SUBSCRIBE TO OUR BLOG

We keep our fingers on the pulse of education technology and deliver insights on the issues that matter most to you and your staff. Stay informed and subscribe today!

www.skyward.com/subscribe
Welcome to the Fall 2021 edition of Advancing K12.

Fall 2021. Can you believe it? A year ago, it felt like it would be a lifetime before vaccines would be available, restrictions would be eased, and schools would encounter something like normalcy. It’s certainly exciting, but as the world goes back to the way things were, let me offer one suggestion: Don’t go back to the way things were.

While the past year and a half has been full of challenges, there’s also been much growth. The walls of the classroom expanded to surround all of us. We’ve been stretched to consider new possibilities and embrace the needs of more people. So why stop now?

This silver lining is the focus of the article “5 Good Things the Pandemic Revealed in Schools,” found on page 6. Be sure to check it out, along with our spotlight story on page 16 on how a Texas district uses its student information system to overcome the unique challenges large districts face.

If you enjoy this magazine, I encourage you to visit Advancing K12’s year-round home at www.skyward.com/blog. There, you’ll find more articles on topics in K-12 leadership, technology, culture, and more.

There has perhaps never been a better version of K-12 education than now. I hope you’ll continue refining your district’s processes this year and beyond—and I hope the articles in this magazine will help you along the way.

Scott Glinski, Skyward CEO

FEATUREING:
Pasadena Independent School District

Texas District Finds True Partner in SIS Provider

ABOUT SKYWARD
At Skyward, we’re changing the conversation about administrative software. Since the launch of our first product in 1981, we have remained committed to a better experience for every user. Millions of people rely on Skyward for efficiency, engagement, and empowerment.

Learn more at skyward.com/subscribe

EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH
Future-Ready Students Seek Credentials
Could Virtual Conferences Double Parent Participation?

EDTECH
5 Good Things the Pandemic Revealed in Schools
6 Edtech Tools Schools Used to Navigate a Pandemic

PRACTICAL IDEAS
Impressions Start in the Front Office
Back-to-School Activities to Help Students Settle In
Listening Is a Superpower
Activism by the Numbers
Skyward Giveaway
10 Ways to Reduce Eyestrain
Less Paper, Not Paperless

DATA SECURITY
The Cost of Proactive vs. Reactive

INTERESTING READS
Does Your Pre-Hire Process Shine?
Youth Activism in Schools

INSIDE THIS ISSUE
Future-Ready Students Seek Credentials

Diplomas and GEDs typically only scratch the surface of career and educational application requirements. Other career-oriented credentials can set students apart and provide a competitive edge on their applications.

**OTHER CAREER-BUILDING CREDENTIALS STUDENTS CAN PURSUE**

Most of these credentials are specific to industries, which bodes well for students who know which field they’d like to pursue post-graduation. Some examples of credentials students can achieve and use while employed as a high school student include certified nursing assistant (CNA), automotive service excellence certification (ASE), and ServSafe food service certification in restaurants and grocery stores.

Beginning in 2019, an organization began tracking how students pursued credentials during their K12 and secondary education. The top 10 student certifications, courtesy of Burning Glass Technologies’ 2020 report Credentials Matter Phase 2, included:

1. Microsoft Office Specialist
2. NCCRC – Core Curriculum
3. WISE Financial Literacy Certification
4. Adobe Certified Associate
5. Basic First Aid
6. National Career Readiness Certificate (WorKeys)
7. ASE
8. Virginia Workplace Readiness Skills for the Commonwealth (obviously state-specific)
9. OSHA 10-Hour – General
10. ServSafe Manager

In addition, only three certifications in the top 10 are considered to be in high demand by employers: Microsoft Office Specialist, Adobe Certified Associate, and ASE. However, this could differ based on local and regional needs—which has the greatest impact on whether students can use their credentials for employment before graduation.

**WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO?**

First of all, encourage state departments of education to recognize the value of K12 credentials. This unlocks opportunities for state and federal funding. Schools may not be able to simply add credentialing pathways to curriculums without funding.

Next, figure out the community and region’s need for workforce development. Community job training programs matter and can help employers screening applicants.

Finally, consider promoting a credential program as part of certain paths to graduation success. While it might not be possible to require credentials for every graduate, certain students may thrive in a more career-oriented pathway.

While “college and career readiness” had a nice ring to it for a decade or more, the freedom to choose a different path means more students can set their sights on success—whatever that looks like for them. Adding credentials into the mix means they have something to show for their achievements.

STORY BY

Erin Werra
To read more from Erin, visit www.skyward.com/blog

---

**IMPRESSIONS START IN THE FRONT OFFICE**

Front office staff—you do so much hard work behind the scenes, but parents and guardians still expect you to perform your best whenever you’re onstage. Impressions, especially first impressions, are critical! Here’s how you can make sure yours is for the best.

Provide prompt service—with a smile. For grown-ups stopping in the office, waiting just two minutes to be helped can make them feel unvalued. Pause what you’re doing and assist them within 30 seconds of their arrival. If you’re on the phone, smile and wave to acknowledge their presence.

Create a welcoming environment. Is your office space bright and tidy? Is signage polite (think “please” rather than “you must”)? Is signage minimal so it doesn’t seem like you’d rather avoid conversation? The little things add up to the big things here!

Learn and use people’s names. Taking the time to learn names and use them in conversation does so much to make people feel valued. It’s a simple way to make every interaction feel more personal.

