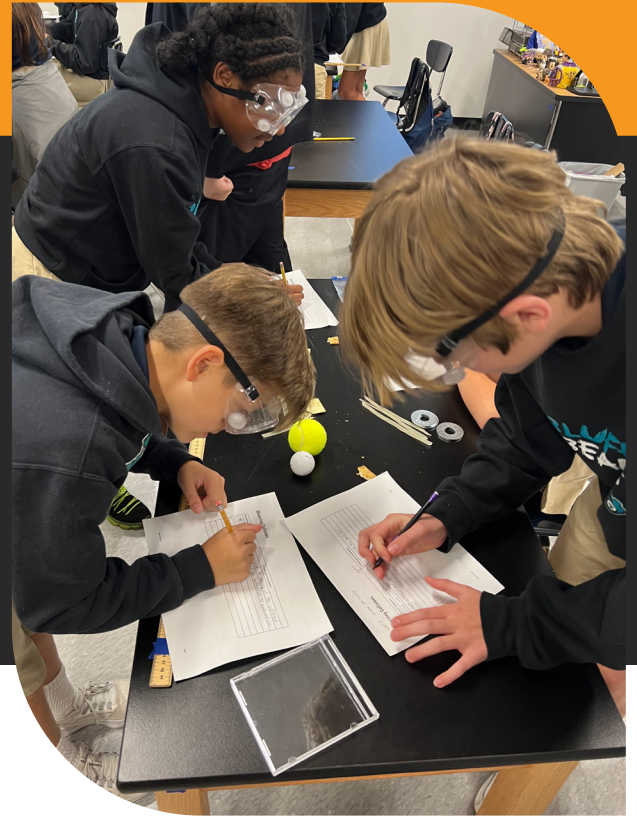


Transforming Science Education in a Top Performing District: How Ascension Parish Schools Overcame Curriculum Challenges with Activate Learning's Custom Solution



Ascension Parish students learn about contact forces.

Educators get the flexibility they need to innovate with ease using IQWST and OpenSciEd science curricula on one digital platform.

For some educators, the increasing pressure facing leaders tasked with preparing students for careers in STEM is nearly palpable. According to the Department of Labor, demand for STEM professionals is twice as high as for all other occupations, with growth projected to reach 11% by 2031. Yet, there is a growing gap between the demand for professionals in these fields and new entrants with appropriate qualifications and education. This disparity was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which kept 1.4 billion children out of school worldwide, leading to an average of 200 lost school days and nearly half a year of lost time in math studies alone.

To this end, educators are responding to the need to reverse these trends by turning to innovative and engaging ways to bolster student learning in STEM subjects. One such solution is Activate Learning, which features research-based curricula designed to reengage not only students, but also the teachers overseeing their instruction. With comprehensive science education programs, Activate Learning helps empower students through interactive content that promotes rigorous study and investigation and gives teachers the tools and confidence to implement phenomena-based curriculum fully aligned with the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS).

This approach perfectly complemented the Ascension Parish School District, which stands out as one of the most innovative in the country. Noticing the decline in student engagement and comprehension in STEM subjects, they sought a dynamic solution that would address two core issues: recovering from pandemic-induced educational loss and increasing student engagement in the sciences.

The path to success included Activate Learning's unique, custom curriculum solution, blending IQWST and OpenSciEd, which brought about measurable change in student outcomes. Notably, not only was IQWST and Activate Learning Certified Version of OpenSciEd recently named Tier 1 curricula in Louisiana, but OpenSciEd is also the recipient of the All-Green rating from EdReports, further proving its high-quality programming for middle school students and its efficacy in districts like Ascension Parish.

The success of Ascension's innovative science program, created with Activate Learning's curricula, interactive digital learning platform, and professional learning solutions, is gaining recognition. The 74 recently named Louisiana as one of fourteen states providing teachers with the high-quality science materials that students need.

A Closer Look at Ascension's Curriculum Challenges

Spearheaded by Erin Babin, Ed.D., curriculum specialist at Ascension Parish Schools, the district undertook the task of innovating its STEM programs to address their growing concern about science and math-based outcomes for their students. Babin's role positioned her with a comprehensive view of the STEM initiatives for the district, with a focus on development in their nine middle schools. Babin noted that two of the nine schools were not performing up to standard despite Ascension Parish receiving an A rating from the Louisiana Department of Education.

