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**Saratosa County Schools:
Transforming Work-Based
Learning with SchoolLinks**

Customer Story

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Key Takeaways

Sarasota County Schools' strategic partnership with Schoolinks has positioned them at the forefront of educational innovation, offering a comprehensive solution that meets and exceeds the evolving needs of students, educators, and the community.

Executive Summary

Sarasota County Schools embarked on a visionary journey to redefine college and career readiness, choosing Schoolinks as the catalyst for their transformative initiatives. This customer story unveils the district's strategic selection process, Schoolinks' impactful features, and its commitment to advancing work-based learning access.

01

A meticulous evaluation of twelve CCR platforms led to the strategic choice of Schoolinks.

02

The district digitized state-required paperwork, creating digital cumulative files and simplifying audits.

03

Students actively engaged in the platform, submitting time sheets, reflections, and evidence of work, fostering accountability and rich data for program improvement.

04

Sarasota County Schools observed a substantial increase in industry partners, indicating strong community excitement and engagement.

Introduction

In the sun-soaked landscapes of Southwest Florida, an educational shift is underway within Sarasota County Schools. Meet Amy Earl, Ed.D, the dedicated Program Manager for College Career and Life Readiness, steering the ship of career advisors stationed across the district's seven high schools and eight middle schools. Amy and her team are at the forefront of implementing innovative strategies to prepare the district's 20,000 middle and high school students for the dynamic challenges of the modern workforce.

Sarasota County Schools has embraced the comprehensive scope and sequence offered by SchoolLinks, seamlessly integrating it into their broader college and career readiness activities framework. This approach doesn't just stop at providing a tool; it propels the students into a world of possibilities through work-based learning initiatives.

As the state of Florida mandates increased accessibility to work-based learning, Sarasota County Schools has taken a proactive stance. Amy explains,

Every student must have access to work-based learning, not necessarily to participate, but to have the opportunity.

The district is committed to ensuring that students are aware of these programs and have the means to access them.

The commitment to diverse work-based learning experiences is evident in the array of pathways offered. Florida defines six distinct pathways, and Sarasota County Schools diligently navigates them. From school-based enterprises, where students manage businesses within the school, to clinicals, practicums, apprenticeships, on-the-job training, and internships, the district provides a rich tapestry of opportunities for students to explore, learn, and grow.

This case study will show why Sarasota County Schools chose to use SchoolLinks as their college and career readiness platform, how they have approached the shift to digitizing their work-based learning opportunities, and how to improve student access to hands-on learning.

Comparing Other CCR Platforms

In the quest for a comprehensive college and career readiness provider, Sarasota County Schools meticulously evaluated twelve platforms, each vying to meet the district's unique needs. Amy recounts the journey of finding the perfect fit. "We had a wish list, knowing we wouldn't get everything, but we wanted a solution that aligned with our goals," she explains.

Key criteria included robust career exploration tools, the ability to track Work-Based Learning opportunities effectively, and learning modules that didn't necessitate extensive self-creation and publishing. SchoolLinks emerged as the standout choice, checking the most boxes on the district's comprehensive list of requirements.

One pivotal factor was SchoolLinks' flexibility in accommodating the existing content delivery model for both middle and high school students. Amy emphasizes the importance of scalability and customization without the burden of creating content from scratch. "SchoolLinks was really the pinnacle," she notes, highlighting the platform's capacity to grow and adapt alongside the district's evolving needs. Unlike platforms that demanded creating and

uploading custom content, SchoolLinks offered a streamlined approach. Amy attests to the platform's responsiveness, saying, "Anything that we've wanted that wasn't on our list, we have contracted to build out with SchoolLinks, and they've been happy to work with us to make it happen."

The transition from their previous CCR platform [Naviance] to SchoolLinks was not just a technical shift but a cultural one. Amy notes that Naviance had low buy-in and engagement internally, and the educators needed extensive support to use the system. SchoolLinks, on the other hand, won over the teachers with its userfriendly design and seamless navigation. The ability to demo as a student was a huge benefit. It allowed teachers and career advisors to experience the platform from the student's perspective, making it easier to guide and support them effectively.

The result? An enthusiastic buy-in from educators who appreciated the intuitive design and the platform's ability to simplify their workflow. In choosing SchoolLinks, Sarasota County Schools found not just a tool but a transformative partner willing to collaborate in shaping the future of their students.

Streamlining College Applications

Sarasota County Schools Prefer SchoolLinks' College Application Manager over Naviance

One standout feature that has ignited excitement within Sarasota County Schools is SchoolLinks' College Application Manager.

Amy compared it to Naviance, stating, "The college application manager in SchoolLinks, by and large, everyone says is so much easier and much more user-friendly."

Improving Accountability: Tracking College Applications Made Easy with SchoolLinks

Amy highlights the significance of being able to pull reports on letters of recommendation and identify which pieces of the application are incomplete.

"Now we can help the students be accountable and track their applications, which is huge," Amy asserts.

The transparency afforded by SchoolLinks allows educators and counselors to provide targeted support where it is most needed, ensuring that students are guided through the application process and are actively engaged and informed about their progress.

SchoolLinks: Transforming College Application Processes for Everyone

In the realm of college applications, SchoolLinks isn't just a manager; it simplifies complex processes and transforms them into user-friendly experiences that resonate with students, parents, teachers, and counselors alike.

