



# The Computerworld Honors Program

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## Final Copy of Case Study

**Year:**

2013

**Status:**

Laureate

**Organization Name:**

Itasca Area Schools Collaborative

**Organization URL:**

<http://www.iasc.k12.mn.us/>

**Project Name:**

Itasca Area Schools Collaborative: Using Technology to Expand Student Opportunities

**Please select the category in which you are submitting your entry.**

Collaboration

**Please provide an overview of the nominated project. Describe the problem it was intended to solve, the technology or approach used, how it was innovative and any technical or other challenges that had to be overcome for successful implementation and adoption. (In 300 words or less.)**

The Itasca Area Schools Collaborative (IASC) is a consortium of seven northern Minnesota school districts and one community college that share educational resources in order to provide high-quality education to a wide range of dispersed students. Supported by a robust technical infrastructure, standardized IT systems and innovative digital teaching tools, IASC proves distance and access no longer limits academic opportunity. Schools in rural northern Minnesota have been experiencing a decline in enrollment as young families increasingly moved to urban areas. Since state funding for schools is based on student population, these schools found their budgets stretched and strained. To maximize resources and provide quality educational opportunities to all students, seven

superintendents and a community college provost worked within IASC to provide solutions. By collaborating across district boundaries using technology, these leaders hoped schools could optimize resource sharing, resulting in improved student achievement. IASC has owned an underutilized fiber backbone since 1987. In 2005 IASC leveraged the backbone to help them face the challenge of working across each school's differing technological platforms. To overcome this challenge, IASC leaders implemented a common, robust technology infrastructure with a common set of goals to drive innovation and allow for seamless collaboration across district boundaries. The strength of IASC's infrastructure has served as a backbone for the schools to deploy other collaborative technologies and implement technology-driven curriculums. The framework has also enabled districts to share resources through technology, ultimately delivering 21st century learning to Itasca area students. "We had completely standalone systems everywhere, from our email application to the call systems to the security systems we used," says Joe Silko, superintendent of Independent School District 318 in Grand Rapids. "But with a powerful backbone, we envisioned that our disparate systems would become unified."

**When was this project implemented or last updated? (Please specify month and year.) Has it incorporated new technologies and/or other innovations since its initial deployment? (In 300 words or less.)**

Following the initial planning stage in 2006, IASC began to implement the first part of its technology initiative: creating a core technological infrastructure across its schools. To begin, IASC deployed a standardized wireless local area network (WLAN) and common voice platform. The convergence of this technology was the key to IASC's subsequent projects that have leveraged technology to positively influence student learning. With the common technology in place across all member districts, in 2009 IASC shifted its focus to decreasing the geographic distance between students. IASC built immersive video (TelePresence) classrooms in three of the IASC districts to support learning and eliminate gaps in teaching. Due to the success of the TelePresence deployment, IASC implemented additional rooms and endpoints in 2011 and 2012. Across IASC, there are currently six full TelePresence rooms and 20 studio carts. Last year IASC offered 16 TelePresence classes, and 18 are scheduled for 2013. Each TelePresence is equipped with wall-to-wall high-definition video screens and voice systems that allow students to learn together in real-time with lifelike detail. Prior to deploying the common technological infrastructure, IASC also developed its own online learning program called VITAL. VITAL was established in 2004 and offered 30 students learning opportunities that would not otherwise have been available. In 2010 VITAL, now Infinity, allowed 980 students to access remote learning options. IASC students represent 28 percent of the 2010 participation total, with 96 percent of IASC students successfully completed their Infinity courses.

**Is implementation of the project complete? If no, please describe the project's phases and which phase the project is now in. (In 300 words or less.)**

IASC believes they are preparing for a future that is evolving and unknown. To guide them they have established a VSEM (vision, strategy, execution, measure) outlining the following phases: Phase I: An upgrade of district networks to ensure safe, reliable support of all applications and services. Phase II: Enhancement of teaching and learning in the districts via the inclusion of a student-centered, 21st-century curriculum, and a common learning management system. Phase III: Outreach to the various educational communities to identify specific needs to solutions and cement partnerships. Phase IV: Evaluate metrics to promote the IASC model and prepare for an increasingly mobile environment. Phase V: Review progress, retool areas of improvement, assess stakeholder satisfaction and develop a new vision for the future. The initial goals set out by IASC in Phase I, to connect all members schools across a common technological infrastructure, and use technology to reduce the learning gap for rural students, is complete. Now, IASC is moving into Phase II and III. A complete look at IASC's phases and plans through 2016 can be found in Appendix 1.

