Scheduling WIN blocks with Meeting Needs

MeetingNeeds
a product of SchoolData.net

In his first year as the superintendent at La Conner School District, Will Nelson noticed a worrying trend. "We were doing a lot of pullout services," Nelson says, to provide students with individualized attention in areas where they needed extra support. However, using pullouts meant those students were also "missing the activity or the learning happening during that time." So not only was there the potential for students to fall behind on classroom instruction, but there was also an "equity component" to students who had to sacrifice a shared activity.

Nelson asked his principals to investigate district-wide "what I need," or "WIN," blocks. Instead of just certain students receiving special services, these periods could be used to empower every student to seek out a topic that interested them or where they needed extra help.

With this goal, a group of La Conner administrators, teachers, and students sat in on WIN sessions in the Meridian School District in nearby Bellingham, Wash. They left excited to pursue their own WIN blocks, with a structure that met their district's needs and objectives.

Beth Clothier, La Conner's assistant director of teaching and learning, says, "we realized right away" that implementing WIN blocks, even in relatively small districts, was a complex undertaking. "If you've got students going in all different directions and they're not assigned to a set class period, how do you know that everyone is where they need to be?" The "accountability piece," where each educator knows which students they're responsible for at any given time, was one Clothier and Nelson wanted to solidify before implementing WIN time themselves.
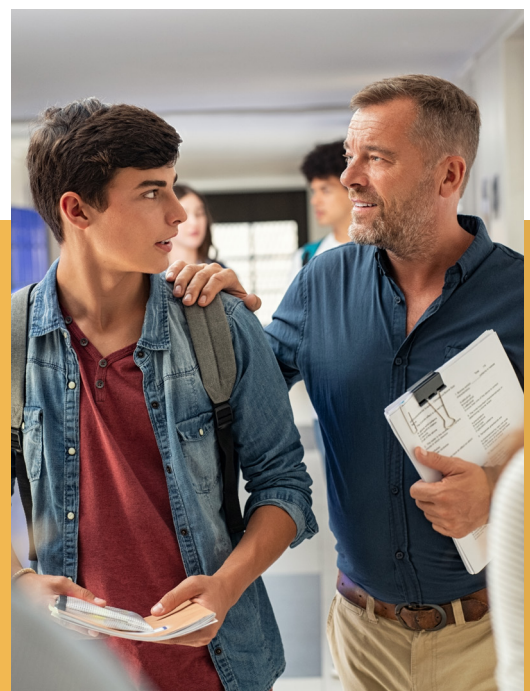
A new tool from a trusted partner

When they learned of the new Meeting Needs scheduling application, "it made perfect sense," says Clothier. Other products "had some nice features," but in SchoolData.net, "we have a suite of tools that we're already using." Even better, "our students know how to log in" via a student portal to use their High School and Beyond applications. "And all the things in the Meeting Needs tool were the things that we were looking for."

Nelson adds, "From a district office perspective, it made much more sense for us to stick with one vendor. It's easier for manageability and sustainability," and from a tech-support perspective, SchoolData.net is "awesome. We're very pleased with the customer service that we receive."

With their application chosen, La Conner rolled out a test of their WIN time with middle schoolers and high schoolers starting in April 2022. The first step was to create a weekly WIN block on Wednesdays. Then, a few weeks later, "we added the layer of the Meeting Needs piece," Clothier says. This phase gave district staff several weeks to determine "the things that were going to work, and what we needed students to know."

Administrators leaned on student as well as teacher input during the pilot period. "We kept going back to them and asking, 'How's this working? What do you need?'" Clothier says. "They were instrumental in helping us make sure that we got it to work the way students would make it work," rather than focusing exclusively on educators' concerns.

Because Meeting Needs was originally developed to schedule virtual-learning sessions during COVID closures, there were some important adjustments to be made. With La Conner's help, SchoolData.net spent the spring transforming the application from one in which students met with the same teachers every week to one that offered much more flexibility. From the elementary to the high school level, Nelson says, "students can choose which teacher they need to go to if they have questions about certain concepts, or want to follow up on activities or tests that they've missed."