Why SchoolLinks Stood Out

Choosing Quality Over Free Solutions and Other Competitors:

The decision to invest in SchoolLinks over free state solutions and even competitors like Xello was rooted in a thoughtful evaluation of needs and capabilities.

Previously relying on the state-provided platform My Career Shines for nearly two decades, the abrupt discontinuation of the service left many districts scrambling for alternatives. The experience underscored a critical lesson – just because a solution is free doesn't necessarily make it the best.

Despite considering Xello a competitor in the market, the district found it lacking compared to SchoolLinks. Amy explains,

Xello is just not as robust, and it doesn't offer the same quality of care that SchoolLinks offers.

The ability to track various aspects of work-based learning, schedule events with industry partners, and conduct evaluations district-wide were essential features that SchoolLinks offered, differentiating it as the superior choice.

The district's heavy platform usage played a significant role in their decision-making. “We have students log in every single day. Last summer, after our first year, I think we averaged about 30 students a day over the summer without teacher instruction. Students want to be in the platform, and that's a huge difference,” Amy affirms.

In pursuing progress and digital advancement with students, Sarasota County Schools recognized the need for a platform to meet and exceed their evolving needs. SchoolLinks emerged as the preferred choice, not just as a tool but as a partner committed to facilitating the district's forward momentum in preparing students for future endeavors, especially with work-based learning initiatives.

Work-Based Learning:

Sarasota's Digital Transformation with SchoolLinks

Work-Based Learning is the cornerstone of Sarasota County Schools' commitment to providing students with real-world experiences. SchoolLinks has proven to empower their digital transformation in this domain.

Amy delves into the heart of their WBL initiatives, explaining, "On-the-job training and internships are our bread and butter with SchoolLinks," she notes. Audited courses, typically taken in the senior year, are now seamlessly integrated into SchoolLinks.

The platform has become the hub for every teacher and student involved in WBL, allowing the district to digitize the unending amount of paperwork associated with state requirements. As the district embraces a move towards digital cumulative files, tracking all on-the-job files within SchoolLinks emerges as a game-changer.

Amy highlights the convenience it brings during audits, stating, "When those auditors come in, we can just give them everything they need without them having to drive miles and miles across the district to get one paper folder."

The benefits continue beyond there. Students actively participate in digitization by uploading time sheets, reflections, and evidence of their work every two weeks. This ensures compliance and goes beyond fostering a culture of thinking and accountability. Amy explains,

We're not just being compliant; we're going above and beyond and making them reflect on what they've learned, whether they love it, and if they'll continue.

This rich data becomes a valuable resource for the district, informing future programming and offerings. Amy sheds light on the district's meticulous approach to selecting a platform for work-based learning, saying, "We were looking for something that supported work-based learning specifically for that initiative of just digitizing everything. We wanted the planning tool, the accountability, and everything in between." SchoolLinks emerged as the ideal choice, offering a comprehensive solution that met and exceeded their needs.

Amy credits the SchoolLinks work-based learning team for their exceptional support. She affirms,

Honestly, that work-based learning team has been amazing. We have a lot of niche needs, and they have risen to the occasion.

The collaborative effort involving teachers, administrators, and the SchoolLinks team has resulted in continuous improvements, with plans to improve the WBL experience in the upcoming year.

In Sarasota County Schools, SchoolLinks isn't just a platform for work-based learning; it's a transformative tool that empowers students, streamlines processes, and shapes the future of education in the digital age.

Charting a Path Forward

Sarasota's Future with SchoolLinks

As Sarasota County Schools continues its journey with SchoolLinks, the focus on student growth and accountability is at the forefront of their planning for the future.

Amy shares insights into the anticipated impact of Work-Based Learning (WBL) on the student population. "We're hoping it's to grow and have accountability across the entire process," Amy expresses.

The digitization of forms allows the district to closely monitor student experiences, ensuring that each placement aligns with the student's aspirations. The ultimate goal is to enhance the overall student experience, personally and professionally.

"We're here for students, we're here to connect them to employers, we're here to help them plan their path for the rest of their lives," Amy emphasizes.

Whether a student discovers a passion or realizes what they don't want through internships, the experiential learning comes at no cost, offering invaluable insights without financial burdens.

The impact extends beyond students to the broader community. By creating industry partner profiles, businesses can actively engage with students, post events, job opportunities, and seamlessly participate in the verification process. Amy notes the positive response from the community, stating,

The industry profile side is huge, and the fact that they get an email to say, 'Can you verify this student's time card or reflection,' takes the stress off the employer.

Looking ahead, Sarasota County Schools envisions a streamlined and unifying process for teachers and rising seniors involved in on-the-job training. With a more synchronized schedule, the following year is anticipated to open opportunities for a smoother application process and increased participation from both educators and employers.

The positive momentum is evident in the growing number of industry partners within the community, which has skyrocketed from 150 to over 600 since the introduction of WBL.

This robust industry partner database empowers the district to cover various career clusters and fosters a collaborative relationship where both parties can seamlessly reach out when needed. Amy concludes, "It's a cool platform for everyone involved in the student readiness process." SchoolLinks has exceeded expectations, creating a dynamic ecosystem where students, educators, and the community actively participate in shaping the future of education and workforce preparation.