**Please provide at least one example of how the technology project has benefited a specific individual or organization. Feel free to include personal quotes from individuals who have directly benefited from the work. (In 300 words or less.)**

Students, faculty and residents directly benefit from IASC's initiatives. Students from rural areas can now collaborate and learn alongside students from urban districts, equalizing the playing field for all students. Since the start of the collaborative, the usage of immersive video continues to expand across IASC. As an example, in September 2012, 25 sessions were held with 185 participants, in December 2012, 42 sessions (student classes, meetings, after school programming, virtual field trips and community education classes) were held with 305 participants. As another example, two IASC member districts lacked Spanish programs. With the TelePresence classrooms, students are given access to learning foreign language. IASC is also using TelePresence for students who need accelerated or remedial education. In the near future immersive video will host music lessons that "bring in" musicians from Minneapolis several hours away. IASC is also working with several colleges to host courses for students, area residents and dislocated workers over TelePresence. IASC has also maximized school resources in difficult economic times, ensuring that all students are still granted access to a quality education. "It's frustrating that because of funding, we can't offer a chemistry class," says Barb Kalmi, a member of the Nashuak/Keewatin ISD 319 School Board. "Through IASC and TelePresence,

we can provide those opportunities to every student. Instead of having them go to another district to get their education, now we can keep them here; we can give students what they need."

**Would this project be considered an innovation, a best practice or other notable advancement that could be adopted by or tailored for other organizations and uses? If yes, please describe that here. (In 300 words or less.)**

Schools across America are all facing the challenge of providing students with a quality education, while dealing with slashed budgets and a struggling economy. IASC offers a model for resource sharing, which allows school districts to maximize their resources through digital learning and sharing tools. IASC also offers an example of how schools in rural areas can overcome geographic limitations and offer students the same education as those in more accessible, populated districts. There are 14,000 school districts in the United States today. As many as 50 percent of them are facing the same remote-location issues confronted by the Itasca area administrators. By implementing a program similar to IASC, these school districts can give their students access to the education and opportunities they deserve. "Asking superintendents to blend formerly siloed systems required a significant shift in thinking," says Lora Mathison, CIO for IASC. "There had to be a tremendous amount of trust among the superintendents sitting around the table. They had to forgo the attitude of I'm protecting my district," and do what was best for everyone. The IASC has fielded many calls and hosted numerous visits from not only schools districts, colleges and learning establishments, but also local and metropolitan businesses. Groups are looking to answer the same challenges tackled by the IASC: how to train people without traveling and how to optimize educational resources.

**If there are any other details that the judges should know about this project, please note them here. (In 300 words or less.)**

To help with its success, IASC has cultivated several key partnerships, both private and public, to realize its vision of enhancing cross-district, cross-regional student learning. For example, the IASC leadership team and Cisco partnered together in May 2009 to identify challenges, envision technological possibilities and implement key architectures to jump-start IASC's plans for educational change. IASC also has a strong relationship with the Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce. Through the Chamber of Commerce's Education Committee, CEOs and business leaders are invited to IASC member schools to share with students the importance of education and how education has impacted them in their careers and lives, as business owners. Additionally, IASC entered a strategic partnership with the Blandin Foundation, whose mission is to strengthen rural Minnesota. Beyond financial support, the Foundation has worked with IASC to



develop initiatives that benefit all students and residents within the participating member districts. One of IASC's next projects is to collaborate with Minnesota's private sector by identifying actionable areas where a business owner might be able to partner resources with IASC, forming a win-win relationship. This is an effort to engage the greater community into the educational gains that IASC leads. Furthermore, IASC is planning to leverage the technology it has in place to benefit the region by working with for-profit and non-profit businesses, medical facilities, law enforcement, city government, human services, public health, probation and others.