

# District Spotlight: Liberty Public Schools

Located just north of Kansas City, Missouri, Liberty Public Schools (LPS) is a growing suburban school district of approximately 12,500 students. LPS leaders began their OER journey in late 2015 as they reviewed the district's science and social studies curricula up for renewal. Andrew Marcinek, the former open education adviser at the Office of Educational Technology, approached LPS leaders and encouraged their participation in the #GoOpen Campaign to further support this work. With guidance from Marcinek and Columbus Municipal School District in Mississippi, a #GoOpen Ambassador District with significant experience in implementing OER, LPS leaders selected 15 courses in secondary science and middle school social studies as appropriate candidates to pilot the use of OER (LPS, 2018a).

From the beginning, district leaders worked to develop a sustainable approach to their OER initiative. First, they developed a coordinated team approach, bringing together diverse voices to oversee and implement the initiative. Second, they thoughtfully considered ways to reinvest limited funds to support teachers, rather than purchase more static, proprietary content. Finally, district leaders removed potential technical and policy barriers. The success of LPS demonstrates the advantages of creating sustainable OER implementation models.

## A Coordinated Team Approach

LPS leaders recruited various perspectives onto a core leadership team, which was responsible for creating a strategic rollout plan and overseeing the entire OER initiative. The leadership team included district-level administrators, who would provide policy insights, and departmental directors, who would leverage their content expertise and curriculum writing experiences to ensure the quality of OER. LPS leaders also formed implementation teams, comprised of teacher leaders who would review state standards and existing learning materials to curate or create the OER appropriate for each course. Implementation teams established standing meetings and

online communication channels for teachers to regularly collaborate. Over the years, as the number of OER-using courses increased, implementation teams brought on board more teacher leaders.

## Reinvesting Funds to Support Teachers

Another instrumental component of LPS' sustainability plan involved reinvesting hundreds of thousands of dollars, previously allocated for purchasing proprietary learning materials, into its teachers. Teacher leaders on OER implementation teams designed and submitted a three-year plan to propose how best to allocate the saved funds to support their efforts. As a result, district leaders provided these teachers with a stipend for taking on critical roles in OER implementation. They also created a compensation pathway to encourage new personnel to join the process; teacher leaders in their first year of OER course development were compensated for up to 160 hours of their work, up to 80 hours in their second year, and up to 40 hours in subsequent years as they maintained and updated course materials.

Another portion of the saved funds were reinvested into professional learning opportunities for teachers (e.g. attending national conferences or inviting guest speakers), where they would deeply engage with the curriculum and participate in activities to improve instructional practices. Teachers could also use the money to attend and present their knowledge of OER at national or regional #GoOpen summits. A final portion covered costs of purchasing digital resources to support OER implementation (LPS, 2018a).

## Removing Technical and Policy Barriers

LPS leaders additionally sought to keep OER sustainable in their district by providing maintenance support and facilitating the initiative through necessary policy measures. IT technicians in each building troubleshooted any small glitches and difficulties with digital tools. Eric Langhorst, an eighth grade U.S. history, computer science and student broadcasting teacher on the LPS implementation team, served as

the OER coordinator and offered support for teachers publishing OER by creating a districtwide protocol for the use of Google Docs. Langhorst is also the primary point of contact for teachers accessing the OER page within LPS LEADS, a virtual hub for the district's teaching and learning resources (LPS, 2018b). Furthermore, the leadership team made joint decisions to solve macro-level issues, such as addressing the textbook adoption cycle. Local educational agencies in Missouri, including LPS, have control over their textbook adoption cycles and the LPS leadership team shortened the timeline of their digital textbook adoption cycle. District leaders had previously used a six-year cycle as suggested by publishers of proprietary learning materials, but they moved to an adoption cycle of one to three years, creating more frequent opportunities to choose OER.

### Outcomes of OER Implementation

Although OER usage is not mandatory in the district, LPS leaders have observed numerous positive outcomes from their OER initiative. The number of courses that include OER has steadily grown to almost 50. OER is also embedded into other ongoing initiatives, such as project-based learning. For example, during the 2017 solar eclipse, LPS was in the geographic path of totality. The district's science teachers used this opportunity and OER's sharing capabilities to design a districtwide lesson (Wheeler, 2017) on this natural phenomenon, through which students could gain critical data collection and graphing skills (e.g., monitoring temperature changes over the course of the eclipse). The benefits of OER have also extended to LPS teachers. Because implementation teams engage in deep conversations about content and pedagogy, they have become more knowledgeable about how to improve their instruction.

LPS leaders believe in sharing details about how OER has positively impacted their teachers and students. In July 2016, Liberty held the first #GoOpen regional summit, inviting 40 school districts to learn more about OER. LPS also serves as a #GoOpen Ambassador District, mentoring others just as they had been mentored in previous years. Finally, LPS publicly shares many of its resources, published under a Creative Commons license, such as budgeting guidelines, OER development contracts, OER approval processes and OER-using courses (LPS, 2017).

Jeanette Westfall, Ph.D., executive director of curriculum, instruction, and staff development, and a key figure in the LPS OER initiative, shared that true success with OER occurs not by simply focusing on the replacement of proprietary textbooks. "OER [itself] is not the goal of the work...it's not about blanketing everyone with just another tool," she said during an interview at the March 2018 PK-12 OER Learning Network convening in Washington, DC. Westfall explained that the transformative power of OER has been realized at LPS through the development of systems that deliberately engage, support and recognize teachers in implementing new learning materials.



Jeanette Westfall (middle) at the March PK-12 OER Learning Network Convening  
 Photograph provided by New America

## References

- Liberty Public Schools (LPS). (2017).** *LPS district #GoOpen funding & expenditure guidelines*. Retrieved from [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1KkfS5P73R7UclOH7Qi89wSVFGPRcs55fkF\\_oBdXWQak/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1KkfS5P73R7UclOH7Qi89wSVFGPRcs55fkF_oBdXWQak/edit)
- Liberty Public Schools(LPS). (2018a).** *OER: A district's journey of adopting open educational resources*. Retrieved from <https://sites.google.com/site/libertyoer/home>
- Liberty Public Schools (LPS). (2018b).** *What it means to #GoOpen*. Retrieved from <https://www.lps53.org/Page/6388>
- Wheeler, C. (2017).** *For Northland schools, total solar eclipse a teachable moment*. Retrieved from <http://www.kcur.org/post/northland-schools-total-solar-eclipse-teachable-moment#stream/0>