Parents and guardians don’t take the decision of where to send their children to school lightly. When you welcome, respect, and take care of them in the office, you give them every reason to believe the school will do the same for their children.
Out-of-building classrooms emerged, weather permitting, as options to increase air flow and space available for in-person learning. It’s another way to prevent the spread of disease, but so much more to kids who can integrate more movement and new enrichment into class.

Virtual classrooms may not be a first choice for every student, but for some they provide a welcome respite from challenges ranging from illness to transportation to social snafus. School leaders expect virtual options to stick around for at least the 2021-22 school year, and perhaps beyond.

Finally, the way school districts consider expanding building space has changed a bit out of necessity, but not in a detrimental way. Improving existing school buildings and converting existing real estate (think vacant big box stores) has served existing needs without waiting for new construction funds to be allocated by referenda. The environmental impacts of these decisions are worth noting, too.

The light at the end of the tunnel shines a little brighter every day, and it makes it easier to reflect on a handful of hard-won positives to emerge from the pandemic. These may not be universal truths, but some schools have unearthed opportunities from the past year’s challenges.

INCREASED ENGAGEMENT

When given the opportunity to connect through teacher conferences, traditionally parents could take it or leave it. After all, barriers to creating connections loomed large. Virtual school led naturally to virtual conferences, and the rest is history. One district even saw 100% attendance at one elementary school’s conferences!

Community engagement has bloomed, too, as residents realized the critical role schools play for families. A renewed interest in local elections bodes well for school-related ballot initiatives and board elections. And while that can bring on conflict, opposing viewpoints, and loud feedback, this supercharged engagement is still engagement.

FOCUS ON HEALTH AND HYGIENE

An important component of whole child education, the physical health of students (and staff!) has been tossed into the spotlight in ways we’ve never seen before. Schools have prioritized handwashing and sanitizing surfaces for the past year. Influenza numbers have trended down, possibly thanks to this increase in hygiene and adoption of mask wearing to stop the spray of fluids when people sneeze or cough. In addition, students who present any symptoms of illness have been required to stay out of school, whereas before many students would attend classes while ill.

These changes have been helpful for students who have healthy immune systems. However, students who live with chronic illnesses may benefit from the increased virtual options, which ensure they feel included in school when not physically able to attend classes in person.

Out-of-building classrooms emerged, weather permitting, as options to increase air flow and space available for in-person learning. It’s another way to prevent the spread of disease, but so much more to kids who can integrate more movement and new enrichment into class.

Virtual classrooms may not be a first choice for every student, but for some they provide a welcome respite from challenges ranging from illness to transportation to social snafus. School leaders expect virtual options to stick around for at least the 2021-22 school year, and perhaps beyond.

Finally, the way school districts consider expanding building space has changed a bit out of necessity, but not in a detrimental way. Improving existing school buildings and converting existing real estate (think vacant big box stores) has served existing needs without waiting for new construction funds to be allocated by referenda. The environmental impacts of these decisions are worth noting, too.

DESIGNING LEARNING SPACES

School used to refer to a building. Now it’s the connection to education options with a wider array of settings.

In-building classrooms have undergone some pretty momentous changes. Classrooms have more space for students to spread out, different room dividers (clear, to ensure a nice line of sight), and individual rather than shared resources and manipulatives. It drives home the concept that flexible seating is not just for show: the ability to create different zones and spaces within a classroom has made a difference for teaching in person.

The light at the end of the tunnel shines a little brighter every day, and it makes it easier to reflect on a handful of hard-won positives to emerge from the pandemic. These may not be universal truths, but some schools have unearthed opportunities from the past year’s challenges.
**Listening IS A SUPERPOWER**

Just as learning is much more than memorization, listening takes much more than being near someone who is talking. Let’s break down some components of active listening.

For the full article, visit skyward.com/blog and search “Listening Is a Superpower.”

Listen to learn, not to form a rebuttal

Even in an emotionally charged conversation, give your full focus to what's being said and then begin to form a response. A hasty answer can take up even more time in clarification than it would to respond carefully the first time.

Full attention, with managed expectations

Rather than splitting your attention between two important things, it's okay to admit you aren't able to listen at your full capacity and schedule a time to meet in the near future.

Confidentiality and trauma-informed listening

When listening to someone unwilling or unable to share openly, honor the person with patience, validation, and space to process. Explain the process of reporting abuse carefully, while assuring the speaker their private information will remain confidential.

Open-ended questions

You might be able to crack the facade of an unwilling speaker by choosing open-ended questions. Even starting with a more neutral or unrelated topic could ease the speaker into opening up.

A listening ear vs. advice sessions

Offering options, “Would you prefer I listen or would you like some feedback?” gives the speaker an opportunity to steer the conversation.

**QUICK PIVOTS AND DESIGN THINKING**

Let’s face it, decision making this past year and a half has occurred at an unsustainable pace. But that pace has revealed lessons we can take forward into post-pandemic planning, too. District leaders have been making new decisions weekly (if not daily), trying to pivot to the next step of reopening, hybrid, or mitigating staffing issues due to quarantine or lack of substitutes. Looking past the exhaustingly fast pace, this past year and a half has shifted decision making into an extremely active and dynamic role. Not only did decisions have to be made quickly, but they also had to be made well.

This agile approach to problem solving can make a difference when used in healthier circumstances.

**CHOICE AND CHERISHING SCHOOL**

Families had no shortage of decisions, either. Many families will still face choices when students enter school this fall. In-person, online, or hybrid learning options add a lot of logistics to school districts but going forward these options can be game-changers for families.

That’s probably why a survey of over 375 school districts and charter schools showed 20% already plan to offer virtual school options after the pandemic ends. Even though remote learning was not the golden ticket for every family, some students thrive in an environment that places more emphasis on individual study and less on social structures.

