

Using Online Solutions to Overcome the Challenges of Traditional Lesson Planning Systems

Overview

When properly prepared and implemented, lesson plans help ensure instructional quality and consistency and overall educational effectiveness. Lesson plans establish learner objectives (typically aligned with the No Child Left Behind Act and other goals), identify procedures to follow, specify any necessary prerequisites and indicate any materials that are needed. Lesson plans ideally enable any teacher with knowledge in a particular subject to deliver a lesson about that subject without needing to contact the author/teacher for clarification.

While lesson planning is generally undertaken with the best of intentions, it is nevertheless a process that is at times encumbered by a number of different obstacles. These include limitations imposed by some paper-based systems, the demands of the No Child Left Behind Act and inherent communication challenges in attempting to create a smoothly functioning, “closed loop” system, especially related to the needs of curriculum directors and principals.

To address these and other challenges, educators need to consider solutions that connect all stakeholders—especially curriculum directors, principals and teachers but also parents and students—within a single system. These solutions should empower teachers to create effective, standards-based lesson plans that can easily be put into practice, shared with administrators and other teachers, and modified for future use.

Current challenges of lesson planning

Currently school districts across the country are challenged to varying degrees by a range of factors in attempting to improve lesson planning. These factors include:

The No Child Left Behind Act. NCLB has established standards that all public schools must meet, which has resulted in schools increasingly teaching to these standards both to improve student achievement and to meet accountability requirements. These developments have created a need for streamlined processes, including improved lesson planning.

Classroom observations related to lesson planning. A key weakness of some lesson plans is that they don’t clearly specify what teachers intend to teach or

what they have taught, especially related to standards. As a result, principals struggle to conduct classroom observations that allow them to determine true educational effectiveness.

Limitations of paper-based lesson planning systems. Most formal lesson planning systems are paper-based and are vulnerable to creating mushrooming paper trails that can bog down efficiency, hinder communication and ultimately compromise educational effectiveness.

Teacher accountability with lesson plan implementation. In some school districts, there is a lack of formal checkpoints or a system to ensure that teachers follow through with the objectives specified in their lesson plans.

An idealized vision of lesson planning: A closed loop system that ensures educational effectiveness

Lesson planning is one of any number of measures used by school districts to improve classroom instruction. Ideally, the lesson planning process starts with curriculum leaders developing scope and sequence for each individual grade and subject. Then they distribute curriculum to teachers, and will often include guidance, best practices and lesson plan examples.

After reviewing the curriculum, teachers will create a personalized lesson plan for the year that includes goals and objectives, procedures, material requirements and other details. At the elementary level especially, this can involve collaborating with other teachers to create shared lesson plans. Teachers then turn in lesson plans to their supervisor (the principal, assistant principal or department head) for review and approval. Once approved, teachers follow the plan in the course of delivering instruction each week.

The challenge: The loop is weakened by breakdowns

Unfortunately, lesson planning often does not work according to the above scenario. First of all, teachers frequently find it difficult to adequately absorb curriculum or to access standards, particularly with paper-based systems. Also, because of the sheer document load that is created once all of the lesson plans are submitted in a paper-based system, supervisors at times struggle to efficiently review and comment on these plans.

Another weakness with some lesson planning systems is that it's hard for teachers and principals to efficiently identify what has been taught cumulatively during the school year vs. what needs to be taught according to district curriculum and/or state standards. What's more, these same situations can adversely impact the value and significance of classroom observations when principals or other individuals struggle to understand what standards have been

taught vs. which ones have not. Complicating the situation is the fact that teachers don't always follow through and teach the objectives in their plans.

In short, current lesson planning systems do not always work despite the best intentions of teachers, principals and other staff. While school districts want to demonstrate success by showing annual yearly progress and improved student education, the fact is that instances of wasted resources and compromised educational effectiveness continue to occur as a result of weaknesses in some systems.

The promise of online lesson planning tools

Compared to the limitations of some lesson planning systems, online lesson planning tools are showing considerable promise by successfully bringing together all stakeholders into the same system. Online tools are designed to close the lesson planning loop by:

- Making it easy for curriculum directors to clearly communicate objectives and best practices so that teachers can easily insert them into their lesson plans.
- Enabling teachers to participate in collaborative lesson planning and enjoy greater access to best practices while reducing paperwork.
- Creating opportunities for teachers to see their colleagues' lesson plans and learn to fine-tune their own to balance student workloads.
- Generating reports for principals that show for each teacher which subjects have been covered and which have not, which allows for real-time management and making course corrections *during* the school year.
- Offering a way for all participating stakeholders—including curriculum directors, teachers, principals, parents and students—to easily verify which subjects and topics specified in the plan have been taught or will be taught.

The benefits of online lesson planning

Online lesson planning systems help educators succeed by turning the lesson planning process into a powerful tool for improving instruction and learning. They help teachers create planned activities and assignments that can be easily shared with students and parents in addition to curriculum leaders and principals. As a result, teachers save time and eliminate the need to duplicate their efforts by entering the same information in multiple places.

What to look for in evaluating an online lesson planning tool

An optimally performing online lesson planning tool is one that succeeds in seamlessly bringing together all stakeholders—curriculum directors, teachers and principals especially—into the same system. What’s more, it empowers districts and schools by allowing:

- Curriculum leaders to efficiently publish and share curriculum.
- Teachers to easily see which standards need to be addressed.
- Districts to successfully combine standards, curriculum/classroom objectives, and student/parent/colleague access in one system.
- Teachers to access best-practices in collaboratively developing more effective lesson plans.
- Principals to see very clearly what curriculum has been covered and what has not been covered *before* testing.

How it works

The critical advantage of online lesson planning tools is that they bring together all key stakeholders into the same system to help positively impact instruction. What is especially notable is how they empower the three critical participants in the process: curriculum directors, teachers and principals.

Curriculum directors – direct standards selection:

- Create lesson plan templates.
- Highlight standards to be covered in a specific time period.
- Run reports on teachers’ coverage of curriculum.
- Share exemplary instructional methods by grade, subject or standard.

Teachers – easily create, share and submit plans:

- Easily align plans to targeted standards.
- Point-and-click to submit plans.
- Receive feedback and make improvements.
- Share planned activities and assignments with students and parents.

Principals – analyze standards coverage and review plans:

- Quickly track all submitted plans.
- Review and comment on individual plans.
- Report on teachers’ coverage of standards and identify gaps.
- Eliminate the need for lesson plan papers, books, files, etc.

Conclusion

Currently a number of schools nationwide have implemented online lesson planning tools. While it is too early to draw any statistically significant conclusions, their experiences so far are largely positive and point to the considerable advantages that these tools offer for successfully impacting instruction.

About eChalk, Inc.

Founded in 1999 and headquartered in New York City, eChalk is committed to helping schools succeed by providing online communication tools that support leadership, teaching and learning. With eChalk's safe and secure environment, every school and district community member has appropriate access to event calendars, homework assignments, school board meeting minutes, online discussions, resources, student grades, and other information that helps K-12 schools to achieve their learning and instructional goals.

Contact

For more information about online lesson planning tools, contact Ann Findlay, senior vice president of sales at eChalk, at (800) 809-3349.