

ChicagoHeightsPatch

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Heights Schools Let Parents and Students Track Progress Online

As Heights schools continue to make technology upgrades, parents can expect to have real-time access to monitor their children's progress.

By **Christopher Paicely**

While Chicago Heights School District 170 kids will get to enjoy their first snow day of the year tomorrow, any day now parents will get a treat of their own.

TeacherEase, a web-based software that allows parents to track the progress of their children, will be provided for parents and students at the district through an initiative called Parent Portal, according to the district's chief information officer Edward Mrosek.

"It's completely web-based, and it doesn't require any hardware or software," Mrosek said. "It's accessible from anywhere in the world. All of our student data is tracked there."

Mrosek said teachers will use TeacherEase to record attendance in their classrooms and to record grades, as well as to track disciplinary issues in students. It will also be used to report class, school and district information to the state. Mrosek said the district has already decided which school will be the test subject the new system.

"Starting in late January, early February, Greenbriar School's going to be demoing what we call Parent Portal," Mrosek said. "Parents will have access to view their child's attendance, discipline information, grades, assignments, anything detailed that the teacher can store on that data, the parents will have access to."

Why Greenbriar? Well let's just say this Parent Portal might not be so new to everyone.



Students at District 170 will soon be able to track their own progress online, according to Greenbriar principal James Kendall. Credit courtesy Edward Mrosek

"Greenbriar actually used the program [TeacherEase] that we're using district-wide," Mrosek explained. "Greenbriar's used it in the past, so we know that the teachers there are more familiar with it." Greenbriar had TeacherEase before the district as a whole decided to use it, but parents lost access after the district decided to implement the system in all it's schools, according to Greenbriar principal James Kendall.

"Because a couple of schools had purchased TeacherEase as a standalone building, we had autonomy to do what we wanted with it," Kendall said. "Now that we've purchased the program as a district for our database, we've lost a little control. It was open and then it was shut, and parents were like 'I can't check anymore!' I just tell them, 'call me and I'll check for you.'"

Currently, if parents try to log into TeacherEase using the account that was created for them last fall, they will see a message stating, "Sorry, this school has temporarily turned off parent and student web access. If you have questions, please contact your school."

Kendall said he believes parents of Greenbriar students will be happy to see access returned, mainly because it provides a safeguard against any dishonesty.

"Parents don't always know. They are hoping that everything is turned in and comes back, but we were all students at one point in time," Kendall said. "Some things don't get turned in and some papers don't make it home because of a grade. It gives the parents another eye on what to expect for progress reports and report cards."

But parents aren't the only ones who will benefit from access to TeacherEase, according to Kendall.

"Additionally, students have access," Kendall added. "Students can keep track of what their grade is. When you start hitting sixth, seventh and eighth grade, students are grade-oriented, and they want to know how they're performing. It'll be a pretty valuable tool for everyone."

Upgrades to Up Grades

The implementation of TeacherEase district-wide might not have been possible without the other technology upgrades Mrosek said he has helped with since he joined the district.

"One of the biggest changes we've made in the past year and a half since I started is all of the buildings were connected to the Internet on old copper T1 lines, which gives you 1.5 [megabit] access to the Internet," Mrosek said. "Most residential consumers have faster Internet through just Comcast or DSL than the buildings had."

With help from federal fund, Mrosek helped upgrade the district to a fiber-optic cloud that gave 500 megabit access between all the buildings, making complex databases like TeacherEase easier to implement.

"That's been one of the biggest upgrades," Mrosek added.

District 170 has also added 31 SMART boards to the schools, making for a total of 150 of the boards District 163 Supt. Joyce Carmine found so useful.

The district has multiple classrooms where students are doing activities on iPads and iPod touches as well, according to Mrosek, who said he thinks the technology keeps the students locked into their work.

"The kids are just enamored using the devices," Mrosek said. "They're engaged. They're quiet. They treat the devices with respect."



Chief information officer Edward Mrosek said iPads have been key in teaching students this school year. Credit courtesy Edward Mrosek