Fontbonne Hall Academy embraces student-led instruction using Google Apps for Education, Classroom and Chromebooks

Organization

Fontbonne Hall Academy, located at the foot of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge in Brooklyn, New York, has been educating women in grades 9 through 12 since 1937. The Catholic college preparatory school's mission is to offer a superior educational program while forming and empowering young women with competence, confidence and compassion. The tight-knit, supportive environment that the school has created is clear to students, teachers and visitors: Director of Technology Mark Surdyka describes Fontbonne as "a little family."

Challenge

Mary Ann Spicijaric, the school's principal, and Surdyka both arrived at Fontbonne in summer 2013. What they found, from a technology standpoint, was "a school that looked like it was 1993, not 2013," Surdyka says. "The PCs were out of date, and there was almost no Wi-Fi coverage. We had one room where the kids went for computer class – but outside of that, they used paper notebooks and pens for lessons. They couldn't use a laptop or tablet, even if they wanted to."

Despite the lack of technology, Spicijaric and Surdyka had big plans for Fontbonne – they saw that bringing collaborative and empowering tools to classrooms could help students take charge of their own learning. "Teachers didn't know there were all these other options out there," Surdyka says.

In looking at the options, Surdyka sought devices and software that were easy to use, offered flexibility for teachers and were affordable – which led him to **Google for Education**. "We don't have the state funds that public schools receive," Surdyka explains. "And we don't have a huge IT staff – it's just me."

Solution

The first step: signing up faculty, staff, and students for **Google Apps for Education**, and giving everyone a Gmail address. "[Gmail] gives teachers and students a better way to communicate with each other – it's much better than texting, which is what they were doing," Surdyka says. Texting would require teachers to keep track of student cell phone numbers, whereas Google Apps offers access to email addresses, class assignments and document creation tools, all in one place.

Once teachers and students understood how to use Google Apps – testing it on their own devices as well as the PCs in Fontbonne's computer lab – Spicijaric and Surdyka introduced Chromebooks to the teachers. "They loved the fact that they were small and portable," Surdyka says.

At the same time Surdyka was introducing teachers and students to Google Apps, Fontbonne began testing **Google Classroom**, which helps teachers organize class assignments and communicate with students. "I'll be honest – I was fearful," Spicijaric says. "But I wanted to seize the opportunity." Surdyka agrees: "We were nervous about starting Google Apps and Classroom all at once. But it was probably better to do it this way with a big bang than in stages, which would've taken forever."

About Fontbonne Hall Academys
- www.fontbonne.org
- Private college preparatory high school
- Serves 425 young women
- Located in Brooklyn, New York

What they wanted to do
- Empower students to participate in learning
- Inspire collaborative conversations among students and teachers

What they did
- In 2013, Fontbonne Hall Academy began to use Google Apps for Education
- In 2014, the school began using Classroom and Chromebooks

What they accomplished
- Equipped students with the tools to participate and communicate in new ways
- Encouraged student-centered instruction
- Progressed toward a 1:1 model; by fall 2017, every student will have a Chromebook

Google for Education
A solution built for learning and designed for the classroom that includes easy-to-manage affordable devices like Chromebooks and tablets, a "mission control" for class through Google Classroom, a powerful suite of productivity tools with Google Apps for Education, and new ways to engage students like Google Expeditions. Together these tools help teachers save time, increase collaboration, and inspire curiosity while students discover and learn together on any device, from anywhere.

There were two more pieces of the technology puzzle to fit into place: Wi-Fi and **Chromebooks**. Over the summer of 2014, Surdyka outfitted campus buildings with new wireless access points; in addition, he ordered about 100 Chromebooks for the incoming freshman class, and let the rest of the students know that they were welcome to bring their own tablets and laptops to school so they could use Google Apps.

Benefits

Technology as a ubiquitous learning tool

Now that students and teachers can tap into Google Apps with Chromebooks or their own devices – and work in classrooms, study rooms and anywhere they happen to be on campus – "it's as natural as breathing," Surdyka says.

It's also inspiring creativity. In mid-2015, to celebrate Women's History Month, students in Gloria Musto's class used Google+ to create pages for famous women in child development history, such as Maria Montessori. Students created journal entries in each famous woman's voice, then set up Gmail accounts for the historical figures and responded to queries from classmates, taking on the characters of the child development heroines. "Students think of social media as something they use in their personal lives and not in the classroom," Musto says. "Now, my students see social media as a learning agent as well."

New ways to participate and communicate

Google Classroom is also inspiring students to participate in discussions about their schoolwork, since they can do so online, asking questions within the Classroom application and responding to teacher feedback. "The reality is that some students have a lot of great things to say, but they are anxious about saying it out loud in front of the whole class," says teacher Jenna Caufield.

"Classroom gives the student a chance to have an opinion without having to speak up publicly."

It's also given the school a place to check in daily for news – Surdyka and his colleagues created a "class" within Classroom that includes everyone on campus. "We post daily announcements there, and everyone knows to visit this virtual classroom every day to see what's happening in school," Surdyka says.

As of early 2016, two grade levels now have Chromebooks for every student. Once the next two groups of incoming freshmen receive their Chromebooks, Fontbonne's student body will be completely 1:1 – and all freshmen thereafter will receive Chromebooks that they'll use throughout their school career.

Student-centered instruction

How do Fontbonne students and teachers work with each other today, compared to 2013? "It's like night and day," Surdyka says. "It used to be a teacher talking, calling on one kid, then another kid. Now when you look in a classroom, you see students with their Chromebooks open and working in groups."

"I hear a lot of talking – and it's not teachers talking, it's kids talking," says Spicijaric. "That's exciting. We're moving more toward student-centered instruction."

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