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CASE STUDY: A Verso Transition

New Jersey's Freehold Township includes 8 schools and 300 teachers that educate 4,250 students.

Boasting a population rich with cultural heritage and potential, the teachers here work with gifted, ELL, and special education students, and each educator faces the challenge of staying on top of their game while giving every student the best education possible. To help its staff accomplish this, each teacher in every elementary school has access to Verso—the cloud-based platform that supports teachers with high-impact teaching strategies.

Freehold Township originally implemented Verso as a way to use technology to improve outdated homework practices. To be able to shift the focus to higher-order thinking skills, they had to leverage student technology in a way that would improve previous homework practices. After some research by administration, including principals Eddie Aldarelli and Jeff Huguenin, Verso rose to the top as something to try: it offered questions to help students solve problems, it allowed teachers a window of understanding into what kids were doing when they left school, and it acted as a tool to help gather more data on student thinking and behavior than they were otherwise getting. As Superintendent Kasun shared, it was an added bonus that Verso helped improve academic engagement while visibly transitioning students from surface to deep learning.

The Verso roll-out began district wide just two years ago with five elementary schools, two middle schools, and a single early childhood center.

At that time, Kasun's vision for Freehold Township included a goal that will ring true for many districts: to allow students to own the opportunity to generate discussion. A blended and personalized learning structure would allow Freehold's students to act as leaders of their own learning, Kasun believed, and he emphasized the use of technology to foster that personalized learning. In recognition of his efforts, Kasun was chosen to participate in the first cohort for the Lexington Education Leadership (LELA) Award. This six-month Fellowship helped create a vision and plan—which has been supported and enhanced by Verso's question starters to empower and engage students—and has helped transform learning throughout the district. Recently, FTSD was also invited to be a member of the League of Innovative Schools and was named as one of the 20 most innovative school districts in the country by Digital Promise. As a result of those successes, as well as others, Dr. Ross Kasun was selected as the New Jersey Superintendent of the Year for the 2016–2017 school year.

Verso engages educators in future-ready professional coaching, providing real-time feedback to the teacher on their direct impact on student engagement. Educators connect with each other and are supported with high-impact teaching strategies proven to activate learning through thought-provoking questioning and effective instructional design.



“By design, Verso facilitates conversation through effective questioning. Given that, we use Verso to foster healthy dialogue that empowers the voices of teachers so that our professional development and learning grows exponentially.”

— Dr. Jeff Huguenin,
Principal,
Joseph J. Catena
Elementary School



"We find that our students are asking better questions now; they're collaborating and providing feedback by commenting on other student's posts. Students who were previously reluctant to share have found their voice, and many are now excited to obtain 'likes' and other peer feedback."

—Dr. Ross Kasun,
Superintendent,
Freehold Township



"In our experience with other technology resources, initial training is provided in a "one size fits all" capacity and then teachers are simply left on their own. Verso teachers have a very different experience, with first-rate initial training followed by personalized support using the automated feedback. This model supports our overarching personalized approach to instruction. Brilliant!"

— Eddie Aldarelli,
Principal,
West Freehold
Elementary School



The power of personalized training

All teachers were initially offered the opportunity to use Verso as a powerful homework tool that empowered students with anonymity. To administrators' surprise, teachers quickly reported that they'd discovered a secondary selling feature: Verso functioned as a powerful professional development tool for delivering feedback and encouraging collaboration. Further experimentation revealed that Verso was powerful across the board and could bring value to nearly every aspect of the teaching and learning process.

Phil Stubbs, Verso's Chief Academic Officer, worked with the district to kick off their initial training with two one-day workshops focused on the pedagogy of teaching with questions and engagement. Rather than emphasizing the process of using Verso, Stubbs illustrated how Verso can be a means to an end, with that end being a more engaged environment of active questioning.

"Our teachers are working differently now; they have the data they need to adjust lessons and move all students forward. It's such a powerful forum," said Eddie Aldarelli, principal at West Freehold Elementary School. "Teachers are now focusing more on the ability to ask questions, the process of asking questions, how powerful those questions can be, and the art of instructional practices." Since Stubbs' initial workshop, all teacher training is now customized based on the professional development elements of Verso itself.

"Now that we are doing more formalized training and seeing more teachers implement Verso, we are watching them discover and share new and valuable ways to use it," Aldarelli shared. "This is an example of a practice we've found to be consistently successful: we introduce a product that we think highly of and then rely on staff experience to discover additional ways to use the tool to their benefit. In this case, we're seeing an especially strong response."

