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CD-based Guide to Michigan's Educational Curriculum Earns High Marks

Traverse City firms develop a user-friendly software program to search, browse state educational standards

Traverse City, MI — The Michigan Department of Education gave Traverse City-based Corbin a unique wayfinding assignment — develop a CD-based software program to help educators quickly and easily access thousands of pages of information on the state's educational benchmark standards. State educators say the intuitive and powerful program that resulted, called MI CLiMB, is the first of its kind in the nation.

“A lot is said about advancing public education in America today,” said Jeffrey Corbin, founder and president of Corbin. “We were honored to work with the Michigan Department of Education to develop a tool that will have a real impact on the quality of education delivered to students across Michigan.”

MI CLiMB (which stands for “Clarifying Language in Michigan Benchmarks”) serves a number of functions, including improving access to the benchmarks, allowing cross-referencing between benchmarks and curricula, and linking the benchmarks to real-world examples so teachers can assure that their students are learning what they need to learn. The educational tool also provides a commonly agreed upon series of benchmark definitions to educators for the first time. Glossaries of key terms and reference materials for further research are also included.

“State educators decided that some sort of tool was needed based on frequent requests for information about the state’s educational benchmarks,” said Karen R. Todorov, MI CLiMB coordinator for the Department of Education. “School- and district-based curriculum work was often delayed while further clarification of the benchmarks was sought,” she said. “Those who used the benchmarks agreed that the time had come to clarify them for the average reader.”

The Department of Education wanted a tool that was robust enough to be useful for educators who were already familiar with the benchmarks, yet simple enough for first-time users who simply wanted to gain more insight into the state's educational standards. It had to work on a range of computer systems, and provide for easy updating over the Internet as curricula subjects were added or changed.

“Our challenge was three-fold,” said Corbin lead designer Mark VanderKlipp, “to look at the total program and determine the intent for each end user, to develop and describe a functional specification for the software, and then to design an intuitive product that could be learned quickly. Through focus groups and intensive testing, the Michigan Department of Education provided useful feedback at each

step in the process. Their perspective together with our expertise made the product as successful as it is today.”

More than 1,400 teachers and curriculum specialists across the state prepared the information contained in the tool, spending seven months clarifying the hundreds of benchmarks that make up the Michigan Curriculum Framework. The thousands of pages worth of material were then turned over to the designers and information architects at Corbin, who organized the material, converted it for use in the tool, and crafted a colorful and easy-to-use interface to access the material. Corbin also developed a built-in tutorial to walk users through the tool's many functions.

Byte Productions, a Traverse City-based multimedia production firm, worked closely with Corbin to develop the databases and software engine that power the tool and incorporate the user interface developed by Corbin.

Ongoing dialogue with the Department of Education throughout the design and development process made for a smoother flow of information as different curricula subjects were added. The final tool includes educational benchmarks for English Language Arts, Social Studies, Mathematics, Science and Fine Arts, and can be expanded to include new curricula subjects and assessment examples as they are developed. It was distributed to educators in mid-March.

Todorov described the reaction to the MI CLiMB tool in the broader educational community as "unbridled excitement." Another reaction was gratitude, she said, as the program saves school districts from having to convene committees of teachers to do similar work themselves. “The tool also provides smaller school districts in Michigan the ability to elevate their curriculum planning to levels previously only practical at larger school districts,” she said, “helping to level the educational playing field across the state.”

"By clarifying the benchmarks, we hope that all those responsible for the education of our Michigan students share a single understanding of each of the benchmarks," Todorov said. "This is critical to our work as the benchmarks are the basis for curriculum efforts, school improvement, and statewide testing in Michigan."

Since its foundation in 1976, Corbin has completed hundreds of projects for educational, health care, governmental and business clients across the country. The firm's expanding scope of projects includes signage and wayfinding, interactive systems and Web sites, identity systems and print communications – all of them based on the philosophy that "access equals success." A partial list of Corbin's educational wayfinding clients includes Penn State University, The University of Michigan, Indiana University / Purdue University Indianapolis, North Carolina State University, and the University of Virginia. Other wayfinding clients include the cities of Los Angeles, Milwaukee and Indianapolis, University Health Network in Toronto, Herman Miller in Zeeland, Michigan and Recreational Equipment Inc. (REI) in Seattle. Additional information about the firm can be found online at www.corbindesign.com.