With the updates in place, Nelson says, "we're happy" with the application. "We couldn't have made our WIN blocks happen without it. There's no way."

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Support for strategic initiatives

After the successful spring pilot, La Conner increased their WIN blocks from Wednesdays only to four times a week for the 2022-23 school year, with a primary focus on interventions. Nelson says that while many interventions will be based on needs that appear during classroom instruction, "we're rolling out Meeting Needs at the same time we're rolling out i-Ready, so interventions could also be tied to knowledge strands and the data that's coming out of our i-Ready diagnostics." Once student needs are identified, educators have the option to assign students to specific WIN sessions for remediation.

Clothier explains that students can see if they've been teacher-assigned, and if not, they can peruse "the whole breadth of sessions" to find ones that apply to them. The size of each meeting can also be capped by the teacher to ensure they have time for individualized attention.

"There are so many ways of unpacking what supports a student might need," Nelson says, "and we're utilizing all of those" to ensure students get their needs met. Educators of Highly Capable students and English language learners, for example, have started using specialized WIN offerings and will likely expand those options as the year progresses.

Moving forward, Nelson anticipates that they will manage more than just WIN sessions in the Meeting Needs application. From migrant education to mental health counseling, specialists across the district will be able to set up office hours or other meetings with individuals and small groups. "SchoolData has been really great about enabling us to get all of our paraeducators in there," says Clothier. "Any adult — our counselors, tribal advocates, whoever — can set up their own sessions" as informational presentations or appointment slots that students can sign up for. "It really gives a lot of choice and a lot of opportunity to students."
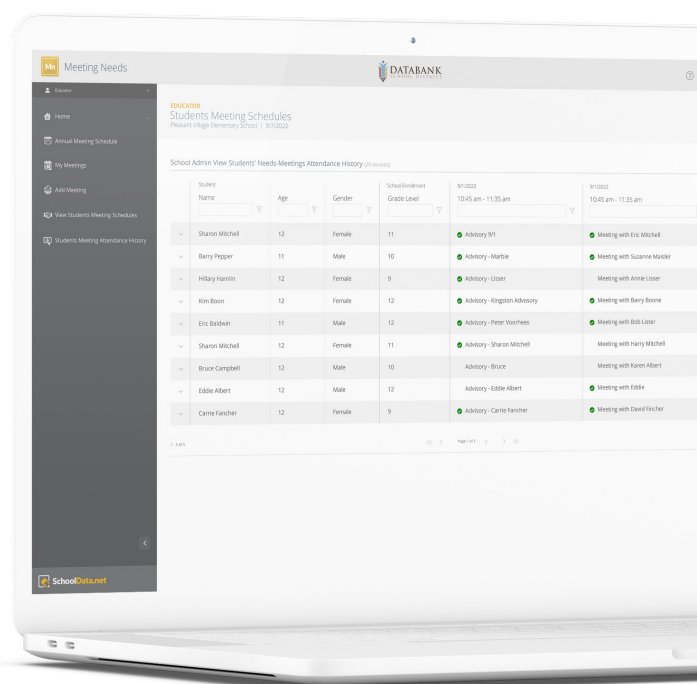
It's no accident that La Conner is encouraging students to choose "what I need" for four sessions a week. "Choice is an important concept to us," says Nelson. With the WIN blocks, "we're not doing something *to* the students." If there isn't a need for a teacher to assign a class, "the students have the choice about where they want to go. There's some accountability on the teachers' parts" when it comes to offering the help students need and confirming their attendance, "but also on the student's part." Each WIN choice helps a student take increased ownership of their education.

Nelson also notes that, because many students are accessing Meeting Needs on their cell phones, they're getting a lesson on "how to use technology in a way that is productive and appropriate for learning purposes."