As we reflect on the highs and lows of the past year and a half, we see how much school matters to families. How much teachers’ hard work matters. How much the connections we build matter. If there’s just one good thing to come out of the pandemic, it’s that realization.

**STORY BY**

Erin Werra

To read more from Erin, visit www.skyward.com/blog

---

**HUMAN BINGO**

Each student gets a “human bingo” card and must find classmates that meet the descriptions in the boxes on their cards—for instance, “Has a brother.” The first student to fill all the boxes with names of their classmates wins!

**TIME CAPSULES**

Freeze a moment in time by asking students to complete sentences like “My favorite thing to do for fun is ______.” After sharing a few responses with their classmates, they’ll seal the questionnaire in an envelope and open it at the end of the year (or, if you can swing it, a few years later!)

**SERVICE DAY**

Set the tone for the new year with a service day. Kids will have fun making a difference in their community while meeting people they wouldn’t otherwise—community members, teacher and parent chaperones, and students from other classrooms and grade levels.

**BACK TO SCHOOL**

**ACTIVITIES TO HELP STUDENTS SETTLE IN**

There’s a lot for students to learn this year, and it begins with the people around them. Start the school year off right with these fun activitives!
Today’s youth (Generation Z, born after 1996) are more racially and ethnically diverse than any other generation of Americans. They represent a vast array of experiences. Not only are they dialed into current events thanks to their upbringing in the digital space, but they’re more self-aware, better informed, and more likely to speak up than previous generations. They’re also more likely to be engaged in education. It’s a powerful combination.

As students navigate their education, they’re also craving opportunities to make their mark on the world. What if that spirit of youthful activism was embraced, encouraged, pruned, and unleashed on the community? What can administrators and students achieve when they work together for the greater good of local families, causes, and challenges? Let’s explore.

NAME IT. DON’T TAME IT

Adults are still responsible for the adolescents around them. At times they can be wary of fanning the sparks of activism, lest it burst into an uncontrollable flame of extremism. This is why it’s so important to begin by acknowledging the connection between the two without stamping out the passion.

A lot of organization, education, and action begins in a digital space. Algorithms aren’t human and prefer to group like-minded folks together. It’s a crucial part of digital citizenship to learn the risks of allowing an echo chamber to take over. Regardless of any stand taken, someone will be around to object. That’s okay. Encourage students to be comfortable with dissent (not to be confused with disrespect). Respectful dissent is good, and it leads to growth. It doesn’t have to dissuade important work to improve the community. In fact, healthy progress isn’t possible without acknowledging the pros and cons to any action.

When students are passionate about causes, though, it can be difficult to encounter pushback. Help them practice listening to learn, not to form a rebuttal. Their aim must be to strengthen their own case rather than succumb to every argument.

FIND AND BUILD A TEAM

Once students are comfortable with the confident exchange of ideas, it’s time to solidify their concepts into a goal others can embrace too. There’s no reason to limit the possibilities of what student leaders can do, and as education leaders, you have just the right experience to help them.

Student leadership experience is invaluable. The ability to mobilize a movement doesn’t appear overnight (although it can come more easily to some people than to others). Instead, as students learn the work it takes to make a difference in their lives and others’, it can open their eyes to the value of people working on the local level to enact lasting change.

Some leadership concepts students can study include communication with multiple audiences, recruiting, delegating, conflict resolution, and again, active listening skills. These interpersonal skills, along with emotional intelligence, give students a leg up in their future job searches as well.

Other learning opportunities education leaders are uniquely poised to pass on include grant writing, producing learning materials, organizing breakout groups, and communication techniques used in teaching.

IDENTIFY AND PURSUE OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

Now that students have a cause in mind and a team to work, it’s time to find an opportunity to serve. Often the zest for life has students fired up to change the world on a global scale. This is also the point at which media representation reaches teen activists. But change starts at home, in backyards and school grounds and communities. And local organizations need help.

This is where education leaders can offer some gentle reality checks. Idealists dream of changing the world but may not know where to start. The ripples outward of investing time and service close to home quite literally do change the world, even if there’s no chyron on the evening news to accompany it.

Educators are unsung heroes. Who better to encourage the value of serving others without expecting accolades in return?


STORY BY
Erin Werra
To read more from Erin, visit www.skyward.com/blog
ACTIVISM BY THE NUMBERS

Are students getting more interested in politics and activism? The data suggests yes! Here's a closer look at where the passion is most prevalent and what students are fighting for.

**COLLEGES SEEING MORE APPLICATION ESSAYS ON POLITICAL ACTIVISM (2018)**

- Colleges that admit less than 50% of applicants: 58.3% increase
- Colleges that admit 50%-70% of applicants: 41.9% increase
- Colleges that admit 71%-85% of applicants: 23.5% increase
- Colleges that admit more than 85% of applicants: 18.2% increase

**COMMON DRIVERS OF ACTIVISM AT UNIVERSITIES (2015-2020)**

- Racial justice: 55%
- Political events/external speakers: 19%
- COVID-19 response: 7%
- Labor/worker rights: 6%
- Cost of attendance: 5%
- Gender rights/sexual assault: 4%
- Environmental action: 4%

**TRENDS SEEN BY HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS (2018)**

- Increased activism: 49.3% public, 57.8% private
- Expressions of disillusionment: 33.4% public, 37.4% private
- Improved attention to civility: 16.9% public, 29.6% private
- Increased considerations of colleges' political leanings: 11.4% public, 42.6% private
- Increased interest in colleges outside the U.S.: 5.0% public, 14.6% private

**GIVEAWAY**

One prize carries your scribbled thoughts. The other carries the coffee that powers them.

