for the Rhode Island High School Diploma System. The components do not impose additional course work requirements, but rather, they provide a means by which students can show that they have met applicable standards for graduation. With the development of these portfolio components came an urgent request from educators and administrators: the state needed to implement a standardized electronic portfolio system.

In response to this urgent request, RIDE brought together a collaborative team that included personnel from RIDE, local school districts, the Education Alliance at Brown University, the University of Rhode Island, and the Rhode Island Network for Educational Technology (RINET). This committee was charged with the task of evaluating national models for ePortfolio implementations and selecting a solution that was right for Rhode Island's K-12 educational system.

From the start, the ePortfolio committee faced a difficult task. Jim Monti, Director of Technology for West Warwick public schools, was involved early in the assessment process as a member of this committee. He explains, "When we first began looking at the proficiency based graduation requirements, we had a lot of concern. Clearly, we were facing a high stakes decision, with little time for execution, given that the new regulations imposed a deadline that required graduating students of 2008 to be able to demonstrate that they had met the requirements of the 2003 regulations."

RINET, as a member of the collaborative team, played a significant role in the ePortfolio decision-making process. As the technology advisor for all 36 school districts in the state, RINET has extensive experience assessing and implementing software solutions on a large scale. With RINET assisting, the ePortfolio committee invited several vendors to present their e-portfolio systems and related training programs. Initial key considerations in assessing the options offered were the opportunity for excellence, the opportunity to collaborate, the economics of the solution, and the solution's ability to address needs specific to the K-12 environment.

After presentations had been made, the committee determined that none of the vended solutions met Rhode Island's K-12 portfolio needs. The committee then issued an RFP to find a company that could assist Rhode Island in developing its own ePortfolio system. One company that responded to the RFP was rSmart.

The e-folio system would have to:

- Help foster educational excellence
- Provide opportunities for collaboration
- Be cost-effective
- Address the specific demands of the K-12 learning environment



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rSMART AND SAKAI PROVIDE THE SOLUTION

rSmart was given the opportunity to present to the ePortfolio committee, and rSmart showed the committee the broad opportunities and capabilities of Sakai. Steve Foehr, Direction of Application Services at RINET, explains: “As we considered the possibilities shared with us by rSmart, we realized that Sakai offered us everything we needed--the opportunity to influence the development process of the solution, to collaborate to meet our unique needs, and to control costs. We also realized that engaging rSmart would be key to our ability to execute successfully on our implementation plans, and this has proven true repeatedly to this day. From the start, rSmart has been supporting and driving RINET’s vision and co-collaborating to see what can be achieved. Moreover, we are thrilled to know that what we’ve achieved with rSmart can be shared out with other K-12 community members.”

Rhode Island decided to move forward with Sakai in mid-2005. By the end of 2006, Sakai was available to all

high schools and middle schools in the state. As with any major software implementation, there were challenges to be faced as the K-12 community learned about the tools available and how to match those tools to their needs, but rSmart was always there to help find solutions as each challenge arose.

Early in the implementation process, for example, RINET recognized that significant changes were required for the “Assignments” tool. rSmart played a key role in designing these changes to meet user needs. As Mr. Monti explains, “rSmart added several features within the application that the community requested, and these features allowed teachers to create and upload assignments more efficiently. It was a great step forward.”



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SUPPORTING SUCCESS WHERE IT IS NEEDED MOST

Current levels of Sakai implementation vary throughout Rhode Island. In the West Warwick School District, implementation has been the broadest and deepest. The West Warwick district serves approximately 4,000 students at four elementary schools, one middle school and one high school. The area this district covers is considered an urban ring community, thus it shares the issues of many urban schools, such as high poverty rates. To address the needs of its community, the West Warwick School District must be agile and innovative. Sakai allows it to be both.

To prepare West Warwick educators to use Sakai, teachers were offered short training sessions to acclimate them to the portfolio tool. The initial goal, explains Mr. Monti, was “to train the teachers to create portfolio worthy assignments, upload all of the resources, link the goals



and post these for their students.” Additionally, teachers were asked to participate in Professional Learning Communities offered in Sakai, which allowed them to collaborate in their efforts to understand the new system and how to use it to meet the new standards. Through the Professional Learning Communities, the district was able to understand what was working and what wasn’t working for educators. As a result, the educators using the portfolio tool were able to offer input on redesign work and feel ownership in the overall success of the portfolio tool.

DISCOVERING THE POWER OF THE FULL SAKAI PLATFORM

Although Rhode Island chose Sakai primarily for its portfolio capabilities, many educators in the state have begun exploring its full potential for teaching and learning. “When we made the decision to go with Sakai, we were looking only at the portfolio application,” says Mr. Foehr. “Still, rSmart gave us a glimpse of a whole other world beyond the portfolio application. Since implementation, we have been able to move much of what we do into that powerful other world of Sakai, and we have achieved so much more than we envisioned when we first chose Sakai.”

Some educators have discovered the opportunities of Sakai through online collaborative learning communities that support face-to-face professional development. Others have learned more as they have navigated the assignment and portfolio requirements. Still others have learned how co-workers are innovating with the many tools offered and have begun experimenting on their own.