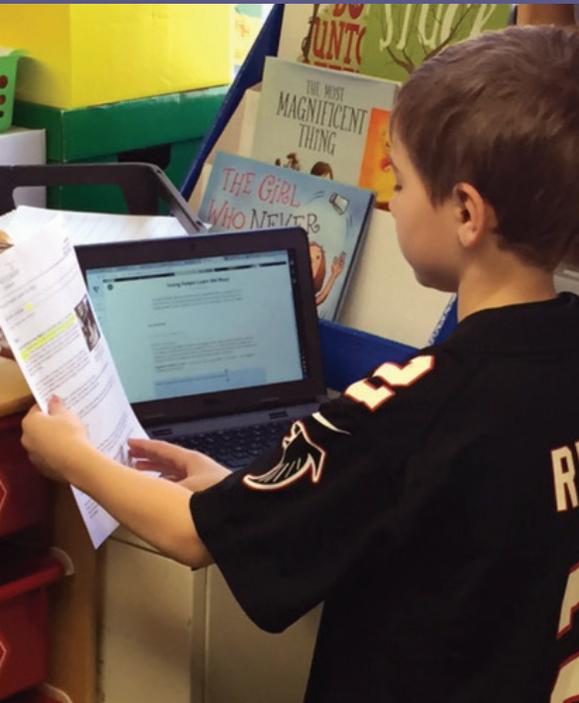
A recipe for success

The teachers at Freehold Township share a common affinity for Verso's Recipe Cards, a feature that helps save time in planning and preparation with simple and precise strategies sent via email and in-app they can apply directly in the upcoming lesson. "The recipe cards are so beneficial because teachers can use these tips in 'real-time' and make immediate adjustments, as well as plan for future lessons," Kasun said. Huguenin agreed. "The recipe cards are not a script, but more of a hint. They give teachers the freedom to do what they want, but with inspiration."

As Huguenin pointed out, one of Verso's best attributes is that it supports teachers by giving them what they need, when they need it. "Teachers don't even have to request recipe cards," he said. "Because the program is so responsive, it supports teachers and leads them forward. They can just take it and run with it." Aldarelli describes the cards as "the clarification, the guiding tips and hints on enhancing the questioning process. From both a student engagement standpoint and that of a teacher input standpoint, it points in the direction of a highly effective teaching practice."

“The professional development we’re seeing with Verso encompasses the entire student/teacher experience: helping teachers improve student engagement, providing visibility on student thinking, and helping to transition students into a noticeably deeper stage of learning.”

—Dr. Ross Kasun,
Superintendent,
Freehold Township



Freehold Township favors Verso because it is a one-of-a-kind program that:



- Uses automated feedback on classroom practice to deliver adaptive and personalized professional development
- Offers simple and precise on-demand strategies as well as amazing creative latitude
- Provides personalization for each teacher’s needs and those of students

For students? For teachers? For both?

Even though Freehold Township set out to use Verso as a student tool, its multi-faceted capabilities turned it into a teaching, learning, professional development and collaboration tool for the district’s teachers. “Our district continues to explore the capability of Verso as a teacher and student-learning tool and we have been extremely impressed with how the platform provides an excellent balance between the two,” says Huguenin. Aldarelli agrees, stating that while Verso is a dynamic student learning tool that gives each student a voice, “it provides us with an opportunity to review highly effective pedagogy with our teachers so they can improve their practice on demand.”

Aldarelli, Kasun, and Huguenin emphasize the opportunity to mentor and support their teachers while they’re using Verso. Particularly, according to Aldarelli, post-observation conferences with teachers allow for a useful discussion of the role of student questioning and reflection upon how the platform can enhance student discussion to promote deeper learning. Each elementary school has established a team of teachers that provide assistance to their colleagues to assist in identifying a quality question focus that stimulates rich discussion, Aldarelli explained. “This type of mentoring has proven to be extremely successful and well received.”

“The Verso approach to professional development provides teachers with an opportunity to openly talk about their teaching practice,” he continued. “Campus data enables our district to track the levels of engagement for specific question topics as well as identify the types of activities that foster high levels of engagement.”

Watching the excitement build

“We are hearing so much about the engagement piece,” Huguenin said. “Students are incredibly excited about the feedback element.” Teachers report that conversations start online and become something more with students, especially boys who were previously reluctant to speak up, who are now feeling exceedingly engaged. Not only do all students feel more comfortable contributing using Verso due to anonymity and ease of use, but the safe space for commenting makes a difference in how much feedback they supply. “Participation is high, and the kids love it. It’s a safe place to engage and kids want to collaborate. No one is afraid to ‘raise their hand’ anymore,” said Huguenin.

With both teachers and students focusing on asking questions and with an all-time low in anxiety of what others might think of their comments, students are now in possession of a forum in which to reflect on in class and for homework, which empowers teachers to make every lesson better than the last.

“Where are we now?” Kasun asks. “We are on a path toward personalizing learning for all students with much more explicit awareness of what their needs are. Through the utilization of Verso—using reports, on student engagement, instructional design and teacher reflections etc.—we’ve been able to help teachers meet the needs of each student in an unparalleled way. Verso is really the answer to so many of the challenges we were facing.”