We’re giving away a hardcover notebook and a YETI tumbler to one lucky Advancing K12 reader. All you have to do is go online and fill out a short form telling us how you liked this magazine! Forms must be submitted by October 15, 2021. And while you’re there, be sure to subscribe to the Advancing K12 blog!

Yep, it’s that easy. Enter now at www.skyward.com/ak12magazine

No purchase necessary. Contest ends October 15, 2021 at 11:59 PM CT.
Could Virtual Conferences Double Parent Participation?

100% participation in parent/teacher conferences. Not just in one classroom, but in an entire elementary school.

Yes, you read that right. We were pleasantly surprised when a district CTO reported that statistic to us. What’s the catch? Rewards, prizes, drawings?

Nope, nothing quite so fancy. You see, all that district had to do was ditch miniature desks and marathon evenings for the comfort of each family’s own home.

The paradigm shift of virtual parent/teacher conferences has the potential for incalculable impacts on parent engagement. Here’s why we expect them to stick around even after we’re crowding into concert venues again.

The Benefits of Virtual Parent/Teacher Conferences Add Up Fast

1. Teachers AND families can meet without the commute. They’ll never know you’re wearing slippers and sweats.
2. No childcare needed. Meet after kids’ bedtime! Bring the baby! Send the kids to grandma’s! Order pizza! Anything goes!
3. Get students involved for part, then say goodbye. Grown-ups can send kids to play Fortnite for once, or off to an extra study session (you’ll know which one they’re going to choose).
4. No tiny chairs! Imagine: Conferences on the couch. (Go ahead and steal it.)
5. Parents can join from work. For parents working outside the home, one less place to be is cause for celebration.
6. Masks not needed. The virtual setting eliminates transmission of germs, and also allows for open communication, lip reading, and reading expressions or non verbal cues. For family members with auditory processing or hearing challenges, this can make a huge difference.
7. Recordkeeping is easier. Keep notes or capture a screen recording of important information to follow up on later.
8. Secure connections. Meeting in virtual spaces help to offer encryption, password protection, and other safety mechanisms.
9. Safety of school buildings. No need to invite new people into secure buildings to look around and learn the nooks and crannies.

But Set Expectations Before You Start

1. Set scheduling expectations. Surveys, conversations, and culture all play a role here. If teachers are okay with offering later sessions or using prep time, those decisions can create flexibility the way in-person conferences never could.
2. Security of devices. Don’t video chat on personal devices and never feel pressured to give out personal contact information. Use a blurred background or have a custom, branded virtual background available for teachers who may elect to offer conferences from a home office.
3. Set expectations for behavior of all parties. Set those boundaries and remember this is a brand-new world to families and staff alike. Learn as you go.
4. Like virtual class, be prepared for anything. If boundaries are crossed, the conference ends immediately.

When parents get involved with their child’s education, great things happen. The recent dive into virtual infrastructure means the stage is set for parents to join educators from wherever they might be, removing one large barrier to making that connection.

STORY BY
Erin Werra
To read more from Erin, visit www.skyward.com/blog
District reflects on successful implementation, overcoming big district challenges, and strong state reporting as a result of thriving relationship.

With a 51,000-student population, 8,500 employees, and 68 campuses, having the right student information system to operate efficiently is an absolute necessity. But ensuring that your solution is a true partner is perhaps just as essential to keeping things running smoothly.

For anyone who has worked in a large district, receiving strong customer support, having your voice heard, and knowing that your SIS provider is willing to accommodate your unique challenges through implementation and beyond is imperative.

Pasadena Independent School District in Pasadena Texas, about 25 minutes southeast of Houston, knew they would require some extra support from a partner who understood the unique needs of large districts and would work with them to achieve their goals. They soon found an SIS provider that was up to the challenge.

Beverly Whitton, PEIMS coordinator at Pasadena ISD, had worked with Skyward at a smaller district prior to Pasadena ISD. Due to her previous experience with the vendor, she advocated for the purchase of Skyward’s SIS solution. Three years later, Whitton and the district are not looking back, largely because of the ongoing support they continue to receive.
A New SIS Opportunity

Prior to switching to Skyward’s Qmlativ Student Management Suite, Pasadena ISD faced some issues with their software provider. One challenge was looking at data from a high level. District administrators had to switch campuses to look at data, rather than looking at it from a district-wide perspective. For a district with 68 campuses, this became difficult.

Another challenge was that their previous software required third-party software to do crucial tasks. One lacking feature was a grade book, which meant that the district had to purchase an additional system to manage grades and discipline. Another missing feature was one that managed the student health office, again requiring an outside system.

“It became frustrating to have to switch systems all of the time,” said Whitton. “Now we are able to have everything in one place, saving us loads of time and headaches. For example, the Skyward health module does away with the cost and support of our previous third-party health office system.”

When Pasadena ISD learned their previous software was going away, the district saw a perfect opportunity to begin looking for an SIS that better fit their needs.

Whitton took it upon herself to begin this search, with Skyward being at the top of her list. To convince others at Pasadena ISD who had never seen Skyward, Whitton began researching other districts in Texas to look at what software they were on and what if they would move to another product. She found that very few districts left Skyward after purchasing the product, while their Skyward project manager led them through the entire process.

To keep Pasadena ISD on track with their implementation, the district did many things to ensure a smooth process, starting with increased communication. Since Pasadena ISD implemented Qmlativ alongside two other Texas districts, North East ISD and Boerne ISD, the three often met to discuss the process.

