

How Norwalk Public Schools Used Differentiated Digital Content to Make Its Curriculum Accessible to All Students

DISTRICT PROFILE

District

NORWALK PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Location

NORWALK, CT

Student Population

11,000

Back to school challenge:

DIFFERENTIATING INSTRUCTION FOR ALL LEARNERS ACROSS CONTENT AREAS—STARTING WITH STEM



THE CHALLENGE

Norwalk Works to Streamline Tech Usage While Supporting Student Needs

Norwalk Public Schools K-12 Director of STEM Tina Henckel knew her district faced many challenges for the coming fall in order to support the needs of all student groups. She was aware of the work ahead but still had a positive frame on the situation.

“We’re concerned about all of it, but we know we can’t go back and teach an extra year of content,” Tina said.

When schools closed, Norwalk needed to expand its technology program so more students could experience live online instruction. Originally, only the secondary schools were holding synchronous virtual teaching, but by day thirty of the district’s remote learning plan, live online instruction was expanded to include students in grades 4 - 12.

As they moved forward using a myriad of digital tools, Tina noted that the district needed to streamline its use of digital resources. The situation was exacerbated as companies made tools free to teachers in response to school closures.

Tina’s concern was that different teachers were using different tools for the same purpose, and some tools might be unavailable in the future.

“We want to make sure we’re using high-quality instructional tools that we can support with our existing infrastructure, that meet student privacy laws, and are financially sustainable beyond the COVID period. Tools like Newsela provide us with a deep alignment to standards across multiple content areas and the flexibility to weave it into the curriculum,” Tina explained.

Norwalk’s student population includes several student groups they needed to support when schools reopened. The district has a large ELL population that needs support accessing texts, especially in content areas like science.

Part of the challenge of supporting these students is giving them a reason to log on to online instruction.



“How do we maintain and sustain high levels of student engagement while ensuring maximum achievement?” Tina asked aloud.

The district also will prioritize Social-Emotional Learning this fall. As needs have increased rapidly, some teachers have expressed concerns about integrating SEL successfully.



THE SOLUTION

Relevant, Accessible Content Empowers Teachers to Support Learners Across Content Areas and SEL

For Norwalk schools, Newsela gives teachers the tools needed to differentiate instruction and give all students access to content, especially in science.

For English Language Learners, Special Ed students, and struggling readers, who are often in the same classroom with students at higher reading levels, Tina noted that “the ability to vary the reading levels gives more students access to the science content.”

After the first pocket of teachers in the district experienced the benefit of differentiating by offering content to students at the appropriate level, Norwalk expanded its Newsela subscription across the whole district across subjects to include Newsela Science, Newsela ELA, Newsela Social Studies, and the Newsela SEL Collection.

“Even for math,” Tina tells teachers, “if you want to make the content relevant, you can use articles and discuss the statistics that are used in the articles for example.”

For students who struggle with math, offering them a pathway to engage in the content by relating it to topics they find interesting at a level they can access can help learners create a bridge to the rest of the curriculum.

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Tina Henckel
K-12 DIRECTOR OF STEM

“The articles are so relevant and real that kids are almost automatically engaged. They just want to click on the picture and learn more about what the article is talking about,” Tina said.

Zooming out, Tina noted teachers across the district are starting to see the value of integrating digital tools like Newsela into the curriculum. “And that’s what’s going to make students want to join class and stay connected,” she said.

For teachers’ concerns about supporting students’ SEL needs this fall, Tina believes The Newsela SEL Collection will empower teachers to help all learners develop these important skills.

“Having Newsela, almost as a backbone, made teachers feel like they could leverage the SEL lessons and build a strong classroom climate. The teachers feel they have lessons and resources to bounce off of. And this year, we’re going to need that more than ever before.”



THE IMPLEMENTATION

Norwalk Leverages Digital Content and Powerful Features into a Strong Curriculum

As schools reopen this fall, Norwalk science teachers will leverage Newsela to help differentiate instruction and offer choice to students.

