Shelby County Public Schools see consistent student achievement despite COVID

K – 8 STUDENTS SEE 1.25 GRADE LEVELS OF GROWTH IN DREAMBOX DURING THE 2020-21 SCHOOL YEAR

KENTUCKY

Shelbyville, KY

Shelby County Public Schools based in Shelbyville, Kentucky, serves Shelby County, which is east of Louisville, the state's largest city. This public school district serves approximately 7,000 K – 12 students in 11 schools countywide. The district's vision is to prepare students to master standards, lead by example and embrace social responsibility.

District Serves

Elementary Schools	6
Middle Schools	2
K–8 School	1
High Schools	2
Early Education School	1
Total Students	**7,304**
Total Teachers	**429**
English Language Learners	**3%**
Children with Disabilities	**4.4%**

Student Diversity

Two or more races: **2%**
Asian: **1%**
Hispanic or Latino: **10%**
African American: **7%**
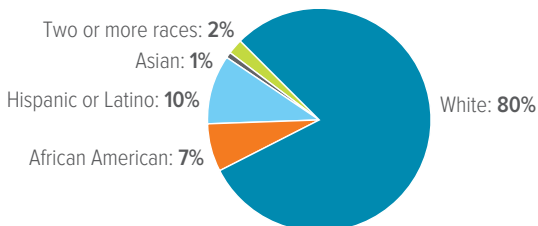White: **80%**

Four years ago, the district applied to become a nontraditional instruction (NTI) district, the Kentucky Department of Education distinction that allows – encourages – continued learning even on days schools are closed. NTI came about because Kentucky school districts lost so many days of school because of snow or other weather-related closures. Although they didn't know it at the time they applied for NTI, it would set the stage for distance learning in 2020.

Meanwhile, Adam Watson, digital learning coordinator for the school district, recognized the teaching challenge that the diversity of the district's student population posed. How do you teach children from such diverse socioeconomic, ethnic and racial backgrounds with equity and inclusion? The gaps in student proficiency also hindered teachers' ability to teach children at their own level.

Three years ago, Shelby County Public Schools launched a strategic leadership plan with an entire strand devoted to providing personalized learning. Watson was already hot on the trail of finding a unifying technology that could provide consistent education throughout the district schools. "I certainly have a passion for education and EdTech," says Watson. "What I really love about my role is thinking through the equity lens; how can we provide opportunities for all, especially when we have those gaps."

As he saw it, the autonomy at the school level to choose the variety of platforms and digital tools each used exacerbated confusion among students, teachers and administrators. He explains it like this: School A uses one platform, school B uses another and school C, yet another. Educators need to support three platforms and keep up with and address the gaps in learning and differing student abilities. Then, there's the question of data. Finding similar and consistent data that gives a clear picture of student progress becomes difficult when trying to compare apples to oranges of different platforms.

In researching technology programs, Watson says, DreamBox rose to the top to unify the schools' math curriculum and get the student-level data needed to inform classroom instruction. He worked to first understand the teachers' focus and values and then find a platform that fit the ideals and helped accelerate progress. DreamBox filled that bill.

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The DreamBox Intelligent Adaptive Learning ™ technology tracks each student's interaction and evaluates the strategies used to solve problems. It uses that data to suggest lessons for each individual student's level of proficiency. Initially, teachers just wanted students to complete five lessons a week, which is in line with DreamBox best practices. As they became more familiar with the platform, teachers could use the data to individualize each student's lessons using the Assignments feature within the Insight Dashboard. That system of quality, says Watson, can positively impact learning, and it fit quite neatly into Shelby County Public Schools philosophy.

By the time COVID threw the U.S. education system in disarray, Watson and his team were better equipped for distance learning than other schools and districts. Teachers having used DreamBox recognized its value, and according to Watson, students were the first to tell you truthfully, that they liked the play-based learning within DreamBox. But the proof of DreamBox was in the pudding. Not only were kids completing the requisite five lessons a week – the number proven to improve proficiency – the district was seeing results.

Once again, along with NTI, which had been expanded to include continuation of learning, DreamBox flexed its muscle and the blip in navigating distance learning was short-lived in the district. Not that there weren't hiccups. Human interaction was noticeably absent, which challenged both instruction and learning. But teachers stepped up and did what was necessary to build rapport with students in an online classroom. Although it was a tough juggling act, Watson says, "Doing that kept [teachers and students] engaged and involved, equitably showing that a kid at home is no less important than the kid who's standing in front of me."

"One of the major pillars of our strategic leadership plan is personalized learning. It quickly became evident that DreamBox could give us access to data so that [teachers] can personalize learning at each student's level."

– Adam Watson | Digital Learning Coordinator

In 2016, the district created Cultivate, a secondary (grades 6-12) virtual school for students unable to attend school in person for various medical or other reasons. Cultivate recently expanded to include K-5 students for the 2021-22 school year. Watson expects students whose parents aren't ready to send their children back to the classroom will attend school online through this virtual academic program.

"These are at-home kids, who will get an effective, engaging and personalized experience, of which, undoubtedly, DreamBox will be one of the learning tools that they'll be engaged in," says Watson. "Providing those students an opportunity to learn virtually, thanks to the expanded virtual program, is exactly the mission of Shelby County: personalized learning."

When all is said and done, Watson thinks the data of the past three years show the value of DreamBox. It enables Shelby County Schools teachers to differentiate their math instruction for each student while boosting their math achievement. DreamBox, according to Watson, has been a great partner for his district and will continue to be so.

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