Due to the size of the district, Pasadena ISD had some extra training sessions in which a Skyward trainer was always in the room. The district also had weekly and monthly calls with the Skyward team to address any outstanding issues.

The district also took it upon themselves to create some additional training opportunities for staff. One such project was creating a “Qmlativ Navigation 101” manual that covered specific ways to do tasks within the Skyward system to ensure consistent results throughout the district.

In addition, the district implemented the Knowledge Hub, a training repository within Skyward.

Finally, the district ramped up training before the first day of the 2018-2019 school year to solidify staff knowledge.

“Gearing up for the first day of school, we had a two-hour training session twice a day for several weeks to get everybody trained,” said Whitton.

By the beginning of the 2018-2019 school year, Pasadena ISD was up and running with Qmlativ, but the support from Skyward didn’t stop there. To ensure that things were working well at the district, Skyward’s implementation team continued to monitor and touch base for about a year afterwards.

Big District, Big Challenges

Before working at Pasadena ISD, Whitton worked in a smaller district, giving her insight on the differences between small versus large districts.

“Small districts sometimes have work-arounds that are easy to do because you can just go in and fix a few things, but at a large district, that is a lot harder to do,” said Whitton.

In addition, large districts require streamlined processes.

“In a large district, you don’t have time for long processes that you have to handle at the campus level,” said Whitton. “With 68 campuses, things need to be to be done at the district level. If I have to do something 68 times, it gets very time-consuming.”

Pasadena ISD struggled with this when they first came to Skyward, which has since been fixed.

“We explained our concerns to Skyward and they have made it where we can do a lot at the district level that we once had to do at the campus level,” said Whitton. “We worked through the kinks and we feel like we made the best decision by going with Skyward.”
Whitton stated that her favorite feature is the ability to filter data so she can easily find what she needs, drop it into a spreadsheet, and share it with other stakeholders. Better yet, once people receive the data, they can filter it even further if needed. Additionally, users can lock that data in so other users cannot run a new extract or modify any data. In a large district where data is being sent back and forth often, these capabilities are essential.

Another favorite of Whitton’s is the ability to schedule PEIMS extracts. During this extract process, most of the edits are validated. The district is also able to address a large number of errors before the files are validated within the state validation tools.

As a large district, Pasadena ISD’s reporting submissions usually take longer than others to build and extract. Whitton stated that their summer submission, which is usually the largest of the year, takes about two hours, which is great for the district’s size.

Some other capabilities that Whitton mentioned that she particularly enjoys and that make her job much easier include:

- The ability for users to mass update data and run any additional information needed, even before it is submitted.
- The no-show button, which gives the user the ability to configure when a student is a no-show then decide how the system classifies the information, allowing a one-click process when no-showing a student.
- Changing views and having multiple views, as well as the option to save views and go back to them if needed.

Whitton often networks and chats with other PEIMS coordinators, giving her insight to Skyward’s state reporting tools, which helps them eliminate reporting mistakes.

The other PEIMS coordinators and I often talk about state reporting issues that we are facing, and I don’t recall Skyward ever leaving us with a submission where they didn’t fix a specific issue required for a submission,” said Whitton.

Districts also faced many hurdles in the past year due to COVID-19, but Skyward kept ahead of the changes and adjustments districts needed to make when it came to reporting.

“This year has been challenging with COVID-19 and all of the remote attendance, and I really do believe that Skyward was on the front line with updates and how they were going to help us handle remote attendance,” said Whitton. “It was painful and challenging, but there was a lot that Skyward did, and they were able to stay ahead of the game. Not everyone can say that about their product.”

Support Doesn’t Stop at Implementation

Although Pasadena ISD’s Qmlativ system is well-established after three years of use, there are still some improvements and adjustments to make.

“Skyward is always there to help us tweak things in our system,” said Whitton. “Our district was able to use a product owner throughout our implementation, and they were great about meeting with us often and letting us know about easier ways for us to do certain tasks.”

Additionally, Skyward reaches out to districts for feedback when new tools and features are being considered.

“As Skyward makes changes or enhancements, they are really good at contacting the user and asking, ‘Can we show you what we want to do? Can you give us any feedback? Do you have any better suggestions?’” said Whitton.

For other districts considering a switch to Qmlativ, Whitton’s biggest suggestion is to be open to changes.

“Since I was used to Skyward’s SMS 2.0 product, when Pasadena ISD first started looking at Qmlativ, I didn’t like it because it wasn’t what I was used to,” said Whitton. “Eventually I started liking Qmlativ more, and now I love it.”

Now that Whitton and Pasadena ISD are fully committed to Qmlativ, they are advocates for others.

“I tell the people using SMS 2.0 that although there will be some kinks to work out in the beginning, Qmlativ will be worth your time,” said Whitton. “There are so many more features in Qmlativ than are available in SMS 2.0.”

“Qmlativ is now a product that is ready for other districts to start benefiting from as well.”

**It became frustrating to have to switch systems all of the time. Now we are able to have everything in one place, saving us loads of time and headaches.**

- District PEIMS Coordinator, Beverly Whitton
10 Ways to Reduce Eyestrain

Share these tips with the students and families at your district to help prevent eyestrain!

1. Check screen positioning. A computer should be about 25 inches away, and the center of the screen should be about 10–15 degrees below eye level.

2. Take long and short breaks. Follow the 20-20-20 rule: every 20 minutes of screen time, look 20 feet away for at least 20 seconds. It’s also best to take a longer break of about 15 minutes every 2 hours.