Teachers will use quiz features to collect data, “so we can see where the students are in those first couple of weeks,” Tina explained. This allows teachers to adjust instruction and meet students where they are after spring remote learning.



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Teachers can then act on that data by leading online break-out rooms or in-person small-group instruction to address students' specific strengths and needs.

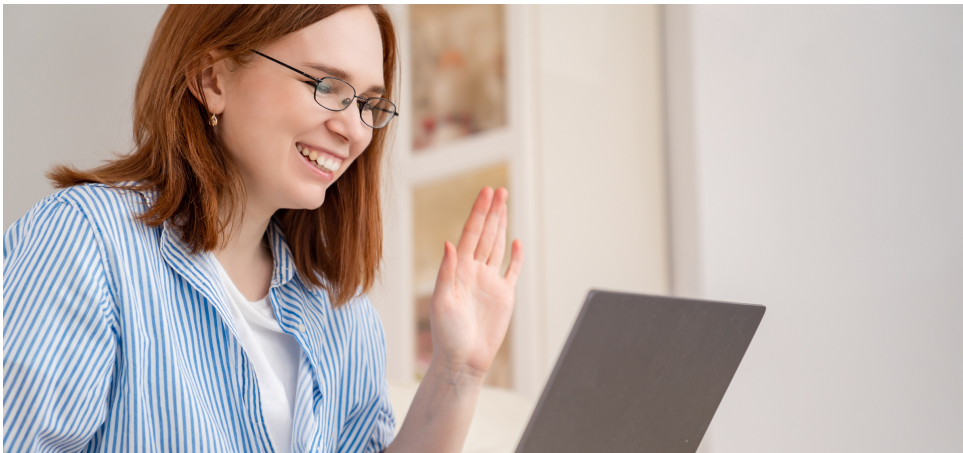
These kick-off strategies build on Norwalk's solid foundation of using Newsela to differentiate instruction in science.

"We want to engage all learners in content area reading, especially those that may not have the confidence or ability to access grade level texts yet," Tina noted.

For these students, Norwalk's Newsela Custom Collections in Science help teachers differentiate through adjusting the lexile level of articles to best fit students' reading abilities.

As Tina views it, adjusting the lexile level of texts is "a tool for students to move ahead in their reading ability," as opposed to a way to make things easier.

For struggling readers, Norwalk teachers use Newsela for read alouds, which helps more students engage in follow-up learning activities like annotating articles, responding to writing prompts, and answering quiz questions.



These read alouds also give more students access to the comprehensive lessons teachers create by integrating Newsela with Nearpod, "and teachers can make it a collaborative experience through peer-to-peer or teacher-to-student group work"

Newsela is not just used in daily science lessons, but it is deeply integrated at the curricular level, too. The planning process began with the science phenomena in each unit. Then, the district worked with the Newsela team to create a Custom Collection with text sets aligned to each phenomena, Lesson Spark, and learning sequence.



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After aligning the content to the curriculum, teachers applied the Newsela tools into their instructional planning and delivery by using the annotation features, writing prompts, multiple choice quiz questions, and Power Words vocabulary activities.

As teachers evaluate students' work on these activities, they gain valuable formative assessment data that helps to guide instruction based on each student's needs.

"Then we integrate science strategies like claim, evidence, reasoning, driving question boards and others," Tina said. Finally, students present and discuss how Newsela content relates to the science concepts and skills in the unit.

This curricular alignment across the science department means all teachers can flexibly use Newsela to engage students, regardless of their needs.

"Teachers can take specific texts and assign them to students, or assign the whole text set and let students pick which one to read," Tina explained. This means students can pick articles that they find interesting or relevant.

While Tina acknowledges that the school year is going to be challenging, she's excited by the way teachers are recognizing the value of merging high-quality tools like Newsela with a strong curriculum to reach all students.



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