

Rural Colorado school districts use technology to address teacher shortage.

The Southeast Colorado Consortium (BOCES) is comprised of 13 school districts in a 6,000 sq. mile area in rural Colorado. It is common to see schools 150-200 miles apart with less than 100 students K-12 within the BOCES service area. These sparsely populated school districts provide an additional challenge to educating students.

At the forefront of the issues facing BOCES was a teacher shortage that is plaguing the districts. "It goes beyond finding the budget to hire more teachers. There are just not enough out there," stated Randy Weigum, SE Colorado BOCES Coordinator, Distance Learning and Ed. Tech. Services.

Through their research, BOCES was exposed to EdComm™, a baseband videoconferencing product that was solving many of the same issues they were having in rural Nebraska. "After seeing the system in Nebraska, I knew that videoconferencing could help us too," said Randy Weigum.

There was really only one hurdle. What technology to use. Many discussions were held debating the merits of different video technologies. The traditional baseband video products provided unrivaled video quality without any delay. While on the other hand, everyone knew that digital video over IP was the wave of the future. "We just felt that the digital

technology just wasn't there yet," stated Randy Weigum. "In the end it became a non issue because we found someone that could provide both."

BNI offered up a solution that made everyone happy. Both a baseband video product, EdComm and an IP-based video solution, PowerPlay, could be deployed with the plan to interface the two together.

With just a half a year under their belt, BOCES has already launched several successful programs using the system for direct curriculum instruction setting the foundation to combat teacher shortage.

Initially Spanish I, Spanish II and of all things, Drivers Education was offered over the system. "It seems strange at first but there is an extreme shortage of drivers education instructors and every student has a mandatory 30 hrs. of classroom time," stated Randy Weigum. It turned out to be a great way to offer the course in a more efficient way.

BOCES was also able to offer an ACT prep course involving teachers from all the core curricula instructing the kids. "The kids really loved it and had a lot of fun," stated Randy Weigum. The teachers also enjoyed being able to reach out to students at other schools and use their expertise to help.

In addition, "we plan to use the system to facilitate new teachers becoming certified," stated Randy. Teachers being employed under a one contract emergency situation certificate can be enrolled in the necessary coursework to obtain an official teaching license without greatly effecting their personal time. This should be a major boost to the success of Alternative Licensing Program.

BOCES looks to the future with optimism. They are scheduled to offer 21 different classes in the fall of 2000. They are also using the system to go beyond just direct instruction for students and establishing program for staff development, teacher mentorship and community learning.

Products & Services provided by BNI:

EdComm
Videoconferencing

PowerPlay
Videoconferencing

Integration Services

Support Services

Reference:

Randy Weigum
Video Solutions
Consultant with
Ameritech/SBC