3. Don’t forget to blink. During those 20-second breaks, blink 10 times. This will compensate for the tendency to blink less when looking at a screen.

4. Increase size. Zoom in on documents and webpages or decrease your screen resolution to make a broad change across all programs.

5. Increase contrast. Increasing the display contrast makes it easier for your eyes to take in what’s onscreen.

6. Schedule a night shift. Computers’ night shift capability turns the screen a hue of yellow to help users sleep soundly when it’s time for bed.

7. Check the lighting. The best lighting is approximately the same brightness as your screen. Avoid bright lights behind your screen and directly overhead.

8. Check the air quality. If you own a humidifier, consider setting it up near your workspace to help prevent dry eyes.

9. Block the blue light. Blue light glasses haven’t been studied extensively, but users often say they get fewer headaches when they wear them. Alternatively, you can set your night shift to be on all day.

10. Encourage kids to get away from screens. For kids learning remotely, projects that don’t require screens are the best solution. Even better, get them up and moving!

For the full article, visit skyward.com/blog and search “10 Ways to Prevent Eyestrain During eLearning.”

WHAT A DIFFERENCE A YEAR MAKES.

Things are looking rosier this fall as more schools gather in person, but re-emerging can bring its own set of worries. With the proper software support, though, schools can continue to process data and documentation remotely. Let’s explore six tools a worthy SIS can offer to keep communication flowing while minimizing risk as the pandemic winds down.

BUILT-IN SCREENERS

Although third-party solutions and paper options remain, health screening tools built right into a student information system can’t be beat. Ensure students and families have access to this tool for pre-screening before arriving in the classroom or at other events. Teachers and administrative staff can create records when symptoms arise at school and track which families need to quarantine after positive cases. By keeping all the data in one secure location, these records meet both FERPA and HIPAA requirements.
PAPERLESS SCANNING
Staff and families alike benefit from touchless options. Two main uses of paper mean the switch to paperless scanning is a huge slam dunk. Hiring new candidates remotely may sound like a headache, but there are some silver linings. As candidates move through the process, submitting documentation online saves both time and paper, while still creating a compliant set of documentation.

Accounts payable and invoices also present an opportunity to move payment online without losing the so-called paper trail. ePayables, online purchase orders, and online accounts payable are all housed within enterprise resource planner (ERP) software. The security of your software can help detect and prevent fraud while making it easier (and more environmentally sound) to pay bills.

VIRTUAL CONFERENCES
As more students return to classrooms, it’s still helpful to keep anyone out who doesn’t absolutely need to be in the building. Visitors, including parents, can connect with teachers using remote conferences. Whether a public offering like Google Meets or Zoom, or eLearning specific, these remote conferences have increased participation rates as parents join from home or from work. More parent engagement? We’ll take it.

COURSE SELECTION WITH ARENA SCHEDULING
When students select their own courses and build their own schedules, the benefits last for a generation. Students not only take on some of the burden of building schedules, but they learn valuable time management and agency skills. They must create a schedule that meets graduation requirements, but they also have an opportunity to create one that enriches their interests and social calendar.

NEW STUDENT ONLINE ENROLLMENT
Pandemic or not, families are moving into new districts and schools. The paperwork used to require the sacrifice of a tree or two—not so with online registration. This also cuts down on trips to the main office to drop off proof of residency and identifying documentation. Similar to new hires, new students can submit scanned copies of documentation securely. The enrollment process then flows into scheduling, fees, and any other registration task, all housed in the same SIS. All this occurs with as few touches as possible, minimizing the flow of germs along with paper.

BUILT-IN PD
It’s never too late to figure out the specific professional development options your vendors offer. From tips for daily tasks to in-depth data migration support, it may come as a surprise that vendors offer no-cost PD for users. While it’s true these options can get left out of initial integration conversations, it never hurts to check in to see if there are regular training updates, help centers, user communities, or other professional development options.

STORY BY
Erin Werra
To read more from Erin, visit www.skyward.com/blog

To read more from Erin, visit www.skyward.com/blog
Your hiring process—even from the initial job posting—tells applicants a lot about your culture, processes, and responsiveness.

Does your process tell your district’s story the way you want people to hear it?

CULTURE
Legal requirements for job postings take precedence over tone, but how the audience views your advertisements can give them clues into your culture.

Are your job postings upbeat?
If your job postings are just a laundry list of tasks, inject some personality in there! The way your job postings are written can tell candidates a lot about your culture, processes, and responsiveness.

Where do you post?
Where are your candidates looking? This is a straightforward question to ask during the new hire process. Once you know where most candidates look, take the opportunity to make some improvements. And once that source is looking ship-shape, branch out to where you’d like to land some new interest, including social job sites, workplace review sites, and other digital outlets.

Do your postings answer questions about the role and the setting?
Top-performing candidates are looking for places to set down strong roots and grow, so include leadership opportunities. If challenges exist in the upcoming role, be open about them as much as is appropriate (maybe saving some nuance for conversations). If a position is brand new, add that too. Transparency is important.

Does your careers page include your district’s history, points of pride, local landmarks, current branding, vision, and mission?
Your community is an extension of your district, especially for candidates who are relocating. There’s no need to reinvent the wheel, but link out to a local chamber of commerce, parks and recreation, and other local gems. Candidates will take stock of these community attributes during their job search.

Your district’s brand and defining messages can also offer culture clues for new hires. Include your claims to fame, links to your social media, and other branding cornerstones right on your careers page for easy perusal.