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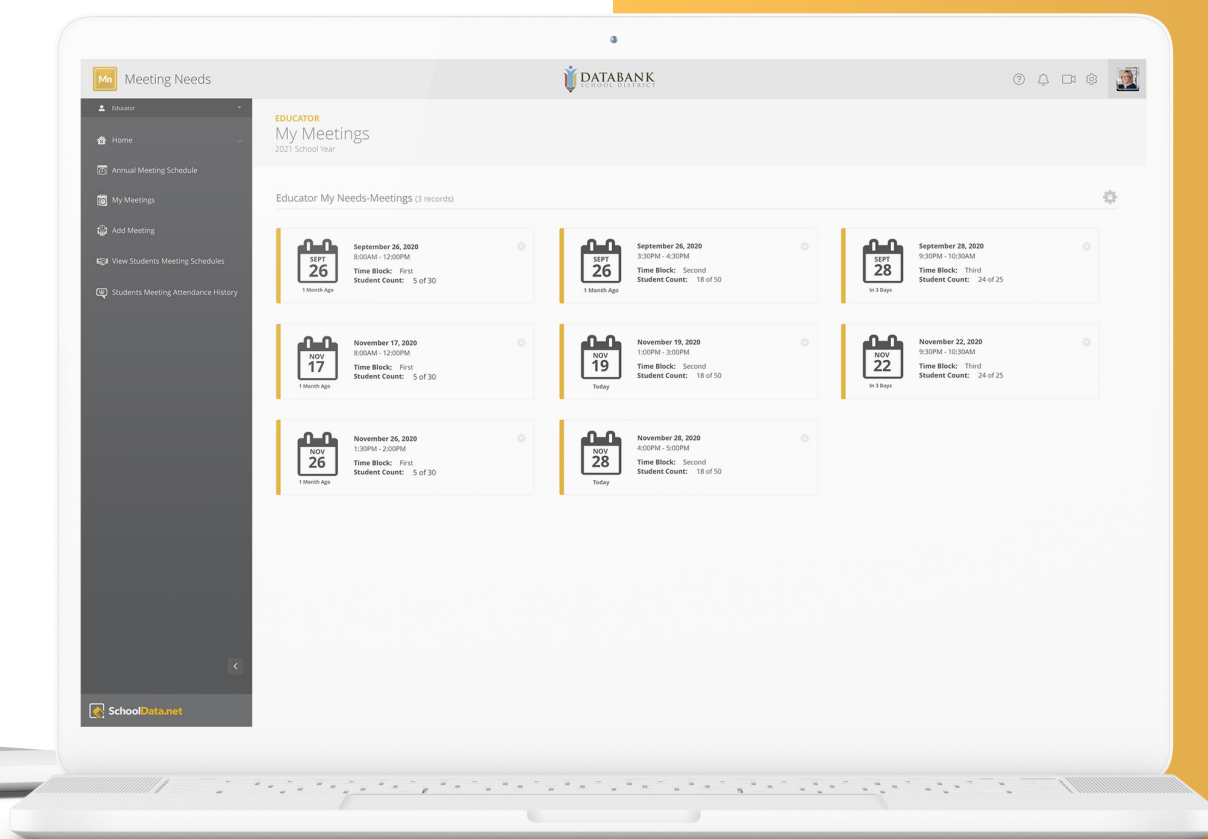
Adding value at every level

Nelson believes the ultimate value of using Meeting Needs comes from "allowing us to provide more services to kids in a way that meets their needs, but also meets the needs of the staff."

Clothier likewise feels the benefit of having technology that lessens the burden for educators. "Without Meeting Needs, somebody would have to be organizing who's doing what session and what students are there, using a paper sign-in or some other format that's not trackable." Having all the students' WIN attendance recorded where it can be monitored provides Clothier and her colleagues with "peace of mind."

While Clothier appreciates the ease of scheduling — a function she claims is "making WIN possible for us" —the fact that Meeting Needs can also be customized to empower student choice has made it ideal for furthering the district's highest objectives. "Having all of those pieces in one tool has been fantastic."

