

# The Paperless School Board



By Sarah Zykanov

In summer of 2008, San Rafael City Schools completed a move to paperless school board meetings. A cost analysis determined that the benefits: savings on paper, binders, printing supplies and staff time, would outweigh the costs. The move would reduce the environmental footprint of the district, increase the level of communication with our community, and save money as well. This article will provide an overview of where the district started, outline the moves that were made to prepare for the shift, look at some of the environmental and cost savings the district continues to reap, and wrap up with a mention of paperless initiatives being pursued by individual school sites.

The board of education for San Rafael City Schools provides oversight for an elementary and a high school district that serves 11 schools and more than 5,000 students. There are 17 scheduled board meetings and a handful of unscheduled meetings in a typical school year. In the past, 50 “board packets” averaging 200 sheets of paper each would be prepared for distribution to school board members, the superintendent, cabinet members, two student representatives, district principals, and those in the community who requested them. An extra board packet would be prepared for audience members to review.

The move to paperless board meetings followed a carefully designed plan that included increased technology access and training for all participants. First, a secure Web-based portal was found for posting agendas, minutes, board items, supporting documentation and board policies. A set of laptops was purchased for board members to use at meetings. It was agreed that a projector would be used to show

agendas and documentation and could also be used for presentations.

Fortunately, this process began at a time when the district boardroom was undergoing remodeling, so the plans included installation of a mounted projector, screen, 12 Ethernet drops and two VGA outlets. In late spring of 2008, the final implementation steps included training for the superintendent’s executive assistant, as well as cabinet and staff members who prepare board items. In July, board members received training in how to use the laptops and access the Web-based system.

Prior to the move to paperless board meetings, preparation of board packets was typically a process that required three full days of staff time for the executive assistant, two days work for another assistant, and one day for a third assistant. Though board members’ binders were reused regularly, the printed materials for the board packets averaged 200 sheets of paper each. Since 50 of these were printed, at least 10,000 sheets of paper were consumed for each scheduled meeting. This number does not account for mistakes in the copying process or board items that had to be revised after initial printing. It also does not count paper used for the unscheduled meetings that were held each year.

Over the course of a year, board meeting preparations used at least 170,000 sheets of paper, this equals 340 reams, or about 20 trees. The superintendent’s executive assistant, Laura Milholland, says that making the board items available on the Internet has also made our community feel better informed. She has had a noticeable reduction in phone calls related to board business, and those who do call are often asking clarification questions about what they have

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found online. Many callers express appreciation for having so much information available. In the past, callers would request copies of board information and policies that would be reproduced and sent out in the mail. But those requests have virtually stopped. Clearly this project has saved environmental resources, money, and staff time and has improved communications with district stakeholders.

It should be noted that Internet systems have also allowed our schools to greatly reduce paper consumption. Online attendance, e-mail instead of printed memos for staff, posting of newsletters and the "weekly packet" on school Web sites, all these efforts are paying off in increased communication with reduced environmental costs. It is important to note that these measures were not pursued until every classroom had Internet access and a reliable computer.

Two of our schools have piloted an initiative to put the weekly packet to parents in an electronic format. These schools wanted to ensure that all families would continue to receive notices from the school; so the classroom teachers did a survey to determine which families needed a printed copy of school notices. One school found that only 42 packets needed to be printed each week for a school that serves almost 400 students. Since packets contain six to eight sheets of paper, this adds up to a savings of about four reams of paper each week, saving another 8 trees in a typical school year.


I am sure that many of the paperless practices outlined in this article are being pursued by school districts around the country, but it's important to recognize and affirm the savings being made in using these practices. These practices save time, increase communication, help the environment and save money. If you would like to calculate some of your district's environmental savings, try the following online resources: <https://www.rainforestmaker.org/rain/php/calculator.php> and <http://www.ibuydifferent.org/takeaction/explanation.asp> ■

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