PROCESS
Process blindness happens to even the greatest teams, so it takes a keen and self-aware eye to audit from the inside. New hire surveys about recent hirings might sound helpful, but unless they’re highly anonymized or sent out well beyond the probationary period, results might skew a bit rosier than reality. It’s always nice to hear upbeat feedback, but the honest and constructive criticism is hard to come by from an excited new hire.

Measurable questions can kick off the analysis.

How long does hiring take, from posting to departmental onboarding?
Backtrack through a few recent hires to take stock of time stamps of your team’s actions and the new hire’s actions. Map the general timeline of an average new hire journey. If possible, compare it to other districts’ hiring processes—particularly since these neighboring districts may be vying for the same applicants.

Do applicants receive an agenda or timeline, so they know what to expect?
A culture of transparency starts early. This also keeps your team accountable and informed. Candidates will appreciate an itinerary of next steps, and it will cut down on calls to the main office asking if a decision has been made.

What sort of automation is in place?
Even small tasks add up to hours spent on data entry and management. Automation not only saves your staff valuable time they can use to focus on other tasks, it also guarantees all applicants enjoy the same high-quality pre-hire experience. The hiring process is highly regulated, and automation can simplify those complicated processes while ensuring compliance.

Portal communication with email notifications
The portal gives everyone a secure, central location to communicate within, but backup notifications sent to a regular email address ensure that nothing is missed along the way. There’s no way to guarantee every applicant is willing to download a brand-new app for a career portal, so ensure web support on mobile is up to industry standards. Ask applicants to add your email address to their safe sender’s list to bypass any spam filters.

One-way interviews
This high-tech HR strategy can cut down on the hours spent fielding initial interviews. Learn the ropes and decide if it’s the appropriate move for your culture. A tech-savvy district usually has little to fear, and in fact, those who object to tech-driven applicant engagement might self-select out anyway.

Follow-up for candidates not moving forward
The portal turns the time-consuming, but still important, task of following up with a decline into an automated process. Candidates still get closure, but your team can focus on the candidates still in the hiring pool.

RETAINING DOCUMENTATION
Document retention laws cover not only successful candidates, but applicants who aren’t hired.

Plan to keep a non-hire’s application for one year, and you may want to include interview notes. It’s the law in many places, but it’s also a good failsafe in case your new hire doesn’t work out.

New hire applications need to transfer to the employee personnel file, since pre-employment documentation needs to be retained along with employment documentation. Save staff time on manual entry by ensuring hiring systems flow freely into employee records.

Security and backups for hiring documentation can be lumped in with other HR documentation. What’s your current backup process? There’s never a better time to reevaluate in case of a ransomware attack.

Data mining can help you identify trends among your current high-performers and form a stronger hiring team. Create reports to look for trends in educational background, certifications, skills, or even which department managers have the best track record for hiring.
This past year, K12 schools became the top targets of ransomware attacks. In August and September 2020, districts accounted for 57% of reported ransomware attacks. You know the threat is out there, but is your district prepared?

COSTS OF PROACTIVE SECURITY
Nothing worth having is free. Create a strong plan when things are going well and you’ll be grateful if disaster strikes.

SECURITY TEAMS
Brilliant teams are run by people, not by machines. Salary, training, and planning fall under this category.

Has your security team grown in proportion with ransomware risks? According to CoSN’s 2020 EdTech Leadership survey, 69% of districts say they are proactive or very proactive—but less than 20% of respondents had a dedicated full-time employee responsible for cybersecurity. 46% listed it as a shared responsibility, 30% “part of the job,” and 10% ad-hoc. This means an overwhelming majority of school districts run the risk of cybersecurity missteps or passing the buck.

One study by ISC², a professional IT organization, shows over 4 million cybersecurity jobs are unfilled worldwide. Not only is this a potential blind spot, but it’s an opportunity for students pursuing STEM and computer science fields.

BACKUP SERVICES
Know your data recovery options. Data hosting services may offer multiple options for backup and recovery, but multiple data centers should be a priority. Whether hosting offsite or in person, frequent backups are crucial.

SINGLE SIGN-ON
Humans creating passwords is one of the weakest points of any network. Single sign-on uses multiple strategies to strengthen security, as well as makes logging on to the many, many different edtech solutions any given district relies on much easier.

TRAINING PROGRAMS
Constant vigilance is easier when training prompts frequent reminders. Your team members all possess wildly different levels of tech savviness—even the most grizzled veterans of the computer sciences benefit from security training updates. Security training creates a unified set of standards for everyone to follow and may even give you a baseline set of data, so you know where to add training.

CRISIS COMMUNICATION TEMPLATES
Hope for the best, prepare for the worst, and create templates when the worst is yet to come. Readers will appreciate calm, collected communication more than a slapdash letter in the event of a data breach.

A PLAN FOR RECOVERY
What will you do in the event of a breach? If you’re deciding under pressure, you run the risk of missteps. Businesses that have reported taking some time to analyze the data breach saved nearly $100 per record.

COST OF REACTIVE SECURITY
Now let’s imagine none of the previous planning has taken place. What’s at risk? Besides the possibility of losing access to systems, revealing personal identifiable information, and community backlash, let’s explore the costs of reacting instead of planning.

RANSOM
While the FBI does not recommend paying ransom, some organizations have done it. Ransom prices have increased as time goes on, and different hackers demand various prices—ranging from $10,000 to hundreds of thousands of dollars.

