



Success Story

Tolleson Union High School District

TOLLESON, ARIZONA

Takeaway: When the pandemic closed schools in March of 2020, Tolleson Union transitioned their nearly 12,000 students from in-person instruction to online courseware. Their strong partnership with Edgenuity and stellar leadership from Superintendent Nora Gutierrez led to success across the district.

Transition from In-Person to Online Learning with Edgenuity

Navigating the transition from in-person learning to a fully online implementation overnight is no small feat, as schools and districts across the country learned in March of 2020. Some schools and districts fared better than others, and one commonality of the most successful is their leaders' strong vision. With a standards-aligned curriculum at the forefront and a focus on teacher training, Tolleson Union High School District's Superintendent, Ms. Nora Gutierrez, successfully navigated arguably the most difficult time in US education with grace and led their nearly 12,000 students to success.

MAXIMIZING THE TOOLS AT HAND

Over nearly 40 years in education, Gutierrez's most notable observation of the changes to teaching and learning has not been in the curriculum but rather in how we deliver that curriculum through technology and online platforms. A few years into her time at Tolleson Union, Gutierrez realized the curriculum they used for their at-risk online program was aligned to standards and common core, which led her to ask the district, "Why are we leaving this tool on the shelf, and only using it for at-risk students?" Gutierrez felt that curriculum alignment was the thing the district needed most, and Edgenuity was the solution. During the pandemic, this commitment to state standards remained a focus and drove online courseware implementation throughout the district.

“Edgenuity is the aligned curriculum we needed in a tech platform that kids relate to and that teachers will embrace once they're comfortable.” – SUPERINTENDENT NORA GUTIERREZ

IMPLEMENTING A STRONG PROGRAM

Gutierrez considers online learning no different than a curriculum-aligned textbook. “If you printed out Edgenuity and presented it like a textbook, it’s no different than handing a student a laptop and saying, ‘go learn.’” But, when teachers are trained to use the tools available to them, then they can truly teach. “If teachers don’t want to teach, then students don’t do well. This is true in blended, traditional, and online classes,” Gutierrez said.

Throughout her career, Gutierrez has focused on staff development, which she believes is crucial to the district’s success and hopes to continue to build on in the future. The shift to 100% remote instruction was jarring in March 2020, but luckily “students are native to technology,” said Gutierrez, and she and her staff worked to implement programs that would support their learning from home. “Edgenuity is the aligned curriculum we needed in a tech platform that kids relate to and that teachers will embrace once they’re comfortable.”

In addition to strong staff development, Gutierrez highlighted the increased parental involvement as a “silver lining” of the pandemic. After addressing the early concerns of Internet connectivity and access to devices, Tolleson Union focused on building relationships with parents and caregivers. As a district, they focus on the best way to get parents and caregivers invested in their students’ education, and they see more involvement than ever before.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE WHOLE STUDENT

In the first days and weeks of the pandemic, it became painfully clear that schools are more than just a place to learn. Schools create community; in addition to delivering education, schools provide a place for students to build relationships, eat, and even offer a place of refuge for those dealing with stress at home. Gutierrez understands that students’ needs must be fulfilled before they’re able to learn, and in a district with average household incomes below the median, they must accommodate students who don’t have a meal or need to work to help support their family. Gutierrez reasoned that when evaluating the effects of the pandemic and the digital divide, the blame should not be placed on students or parents but rather understand the hierarchy of needs that data doesn’t always capture.

INCORPORATING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL)

As Tolleson Union works to support students’ learning and social and emotional wellbeing, they have recently implemented Edgenuity’s SEL courses for their at-risk students. The staff of full-time social workers and intervention specialists at the six comprehensive high schools, virtual academy and University high school in the district implement the SEL curriculum to best serve the whole child, under the oversight of Misti Andrews, District Prevention Coordinator. “It’s nice to have the curriculum in one place,” said Taylor Perez, Social Worker at Sierra Linda High School, who mentioned that trying to find applicable units in the past was time-consuming. At Sierra Linda High School, they appreciate the flexibility to use specific lessons tailored to address the issues impacting students right now, such as restorative practice, bullying, and building healthy relationships.

However, social workers across the district emphasized the importance of relationships and noted the importance of a solid rapport between students and staff. “We don’t want to increase the isolation that students are feeling right now by making them do something on their own,” said Claudia Betancourt, Intervention Specialist at Cooper Canyon High School. Instead, they usually assign the lesson as asynchronous work and have a conversation or facilitate a small-group discussion afterward.

By focusing on training staff, empowering parents and families, and meeting the whole learner’s needs, Tolleson Union transitioned to online learning with fidelity and success during a challenging school year.