# All Aboard the LMS Bandwagon: Bishop McNamara High School Case Study

"Four months. That's all we had," reminisced Janice Cuellar, Director of Web Communications at Bishop McNamara High School in Maryland. "For our entire deployment process, from start to finish; from our first interview with our Project Manager until we launched. Just Four months."



Four months: a common, but difficult goal set by schools when they're working on their own as Janice was. (To be clear, she actually refers to it as "a one-and-a-half person team" as she had a little help from a former student who recently graduated college.)

But let's get to the bottom line quickly here: Janice didn't have a huge team (as a matter of fact, her two administrators moved on to become principals shortly before the deployment process), nor a wealth of resources to ensure she'd launch an award-winning website.

**She's just like every one of you.**

She's cautious yet ambitious, intelligent and experienced, genuine and calm, and most importantly, she wants what is best for her school community. And just like all other one-stop-shop departments, she was burning the candle at both ends to ensure the success of the school's website.

"It was really stressful at times," she said. "I was constantly combing through other websites, and re-thinking every decision I made along the way."

But what makes Bishop McNamara's launch unique? It's not that Janice did it almost completely solo. It's even not the thought-out (and award-winning) detail and design. (Although, kudos to you, Janice.)

It's that she was able to launch a brand new website *and* successfully launch a brand new Learning Management System (LMS) back-to-back, escaping negative feedback and receiving what we see as a standing ovation from administration, faculty, staff, students and current families alike.

## The Key to a Smooth Transition

The key to any transition can be summed up in one word: training. And especially in Janice's case, where the transition was moving at hyper speed, training was the backbone of the launch and the adaptation.

"I'll admit, the transition was rushed, but I took all the training, and it helped...a lot," she said.

Although there were no teachers at the school all summer to train, Janice brought them in a little early for training in the middle of August. Hosting three different training sessions for new teachers and returning faculty that ran about 90 minutes, Janice sought to get her faculty up-to-speed on the entire Finalsite Platform before students flooded the hallways and no one had time to get up to speed.

"Additionally, Finalsite has such an abundance of online training, so I made that information available in August so teachers could learn exactly how to use it," she said. And most importantly, "I just made myself available to help them set up their pages and customize them."

Janice also created a slideshow that described the login process, set up a blog to open a Q&A forum, and took the time to show teachers on a one-on-one basis where everything was and how to us it.

"Everything was really time consuming, but extremely helpful," she said.

## A Successful LMS Launch

How do you get your entire school on board with an LMS? Get the buy-in from your decision makers. They're the ones who will ensure the program is implemented school-wide. "I asked the principal if he wanted to try the LMS in a few of our classrooms," she said. "But, he was so excited and wanted to do it completely across the board for all our classes."

Well, that was almost too easy, don't you think? After the buy-in — which is almost always the most difficult battle for schools — Janice worked tirelessly for the remainder of the deployment.

"As rushed as it was, but I will tell you — it was *fine*," Janice reassured.

"I think it's important to note that moving work online is not foreign to our faculty and students. This is something they are already doing, so that made it easier."

Today, all 121 faculty and staff have all their classes are online.

And with a shift from 0% of the school using an LMS to 100%, it's expected there will be some "fires" to put out.

Mostly, Janice felt some push back from the students. "For the most part I think it was the accountability," she said. "It's taken a lot of excuses out of the equation for students and it really holds them much more accountable. And quite frankly it holds the teachers much more accountable as well."

## The ROI of Online Learning

**1. Improved Accessibility and Communications**

Moving to an LMS offers some serious ROI — rushed, bumpy, and smooth transitions alike.

"First of all, it's a culture change," said Janice. And that was a good thing for Bishop McNamara High School. "People went from saying 'I don't know what's going on' to 'did you see?' and 'have you heard?'"

With new avenues of constant communication at their fingertips, faculty, staff and students quickly adapted — and they loved it.

"Before we didn't have a responsive website, so that has been the biggest boom to our communication. The fact that now people can pull up the website and access their classes right from their phone has been so convenient," said Janice.

The school already had a 1:1 iPad program in place, but students and faculty couldn't access their resources effectively. Now they can because of the user-friendly and responsive LMS and website.

"The students love having the 24-7 access," she said. "They can get what they need when it's most convenient for them."

It's not just about the accessibility of the information, but what that accessibility has done for the classroom.

"I do think this has allowed the teachers to spend less time in the classroom with things the kids can do online," she said. "Teachers can say 'I need you to look at this slideshow tonight and then we'll discuss it tomorrow,' or 'I need you to read this article and we'll talk about it tomorrow,' which prompts more in-class discussions rather than one-way lectures."

**2. A New Level of Engagement**

The LMS "makes education more of a community effort than that of a single person," Janice said. "It's the teacher, the parent, counselors, even the coaches, all collaborating to make this work."

"When it comes to teenagers, you have to teach them something, but you need to do it in a fun way," said Janice. "Technology is something they are interested in anyway, and the LMS makes learning social. It puts learning in a medium they love and that excites them, rather than bores them. **That is the key.**"

Using the LMS, Bishop McNamara High School offers engaging classrooms rather than lecture halls. For example, students love using the discussion boards on the LMS. "This is something we've never had before and it gets kids engaged online," said Janice

"Sometimes you have to do this with teenagers," Janice laughed.

But it's true. Teenagers are tough to keep engaged, especially with so many distractions. "But the LMS makes becoming disengaged less likely, and you can see if a child is not participating," she said. "Not to mention, it's fabulous that guidance counselors can see what students are having problems with. So, instead of getting one point of view from a student, they can look themselves," she said.

The same goes for parents. Janice is also noticing a growing, engaged parental audience. For most schools, helicopter parents and completely disconnected parents are extremes to normal parent engagement. The LMS handles those extremes, and everywhere in-between.

"Parents are given the opportunity to work collaboratively and be engaged with what's going on in the classroom," she said. "They know what's going on and what assignments their child is missing, because they have access to all classes showing assignments, test dates, outlines, and so on."

**3. A Level Playing Field**

The classroom can be an intimidating environment. From classroom anxiety and speech impediments to insecurities or a plain lack of studying, classroom participation can end up on the low-end.

According to Janice, the LMS has been a great asset for that reason. "The LMS - it also levels the playing field for students who have challenges participating in class for one reason or another," she said. "But when they are able to put thoughts in writing in a medium where they are comfortable, it gives them the freedom to express themselves without feeling insecure."

## Conclusion

With the initial launch in her rearview, Janice is still working to improve communications among constituents. With eNotify up and running, some alumni portals on the way, and other updates rolling out constantly, Bishop McNamara's online communications are constantly improving.

Her favorite part? Her ability to further her school's mission online.

"We call ourselves family, and this keeps our family connected," she said. "It's a great program and I love it."