Mr. Monti describes how thinking has evolved in his district: “Teachers got to see that Sakai wasn’t just about portfolio worthy assignments, but it is really about communicating and learning together.” As a result, the full Sakai platform is currently in use at 21 high schools in Rhode Island, serving about 23,000 students. Faculty members at these schools are learning the many ways Sakai’s broader platform facilitates a successful teaching and learning environment.

The screenshot shows the Sakai platform interface for the RIDE IT Leadership Council. The header includes the 'rieps' logo and navigation links like 'Home, Steve F.', 'Administration Workspace', 'RINET SIS Consortium', 'RIEPS Advisory Committee', 'RIDE IT Leadership Council', 'My Workspace', and 'My Sites'. The main content area is titled 'RIDE IT Leadership Council' and features a 'Site Information Display' section with a text block about federal technology reporting requirements and the formation of the Rhode Island Instructional Technology Leadership Council (ITLC). To the right, there are sections for 'Recent Announcements' (listing a 'June Meeting' on Jun 5, 2009) and 'Recent Chat Messages'. Below these is a 'Calendar' for July 2009, showing dates from 1 to 31. At the bottom, there is a 'Messages & Forums Notifications' section with a 'Messages' link and a notification icon.

SAKAI TRANSFORMS TEACHING

➔ They found their answer in rSmart.

Lisa Flanders is a history teacher at West Warwick High School. Having worked in the technology industry before she became a teacher, Ms. Flanders has always sought ways to utilize innovative technology in her teaching. She was especially eager to use Sakai when it was introduced to her school three years ago, and she was excited by the many possibilities offered by the full Sakai platform.

To meet portfolio requirements, Ms. Flanders’ students upload at least one assignment per quarter into the portfolio system. But equally important to Ms. Flanders are the other capabilities of the Sakai platform. One example is the Discussion Forums tool. For an honors class Ms. Flanders teaches, she once struggled to find enough discussion time

in class for students to meet the “chapter by chapter” discussion requirements of the honors curriculum. Using the Discussion Forums tool, Ms. Flanders can now extend discussions to after-school hours, offering students a chapter discussion prompt and then monitoring the dialogue to ensure that each student is meeting the honors requisites. In her words, “The school day may end at 1:48pm, but with Sakai, the learning day continues.”

Ms. Flanders believes that other educators now recognize the platform's potential, too. “It's becoming a part of our culture,” she says. “We know there are other opportunities out there that we haven't explored, and we're interested in understanding and exploring those opportunities. As we use one tool, we see another and wonder what it does and what we can do with it. It's exciting, because the more I see and learn about Sakai, the more I feel the opportunities are endless.”

This enthusiasm is shared at many schools across the state. At Portsmouth High School, Patricia McCarthy is Math Department Chair and a Senior Project Co-coordinator. In these roles, she has gained extensive experience with the portfolio tool as well as an appreciation for the value of the full Sakai platform: “As I've worked with the portfolio tool, I've seen such power and benefit, but there is so much more to Sakai.

I realized that I can do things in Sakai that I would have expected would require a whole new software package. I do a lot of curriculum mapping, and I was surprised to learn that Sakai offered me all the tools I need to accomplish this work.”

In her work as a math teacher, Ms. McCarthy often uses the Discussion Forums tool to post a question to her students and invite the students to respond. Then, she asks the students to align themselves with one answer or another and in doing so, analyze each other's work. She is amazed at the dialogue that ensues. Moreover, she is pleased that each student has an equal voice. “In this format, I hear from students I would never hear from in the classroom. A quiet kid might say the most profound thing—a voice you wouldn't normally hear.”

There are still challenges to be addressed as Rhode Island's K-12 system continues to evolve in its use of Sakai. But for Mr. Monti and many others, the Sakai experience has taken them to places they could not have gone otherwise. “This has been an opportunity you do not see often in education,” he says. “We have had a transformative experience. The tools we use in Sakai are an extension of what we do, but they also allow us to transform *how* we do what we do. Through Sakai, we are a community of learners, students, faculty, and administrators alike.”

GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT WITH rSMART AND SAKAI



The Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) has been a part of each stage of assessing and implementing Sakai. Sharon Lee, a Senior High School Redesign Specialist at RIDE, has been heavily involved in the process, and she understands why the selection committee chose Sakai. As she states, “There was significant motivation in the prospect of not having to fit into someone else's box program. Rather, we could be a part of the development process. This turned out to be very significant, because the new regulations adopted in 2003 were not the end of an evolution, but rather a beginning. Since those regulations were implemented, we have been working to refine them, so it has been essential that we have a system that can adapt. Sakai allows us to be responsive to change.”

According to Ms. Lee, rSmart has played an essential role in this ongoing development. “rSmart has been willing to sit with us and go through a very painstaking process to get to where we are now,” she says. “We've had to review design elements, budgets, timelines, and much more. rSmart has been willing to speak with each group of collaborators, hear all opinions, and gather information. Because we involved the community so significantly in the design process, we probably went through more iterations than we might have otherwise. Through it all, rSmart has been not only patient with our process, but they have been willing to fully share in the process.”

Ms. Lee has seen a significant cultural shift towards statewide collaboration as a result of the Sakai implementation: “One of the most powerful aspects of Sakai is the opportunity to invite the statewide educational community into the application design process. We didn't just ask them what they believe a portfolio is—we also asked them what they think it can be.”

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