Addressing this disparity became a priority for Babin, who looked to improve outcomes while also applying forward-thinking solutions that could help position the district for success for years to come. Emphasizing the feeling of community cherished between teachers, students, and parents, Babin noted that any outside solution to support their STEM programs would have to integrate with their existing culture and sense of community.

With the return to the classroom post-COVID, Babin found that teaching efforts were bouncing back stronger than before. However, the learning loss experienced during the pandemic needed to be addressed, and quickly. The district was also struggling to determine how to best implement the NGSS, which take a three-dimensional approach to teaching the sciences. Additionally, Louisiana had also issued its own set of educational standards the district needed to comply with.

In order to support their students as effectively as possible, Babin and Chief Instructional Director Edith Walker evaluated program options that could bolster their curriculum performance. They found that Activate Learning made it seamless to explore and pilot the OpenSciEd and IQWST learning designs, which were both NGSS-aligned. In the end, Ascension decided to adopt IQWST. "We went to OpenSciEd training, and we learned all about OpenSciEd," explains Babin. "We piloted IQWST, and we learned about IQWST. And then, when the state rated the curricula, they gave IQWST a Tier 1 rating. So we decided to adopt IQWST right off the bat (because we wanted a Tier 1 curriculum in all of our schools)."

The results improved, and leadership noted that the module-based approach could provide the flexibility to align curriculum with grade level pairings to satisfy Louisiana state requirements. Activate Learning allowed the district to deploy IQWST alongside OpenSciEd, opening the door for units that could address the specific standards needed without burdening teachers with administrative concerns. Babin and her team now feel that they have a solution in place that matches the pacing and educational needs of everyone involved. With that, 94% of teachers reported feeling strongly supported in their efforts.

Implementing a Custom Model with Activate Learning's IQWST and OpenSciEd Curricula

Efforts to upgrade their approach to teaching STEM subjects in underperforming middle schools were widely welcomed by the teachers themselves. The district's teacher coaching program collected feedback on what educators believed they needed most in the classroom and where their existing curricula were falling short. They also had the support of a dedicated implementation team at Activate Learning, which made it a priority to understand the district's unique situation and create a custom professional learning approach from the pilot to the rollout.

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Ascension found IQWST easy to adopt and deploy, with their Activate Learning representative consistently monitoring feedback to identify training needs or gaps in the solution at hand.

One significant challenge for Ascension was getting teachers up to speed and comfortable with the Louisiana Science Standards. For Babin, this was a particularly difficult issue that needed to be resolved if they were to be successful at transforming science learning across the district. Babin explains, "Our teachers needed something else because we had all of these standards and we were asking them to change what they were teaching and how they were teaching. We wanted them to use phenomena-based learning, but we weren't giving them any resources to do it!"



Here is where Activate Learning's high-quality, standards-based curriculum saved the day -- making the transition from traditional science teaching to standards-based teaching frictionless and engaging for teachers. Babin describes how this was the game-changer that gave Ascension the results they needed, "We decided that our [IQWST] pilot was a success and that we were going to go with IQWST. The minute we did that, it was just so easy! We had the voice of our teachers. We had the support of my supervisors." Ascension was able to empower their teachers with the guidance and resources they needed to be successful with a new science program that was fully aligned with the Louisiana Science Standards.

Along the way, as district leaders gathered feedback from teachers and students, they remained flexible and open to change. This innovative mindset was crucial to Ascension's success. When Babin contacted her curriculum support specialist at Activate Learning to inquire about integrating OpenSciEd curriculum units to complement their IQWST program, she was pleasantly surprised by the response and results. Ascension's dilemma is one that many school districts that want more flexibility with their science curricula face. Babin points out, "IQWST is put into modules. So we were hoping that we could just rearrange those modules by grade level to align with state standards, but some gaps were still present."