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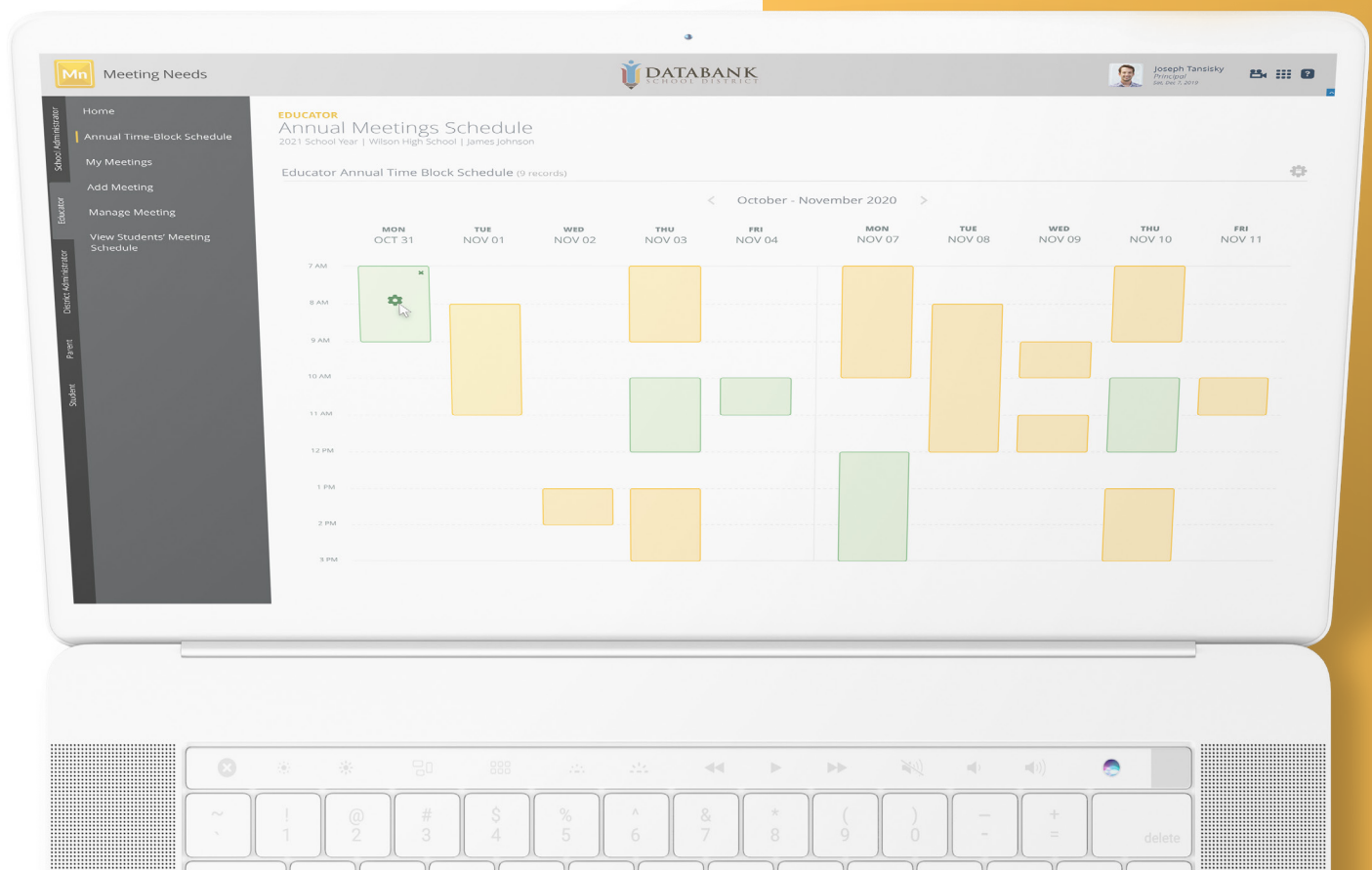
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