REACTIVE RECOVERY TIME
Teams put off or avoid planning for a data breach because they’re busy. Think of it this way: in the event of a breach, there’s no choice but to react, and react quickly. Those reactions are not going to be as careful, thorough, or effective, but they will be much more expensive. Systems paralyzed by a data breach may cause downtime that stretches on for days, leading to huge enforced downtime costs—up to 20 times higher than average ransom requests.

IDENTITY MONITORING
Organizations may choose to offer their employees credit or identity theft monitoring services post-breach. Typical costs range from $10–30 per person affected. Multiplied by the number of individual records and a school district’s long-term records retention, the number can skyrocket.

REPUTATION
You work hard to earn and keep your community’s trust. Hackers may have tricks to circumvent safeguards, but with thorough and proactive planning they won’t undo this precious work. Your district’s reputation extends to include families’ trust. Your reputation helps retain phenomenal employees, attracts the next round of amazing talent, and builds a strong school culture.

LEGAL SETTLEMENTS AND FINES
Violations of privacy laws like FERPA carry their own legal costs that suck precious dollars out of your budget fast. It’s not worth it, when you can instead devote some time and energy to a proactive cybersecurity plan.

Your district’s data is worth the effort.

STORY BY
Erin Werra
To read more from Erin, visit www.skyward.com/blog

ADVANCING K12
2928
ADVANCING K12
“The office of the future.”

That’s what the paperless office was dubbed in 1975, the first time it was predicted—long before computers sat on every desktop and lessons in keyboard skills eclipsed lessons in cursive. Yet while some school districts have shifted to executing processes electronically, others continue printing off stacks of papers like it’s going out of style. (Spoiler alert: It is.)

Why the reluctance to modernize? Likely it’s because districts fear overhauling a tried-and-true method will be stressful, or even impossible. But it doesn’t have to be! The truth is, your “district of the future” doesn’t have to be entirely paperless. It can simply use paper less.

Traditionally, perks of going digital have included saved time, money, and trees; but now, a new reason to cut back on paper has been shuffled into the mix. Districts need to view, use, and share information without having to physically touch it—a juggling kind of like The Floor Is Lava, except with papers and higher stakes and way less fun.

Whether you crave the usual benefits of reducing paper or this new normal has thrust innovation upon you, don’t let the pressure of “going digital” get to you. Here are a few simple ways to get started!

**PARENT PORTALS**

Keeping parents and guardians engaged in their children’s education has never been more important, especially for schools teaching remotely. Your parent portal is one of your most valuable assets.

Often, we think of parent portals in terms of transparency; grown-ups have online access to information like attendance, grades, and missing assignments. But that’s only the beginning. You can also use your parent portal to have guardians fill out forms, pay fees, even register for the new year. (More on these in a moment.)

Aside from eliminating paper and speeding up processes, this is a much more reliable—and secure—way of accomplishing these tasks than sending kids to school with a form or check in hand. It also eliminates the need for grown-ups to stop in the office, which is key in our current environment.

**ONLINE FORMS**

We just suggested putting forms online—but what does that look like, exactly?

Well, it can look like just about anything if your SIS allows for customization. On the student side of things, these forms could include field trip waivers, free and reduced lunch applications, or parent/guardian custodial forms. On the business side, it might be health records, employees’ direct deposit and emergency contact information, contracts for review, or assignment and/or documentation of required trainings. These are just a few examples—the sky is the limit!

E-signatures are just as legal as the ones scribbled onto paper, so there should be no legal restrictions on what you can move online. Even documentation, like proof of residency, can be scanned and included on these forms.

**HEALTH SURVEYS**

This one would have looked odd on a list a couple years ago, but as it is, daily wellness checks have become a necessity for schools meeting in person. Some software providers have created short health surveys for students or their grown-ups to fill out before coming to school each morning to help ensure individuals entering school buildings are healthy. Administrators can then run survey reports, including to identify individuals who have not completed the survey, those who did not pass, or to look for hotspots within their districts.

Taking advantage of this online process can be a faster, easier, and more informative alternative to tracking symptoms on paper.

**LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS (LMS)**

For some schools this year, passing papers around a classroom just isn’t an option. A learning management system, or LMS, allows you to move class notes, video lectures, assignments, quizzes, tests, and pretty much anything else online.

If your SIS can integrate with your LMS, even better! This will save teachers from having to manually enter data into their gradebooks and ensure grades are always accurate and up to date.

**ELECTRONIC PAYMENTS**

From paying vendors to reimbursing employees, most payment processes can be done quickly and securely online.

In this age, most vendors should give you the option to pay electronically. Bills can be emailed to your district office, and payments can be made online. If you have the right software, expense reimbursements within your district can go digital too. The process would look something like this: first, employees submit their requests online. Then, administrators review and approve the expenses. Finally, those reimbursements are directly deposited into the employees’ designated accounts.

**CLOUD STORAGE**

If you’ve yet to store your data in that billowy blanket of the sky, there’s never been a better time.

Not only does cloud storage zap warehouses of filing cabinets into redundancy, but it’s also secure, takes up no space, and allows you to access data from anywhere (ideal in a remote or semi-remote environment).

Plus, regular backups ensure your data will always be safe if disaster strikes. This is especially important right now. Cyberattacks, particularly ransomware attacks, have skyrocketed over the course of the pandemic.

**A SMALLER FOOTPRINT**

Is going 100% paperless possible? Perhaps—but if it doesn’t feel realistic for your district, don’t throw in the (paper) towel.

Steps to reduce paper usage, whether big or small, are all steps in the right direction.

To read more from Caroline, visit www.skyward.com/blog

**STORY BY**

Caroline Gilchrist

To read more from Caroline, visit www.skyward.com/blog

**ADVANCING K12**