



# CASE STUDY

## 21st Century Cyber Charter School

Established in 2001, 21st Century Cyber Charter School provides students with a flexible, individualized learning environment catered to meet specific student needs.



## BACKGROUND

Pennsylvania's 21st Century Cyber Charter School was founded in 2001 with the goal of allowing student athletes to keep on top of their studies while competing and training. It has since expanded that mandate to encompass all students between Grades 6 and 12 who need at-home access to the classroom. Currently, more than 1,400 students are enrolled. "We've grown to house all types of students, in many different situations," said John Provasnik, the school's instructional designer. "That includes new parents, working students, adult students already working in a profession, athletes, and students who don't feel comfortable or engaged in their school and need something different. It also includes students working toward an early graduation" 21st Century is unique among charter schools in the state. "We are a public school and somewhat different from the other cyber charter schools in the state in that we are a public school and created by the school districts themselves," said Provasnik. Unlike other Cyber Charters in Pennsylvania, 21st Century is administered cooperatively by local school districts, rather than operated by a separate charter from the Pennsylvania Department of Education. Provasnik believes this distinction gives 21st Century's administration a better insight into the local needs of their learners and teachers. "We don't just have (administrators) who are interested in education, but people who are leading education in their own districts. They watch over our direction and charter."

## THE CHALLENGE

As the school continues to grow both its services and its enrollment, they have also worked to provide parents and guardians with better tools for engagement with its students. Parents have a lot of questions and the school wanted to make it as easy as possible for them to access answers.

*“How’s my kid doing this week? How are they doing overall? And when was the last time they worked in each class? That was the most important thing,”* said Provasnik.

The school tried to make use of an existing Moodle™ plug-in to answer those concerns. It was functional but cumbersome and time-consuming for parents and teachers alike. In many cases, parents had trouble navigating the system to find the information they needed.

*“One option was they would log in as their children. The second option was they had to go several places and look at different reports and logs. A lot of our parents aren’t tech-savvy. Our teachers would use the backend to script out data and every Monday they’d sift through it and try to build a little report to email to parents, which was consuming a lot of time. And of course, by Monday afternoon it’s already out of date,”* commented Provasnik.



## THE SOLUTION

The school approached Remote Learner (now a Learning Pool company), which hosts 21st Century's Digital Learning Environment (DLE). Learning Pool provides custom development to their clients, from a team of experienced and innovative designers and developers. Stakeholders at 21st Century met with the Learning Pool developers and worked through a thorough scoping process.

Eric Bjella is Solutions Development Team Lead in Development & Design at Learning Pool. He said when 21st Century came to the table they were able to be precise about their expectations and needs.

*"The way the parents were interacting with their existing grade book plug-in to check in on their students was not working. It was either taking too much time to get to where they needed to go, or they were not digesting that data because it was too difficult to understand,"* Bjella said.

21st Century was looking for a new plug-in that was fully mobile-friendly, one that displayed information specific to the user's permission levels, all while offering intuitive navigation. It also had to be compatible with their existing grading system, something their existing parent dashboard did not offer. Learning Pool's team went to work. The result was the 21st Century Parent Portal.

## THE RESPONSE

“Parents could put down what their favorite piece of the portal was. In the first two days over 100 parents replied with wonderful things about the plug-in. The biggest thing they say is that they can understand what’s going on in their child’s academic life... Here they can just see the last time they submitted work and how they’re doing, how many assignments and how they have been graded. You’ve made something really wonderful here. You’ve got to get it out because no one else has this. It’s been such a positive experience”

**Provasnik**

## THE RESULTS

The new parent portal offers much easier access to data for parents and has streamlined the process of generating that data. Numerous data points were boiled down on a weekly cadence to give a parent at a glance an indication of whether the student is keeping up with assignments. The tool allows data to appear dependent on the user's permissions and offers a more compact and streamlined presentation of learner-specific data with easy navigation.

21st Century was pleased with the tool Learning Pool developed. That satisfaction extends to the parents making use of it to track student progress. After introducing the new tool, 21st Century held a competition to encourage parental engagement.

Users were delighted with the changes. They were especially pleased with the mobile-friendly nature of the Parent Portal.

Eric Bjella credited 21st Century's team in turn with providing a clear vision and ongoing feedback that made the development process a truly collaborative project. *"21st Century did a great job of reaching out to people in their organization to get buy-in and feedback. That approach led to enthusiasm among teachers, and frankly a better product because we got on the ground feedback,"* said Bjella.



## LOOKING AHEAD

The 21st Parent Portal has been a success, both in terms of the functionality of the tool and its adaptation by users. Provasnik believes the cooperation between 21st Century and Learning Pool in this project has laid a solid foundation for future collaborative efforts.

*"It's been a great process and we're always looking forward to the next project,"* he concluded.



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