Success Story

**Redbird Professional Learning** Helps Meriden Public Schools Embrace Blended Learning and Transform Its Classrooms

**About the District**

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**Overview**

Meriden Public Schools is an urban school district located in the center of Connecticut, halfway between Boston to the north and New York City to the south. The district serves eight elementary schools, two middle schools, two high schools, and three alternative programs.

In 2012, a statewide assessment revealed that Meriden was included in a number of public schools in Connecticut in need of improvement. Specifically, John Barry Elementary School had some of the lowest test scores in the state and risked the possibility of being taken over by the State Department of Education. The district hired a new principal and turned over 50 percent of its teaching staff, but Superintendent Mark Benigni, Ed. D. knew they needed to do more across the district.
The district wanted to introduce a 1:1 classroom device initiative, but also knew that teachers needed a solid background in blended learning to make it successful. Ultimately, this initiative transformed teaching and learning in Meriden’s schools, and Redbird Professional Learning from McGraw-Hill Education played an integral role in the transformation.

Implementation

Around this time, the Assistant Superintendent of Meriden Public Schools attended a conference at Stanford University where he was introduced to Redbird Professional Learning. He thought it was a great match for Meriden schools because the courses help teachers develop the skills they need to facilitate success in blended learning classrooms.

In 2015, the district purchased licenses for the entire staff at John Barry Elementary. That summer, administrators also prepared to roll out their blended learning initiative for the following school year by attending what school leaders described as “Blended Learning 101.”

“When we rolled out the initiative, some teachers experienced trepidation, while others were eager to begin,” says Susan Moore, Supervisor of Blended Learning. “Redbird Professional Learning helped differentiate professional development, so those who felt comfortable could stretch themselves and move ahead, and others could take it slower.”

Lauren St. Jernquist, a first-grade teacher at John Barry, was eager for the first full rollout. She was already interested in using technology, and was excited to integrate it into her class.

“We already shared a Chromebook cart and we had some iPads, but we were not yet 1:1,” says St. Jernquist. “Redbird Professional Learning showed us how to integrate technology without wondering ‘How am I going to use this?’ or ‘How are students going to use this?’ [It] was conducive to fitting tech into my curriculum and everyday lessons.”

In Meriden, student engagement began with teacher engagement. As 1:1 technology was introduced, teachers were challenged to reimagine their classrooms to support blended learning. Fortunately, they had strong support from school administrators and from Redbird Professional Learning.

“Some teachers had flexibility in their schedules and could build professional development into their day,” says Barbara Haeffner, Director of Curriculum and Instructional Technology in Meriden Public Schools. “John Barry leveraged its extended learning time of 100 minutes a day to work in Redbird Professional Learning to advance blended learning knowledge.”

To ensure retention and focused engagement, Redbird Professional Learning delivers each course as a 20-minute block of learning called a “tile.” Meriden school leaders created a professional development completion schedule that required teachers and administrators to complete specific tiles and choose others that piqued their interests. On Thursday afternoons, students are dismissed early, allowing teachers to focus on their professional learning, including reviewing their tiles and asking questions.
The course modules, combined with the leaderboard that tracks points teachers earn for achievements, formed the foundation for Meriden teachers and administrators to learn and collaborate.

According to Moore, “Some teachers were very engaged and completed all of the modules. It became a friendly competition, and we used the leaderboard and incentives to encourage them. Both administrators and teachers did a great job.”

Krista Scalo is the Math, Literacy, and Technology (MLT) and Technology Integration Specialist at Benjamin Franklin Elementary in Meriden. She was still teaching first grade at John Barry Elementary when the school went 1:1 with Chromebooks.

“There was a lot of effort spent planning and figuring out what to do,” she recalls, “and a lot of people thought the K-2 students were too young for technology. I said, ‘Not true!’ and just went with it. When I started using Redbird Professional Learning, I thought, ‘I can do this!’.”

Scalo was recognized as an “I’m Charged” educator for going above and beyond with technology. Scalo, who started in a low-tech classroom, was proactive about using Redbird Professional Learning as she gained confidence in blended learning.

“After the first module, “Introduction to Blended Learning,” I kept using Redbird Professional Learning to drive my own progress,” says Scalo. “It helped me create truly integrated projects with student choice, not just assignments on the computer.”

Even at their young age, Scalo’s students immediately took to the new technology. “These days, tech is innate, so children naturally gravitate toward it. I had no behavior issues, because my students were doing what they enjoyed while demonstrating learning. They were actually asking to do activities again.”

St. Jernquist had a similar experience with her first-grade students. The students were excited to use the technology, and she saw fewer behavioral problems and increased motivation.

St. Jernquist recommends Redbird Professional Learning for teachers who are nervous about using technology to engage students.

“Redbird Professional Learning answers questions you don’t know you have,” she says. “It will be worth it when you have a notebook of technology plans that you know connect to the curriculum.”

Results

Barbara Haeffner believes the greatest benefit of implementing blended learning is that students become creators rather than passive learners.

“Redbird Professional Learning gave our teachers the built-in supports to be successful,” says Haeffner. “It was extremely valuable for students to have teachers with this experience, and it was eye-opening for administrators.”

More importantly, students in Meriden made astounding progress. In 2012, John Barry Elementary was almost taken over by the state. In 2017, it was recognized by the International Center for Leadership in Education as a model school for making dramatic and innovative improvements.
“It was amazing to go from having some of the lowest scores in the state to being recognized as a top model school,” says St. Jernquist.

Due to its impressive transformation, Meriden has been featured on websites including Edutopia and in publications such as EdTech magazine.

“We were so happy to have a resource like Redbird Professional Learning to support our efforts and calm the fears of a 1:1 rollout,” says Moore. “Teachers and administrators could engage with the program without embarrassment and go back to it any time. The information is delivered in bite-sized chunks of information, so it was manageable in terms of how much time our educators had to spend.”

**The Future**

As the transformation to 1:1 has progressed, Meriden now uses Redbird Professional Learning only as a support for new teachers, yet Haeffner highly recommends the program because it is user-friendly, easy to implement, and the content is extremely relevant.

St. Jernquist whole-heartedly agrees. “Redbird Professional Learning is a great program. It doesn’t take a lot of time because it blends into PD, and it is individualized to the needs of the teacher,” she says.

Scalo believes it helped her progress from teaching first-grade to taking on her current hybrid role as MLT and Technology Integration Specialist.

“Redbird Professional Learning was a starting point for where I am in my career,” she says. “It gave me the confidence to think, ‘I can do this,’ and it initiated my love of tech. It made me comfortable in a 1:1 environment, and I’m not sure I would be so technology and student-choice driven without it.”

“We looked at a number of different products,” recalls Moore, “We chose Redbird Professional Learning because it does a great job of identifying best practices from many different resources, and it allows teachers to progress at their own pace. It was the right choice for Meriden Public Schools.”

**About Redbird Professional Learning**

Originally developed by the Graduate School of Education at Stanford University, Redbird Professional Learning is a research-based professional development program that immerses educators in a highly personalized, virtual learning environment where they discover how to use technology and blended learning strategies to shift their instruction.

Redbird Professional Learning is part of a suite of research-based programs, originally developed by Stanford University, that includes Redbird Mathematics (Grades K–6) and Redbird Language Arts & Writing (Grades 2–7), both digital personalized learning programs that are widely adopted in elementary classrooms.

Tiles break learning down into bite-sized chunks of content.

To learn more about Redbird Professional Learning, visit: redbirdlearning.com