Activate Learning (a licensed distributor of OpenSciEd) was able to recommend a customized IQWST/OpenSciEd implementation. OpenSciEd was a natural fit to supplement IQWST in order to meet Louisiana state standards. Both curricula share the same pedagogy and even some of the same authors, providing a seamless experience to teachers and students through Activate Learning's Interactive Digital Platform. "A lot of times, when you tell people you're using two curricula, they freak out," Babin explained, "but it was really not a big deal. It's all on the same digital platform... Having the option to use modules from both of the systems just made it easy. It was an easy transition!"

While other curriculum options are available on the market, Babin and her team remain convinced that they have found the right solution with their custom approach to science instructional materials with Activate Learning. "I'm thankful that we didn't choose a different curriculum at the beginning. There's no way that [other options] could align as well as IQWST and OpenSciEd," she noted.

Activate Learning also stepped up with customized professional learning options for educators and science kit materials applicable directly in the classroom. Trainers made it a point to carry out on-site visits in every science classroom for the district, working directly with teachers to debrief them on the curricula's nuances and helping them find new ways to engage their students in the sciences.



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Key Takeaways from Ascension's Implementation of Activate Learning's Solution

The quality of the materials and the support that accompanied the curricula stood out to Ascension's leadership team as essential to their success. Even their most seasoned teachers remained open minded and engaged with the new programming, eager to roll out the approach to better engage their students. This was due, in part, to Activate Learning's ability to match Ascension's innovative spirit, an attribute reflected in the student body as well. "Our kids are collaborative, have purpose, and feel empowered, just like we do. I think that is just embedded throughout our culture," explained Babin.

The ease of implementation also stunned the group. Babin and her team found the rollout of IQWST with OpenSciEd helped teachers reach their STEM students more effectively than ever before, as gaps in the prior curricula were insurmountable for individual teachers to bridge alone. Teachers were also empowered with the freedom and flexibility they needed to be individuals in the classroom and address individual student needs along the way while sticking to a set curriculum vision encompassing the district as a whole. Ascension was able to define an overarching mission for their STEM program with a consistent implementation, resources, and teacher training.

The impact on student engagement has also been promising. Babin noted, "When you walk in a [class]room, the models that kids are making now, and that they're thinking, analyzing, evaluating, and making decisions on are really high quality. We never saw that before we started implementing IQWST and OpenSciEd." The specially crafted hybrid curriculum also addressed the district's desire to enhance student conversations in science. Within the science and engineering programs, educators have noticed a significant increase in discussion and interaction. This directly corresponds with the NGSS three-dimensional approach, which calls for collaboration and discourse to stimulate interest in the sciences.

The Future Looks Bright for Ascension's Students

While the pandemic was a setback for school districts, teachers, and students across the country, districts and educators are recognizing their current stance and the need for change in order to recover key learning dynamics for their student body. Transformative curricula like those provided by Activate Learning's deep partner portfolio can not only accelerate program recovery and implementation, but also help with ongoing teacher training on a professional level. Babin shared that the district's professional learning communities continue to thrive as spaces for feedback, encouragement, and continued education.



Activate Learning is a great support system for me, for the district, for the teachers, and for the kids. It's a one-stop-shop for everything that we need to support our science program and science instruction in our district.



Erin Babin, Ed.D., curriculum specialist, Ascension Parish Schools

Ascension's proactive response to the gaps it identified in its STEM programming is just one example of how the district continues to position its educators for success. Teaming up with Activate Learning, Ascension provides ongoing support to new and existing teachers, ensuring they have everything they need to facilitate the curricula with their students. Being able to leverage a comprehensive science education suite from Activate Learning empowered Ascension's teachers – and their students – to ignite learning in science and engineering in an engaging manner that also scaled to their unique needs. Activate Learning does more than help schools implement existing curricula; it helps teachers master the curricula through professional learning that translates to the classroom and to student outcomes.

Prepare All Students for a Phenomenal Future with Activate Learning

Ready to activate science education in your district? Take the next step by contacting us to receive more information about Activate Learning's one-stop-shop science learning solutions, including IQWST and OpenSciEd curricula, science kit materials, and professional learning for teachers. Don't miss this opportunity to transform teaching and learning in your school district - act now!



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