

Title of Nomination: Academic Standards e-Government Initiative

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CATEGORY: Innovative_Use_of_Technology

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Executive Summary
NASCIO Recognition Awards 2003 Nomination
Innovative Use of Technology
Minnesota Academic Standards/Education Department
e-Government Project

Facing a less than 90-day deadline to solicit applications for and assemble a committee, draft new academic standards for state public schools, solicit public opinion on the standards, revise the drafts and present them to the Legislature, the Minnesota Department of Education (formerly Children, Families & Learning) decided to use available technological tools in innovative ways.

We used existing e-mail and Internet technological solutions to establish new avenues for real-time, two-way communication, both between the department and its audiences and among volunteers working with the department on important policy matters. In the process, we saved considerable staff time and resources, forged new connections with our stakeholders and created tools we plan to use in the future to improve both our policy decisions and the way we present them to Minnesota residents.

Our innovative use of some of the latest technologies helped us complete this important project well within our time and resource targets. Our experience should continue to benefit state government and residents as we move forward to develop new standards in other areas, launch new projects such as helping with the design process for Minnesota's 2005 state quarter, and for years to come.

Justification
NASCIO Recognition Awards 2003 Nomination
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Minnesota Academic Standards/Department of Education
e-Government Project

a) Description of the project, including length of time in operation.

The appointment of a new Minnesota education commissioner in January 2003 launched an unprecedented effort to develop new academic standards in language arts and mathematics for the state's public schools. Before a self-imposed deadline of April 15, the education commissioner and department had to solicit applications for committees to develop standards in each grade level and select committee members; arrange meetings of the committee and provide for exchanges of views between committee members when meetings were not in session; solicit and post comments on the draft standards from experts and the public; and get the standards themselves and news about them to interested members of the public in the shortest possible time.

To accomplish these goals, the Minnesota Department of Education turned to the Internet and e-mail, using both tools in new ways to connect government, volunteer committee members and members of the public through active service and two-way communication. The department intends to refine and reuse these innovative tools as it develops standards in other areas; in its continuing efforts to keep Minnesota residents informed of its activities; and as it takes a leading role in the process to design the 2005 Minnesota state quarter.

Soliciting Volunteers for Standards Committee

We anticipated receiving a high volume of applications in a short time from people interested in serving on committees to draw up new academic standards. The Internet gave us a way to take in and process these applications quickly. Using a preexisting account with Zoomerang.com, our technical staff worked with us to develop an online application form. They downloaded information from this form in Microsoft Excel format, which they then converted into an Access database. The database helped us filter the applications and select volunteers with the right mix of experience and high enthusiasm for the project representing a balance of geographic areas.

Though we also made hardcopy application forms available, by far the largest number of applications came to us over our Internet connection.

In the event, we received over 2100 applications for approximately 80 committee positions, over 750 on the first day. Without the technological solution we had put in place, this volume of applications would have overwhelmed our limited staff and set back the project timeline unacceptably.

Enhancing Communications within Committee

The volunteer members of the academic standards committee received no stipend for serving and only limited travel expenses and meals. We envisioned only a few face-to-face meetings. We needed to find a way for members to communicate with each other between committee meetings.

Our technical staff established group e-mail lists and bulletin boards for the exclusive use of committee members. These tools not only enabled committee members to talk with each other from their home locations in widely separated parts of the state; they also gave us a record of committee deliberations we could use to support the strength and thoughtfulness of the committee process for drafting new academic standards.

Soliciting Public Comment

We planned, organized and completed 14 public hearings across the state; however, given our short timeline, there was no way we could reach every community in Minnesota to hear public comments on the draft standards. Again through our arrangement with Zoomerang.com, we established an online comment form for the convenience of the many state residents who would not be able to attend our hearings. Nearly 500 individual comments came to us through the Internet.

Posting Drafts and Comments for Public Examination

As soon as the committee had developed a first draft of new academic standards, we posted these prominently on our Web site, creating a separate page for standards information. As public comments came in through the hearings and Internet and as we received comments we had solicited from experts, we wove them into HTML format copies of these drafts. We reserved separate HTML documents for general comments. The easily updateable HTML formats we created saved editing time and helped us get the latest comments out to our audience quickly.

We also posted newer standards drafts to our Web site as they were developed.

Building on the Standards Project to Enhance Two-Way Communication

We plan to use applicants' e-mail addresses collected as part of the application process to develop a group list of Minnesota residents interested in education matters. We will then be able to send e-mail updates on our latest policy decisions and initiatives to the people most interested in our issues. Building on this capacity, we have included an e-mail signup area on our Web site so visitors can add their contact information to these lists.

As we go forward to develop standards in science, social studies and other areas we will be able to draw on and refine the capacities we developed for this project. We anticipate we will be able to handle many new initiatives involving communication with Minnesota residents more efficiently and effectively using these capacities. In particular, we expect

our new tools to help the department take a leading role in the process to design the 2005 Minnesota state quarter.

b) Significance to the improvement of the operation of government.

Innovative use of Internet and e-mail communications tools:

- saves staff time, which can then be used on tasks more directly involved with the department's mission;
- allows department leadership to make better decisions that are more closely connected with the interests and opinions of state residents; and
- increases lines of communication between the state education department and the people it serves.

c) Benefits realized by service recipients, taxpayers, agency or state.

- Reduction in staff time spent on administrative chores such as processing applications and transcribing comments.
- Additional department resources to engage the public and tap its expertise on a wide range of issues.
- Quicker access to public comments leading to greater responsiveness and flexibility for department decisions.
- Increased avenues of communication to a larger audience, giving more interested residents timely and accurate information on their education department.

d) Return on investment, short-term/long-term payback (include summary calculations). Projects must exhibit measurable operational benefit.

savings estimates for standards project:

task	est. savings	est. staff time saved/ cost	est. other savings	total est. savings
application processing	cut 80%	600 hrs./ \$12,000	n/a	\$12,000
committee meetings	cut 50%	120 hrs./ \$2,400	\$2,500	\$4,900
Internet postings	cut 30%	25 hrs./ \$500	n/a	\$500
TOTALS		745 hrs./ \$14,900	\$2,500	\$17,400

Since we used existing and previously purchased tools in new ways for this solution, our investment for the technology we used on this project was minimal. As outlined above, we expect to derive additional operational benefits from future standards-setting efforts, continuing two-way communications and special projects such as the Minnesota state quarter.