Improving Student Learning

Lancaster-Lebanon Intermediate Unit 13 (IU13) is an education service agency supporting 22 public school districts (as well as non-publics, preschools, adult learners and more) in southern Pennsylvania with a wide range of programming all geared toward improving student learning.

Instructional Media Services (IMS) is an integral component of IU13, delivering access to premium digital resources that promote “21st century skills, digital-age literacy, inventive thinking, high productivity and effective communication.” A few years ago, Instructional Media and Technology Consultant Ken Zimmerman started receiving requests from librarians for a digital reading platform.

“It was very loud and clear from our librarians that they really wanted to be able to enter the eBook arena,” he said, noting IMS’ own desire to continuously update and enhance its offerings.

To help ensure its member districts benefit from the best possible pricing and convenience, IMS coordinates a number of consortia opportunities, including popular tools like Discovery Education, Schoology, BrainPOP, Atomic Learning and Nearpod. With some of IU13’s “powerhouse” school librarians already using the OverDrive digital reading platform – and strongly recommending it – Zimmerman set about applying this same concept to a shared eBook and audiobook collection.

“Our number one goal was to be able to align with current district initiatives and needs,” he said. “And OverDrive fit the bill.”

More Members = More Content

An OverDrive shared collection enables two or more schools or districts – in IU13’s case, 22 districts and 44 non-public schools – to borrow eBooks and audiobooks via a single, easy-to-use website, with all purchased titles available to all participating institutions’ users. This gives members access to far more content than any one institution could purchase on their own.

Here’s a quick breakdown of this powerful dynamic: If School A were to initiate a digital collection of their own, they may only be able to afford 50 titles. However, by joining a collection shared by 20 schools or districts, School A would have access to 1,000 titles. The shared collection grows as more schools or districts join.
An OverDrive shared collection also offers:

- Affordable pricing at $1 or less per student
- The ability to add titles specifically for individual schools or districts
- Titles filtered by grade level to ensure the right titles are reaching the right students
- Content specialists to help select the best titles based on group, school or district needs

IU13’s shared collection went live for its members in May 2014.

“I was surprised how easy it was,” Zimmerman said of the implementation process.

“WE HAVE GREAT USAGE”

IU13’s shared digital collection registers thousands of checkouts per month. Selected from OverDrive’s unrivaled catalog of 3 million titles for K-12, it’s focused on popular fiction for recreational reading – current “Most Popular” titles include Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children, The Book Thief and Wonder – and is on pace to set new records for usage in its third year.

“The moment we implemented OverDrive it was one of the most popular instructional media services we’ve had for a really long time,” Zimmerman said. “It’s received a lot of positive attention, even at the superintendent level.”

Zimmerman said he’s heard “story after story” of librarians reporting the emergence of “secret readers;” students who may be hesitant to visit their physical school library to check out a title that appeals to their unique interests but now enjoy the privacy and 24/7, anywhere access the digital collection offers. Administrative leadership team and summer reading programs have also gone digital, and there’s always a spike in checkouts around school trips.

“I had really no idea what to expect; we have great usage,” Zimmerman said. “I’ve just gotten amazing support from OverDrive for everything we’ve needed to do.”

CLASS SETS

With the impressive success of the shared collection for recreational reading, member schools have begun integrating OverDrive into the classroom in the form of digital class sets, eBook versions of the titles that serve as a cornerstone of the ELA curriculum. Zimmerman said students and teachers have enjoyed the flexibility digital class sets offer – OverDrive titles can be instantly accessed on any device, with no software or downloads required – and have taken advantage of the convenient dictionary and notetaking tools.

“They love how easy it is to use,” he said. “...definitely those using them would like to continue and grow to other classes.”

REDEFINING THE ROLE OF THE LIBRARIAN

Many of the districts IU13 serves have undertaken 1:1 device initiatives, and Zimmerman said librarians were looking to define their role in this environment. The introduction of the shared digital collection has created a new channel for them to deliver their crucial services supporting students’ reading and learning development.

“One of the things we’re working on is continuing to redefine the role of the librarian. Especially in this digital age, people don’t understand; they think librarians just check out books. But that’s not anywhere close to everything they do,” Zimmerman said. “This initiative was partially about bringing the relevance back to the librarians and helping them get back into the classrooms, and helping them to inform teachers and students of more of the services they have to offer.”