



# Going Online to Provide Education in All Circumstances

## Dealing with Hurricane Irma

Gwinnett County Public Schools builds inclement weather days into the school calendar. Once these days are used, the time has to be reclaimed in the form of adding on days to the school year or additional minutes to the school day. Early in the 2017-18 school year, Hurricane Irma exhausted the three built in inclement weather days leaving no days left for the typical ice or snow school closures. When the snow came in January, Gwinnett executed a plan that was a culmination of several years of training and planning. GCPS successfully held three Digital Learning Days and preserved the continuity of instruction.

### At a Glance

**Client:** Gwinnett County Public Schools

**Learners:** 182,000+

**Industry:** Education

**Website:** [publish.gwinnett.k12.ga.us](http://publish.gwinnett.k12.ga.us)

### Interviewees:

- Matt Waymack, Director of eClass Development, Gwinnett County Public Schools

### Other Facts:

- 10,000 staff members
- Offers online and blended learning
- 200,000 potential online users

*“Students live in a digital world and we have to meet them where they are. Our initiative is to engage kids with technology and Brightspace is the hub that makes this possible.”*

*Matt Waymack, Director of eClass Development, Gwinnett County Public Schools*

### **Saving the Schedule With Digital Learning Days**

Gwinnett provides a blended learning education experience to their more than 200,000 users through the Brightspace LMS. But to understand their story, we need to begin a few years earlier when they decided to investigate “digital learning days” as a means of providing fully online classes in the event of inclement weather, causing a school closure.

School closures from inclement weather disrupt the continuity of instruction. In order to make up these hours, Gwinnett would be forced to add an extra 30 minutes per day, or add days to the end of the school year. Simply taking a day off is not an acceptable option as this would deprive students of those instructional hours. Lengthening the year could also have a negative effect on graduation plans. “Nobody liked that idea,” says Matt Waymack, Director of eClass Development. “We used the LMS to deliver digital learning days so that students could continue to receive their education, without adding time to the in-class schedule.” Once put into action, they discovered that 90% of students logged into the system, or viewed eCLASS course pages, proving that digital learning days were a great idea.

### **The Digital Learning Day Plan**

Fast-forward to 2017. Early in the school year, Hurricane Irma exhausted the three built in inclement weather days leaving no days left for the typical ice or snow school closures. When the snow came in January, Gwinnett executed a plan that was a culmination of several years of training and planning. GCPS successfully held three Digital Learning Days and preserved the continuity of instruction.

They had such a significant spike in traffic that it put a strain on the overall system. A lot of teams came together in those short hours to keep the system up and running. D2L Development support, the Technical Account Manager and Customer Success Manager, to name a few, worked with Gwinnett to ensure successful digital learning days, while quickly addressing any issues that surfaced.

“The most significant helping point is that we had our TAM onsite. It provides us with a direct conduit to D2L and full access to exactly who we need to talk with to make things happen quickly. If an organization can swing it, I recommend it!”

*Matt Waymack, Director of eClass Development,  
Gwinnett County Public Schools*



### The Proof Is In the Results

In the end, the login statistics revealed the overall success of their “Snow Day.” About 90% of students logged in over the course of Digital Learning Days at some time. Some students were even logging in the night before to get a jump on the next day’s activities. Digital Learning Days showed to be an opportunity to build teacher capacity in transformational instruction while leveraging technology to engage student learning. A Digital Learning Day essentially forces students and teachers into a fully online environment from one that is web-enhanced, which can cause some uneasiness with students, teachers and parents. After the first day, teachers made adjustments and the comfort level increased for all.

Teachers are addressing issues of accessibility as well. They know which students may be struggling to access technology in their homes. For example, there may be numerous siblings all vying for computer time. Teachers can choose to give assignments that don’t require the student to be in front of a machine the whole day, but rather submit it later, when they have computer access.

Students are happy with digital learning days because they can maintain the continuity of their education regardless of the circumstance. And of course

everyone loves the fact that they don’t need to add either minutes to each day, or extra days to the end of the school year.

“The most important thing is that we preserve the continuity of instruction and prevent overage hours from interfering with student, teacher, and family schedules.”

*Matt Waymack, Director of eClass Development,  
Gwinnett County Public Schools*

### Future Plans

With the system and training in place, Gwinnett plans to continue to leverage Brightspace to potentially offer more digital learning days. The flexibility and scalability of the LMS allows Gwinnett to expand their online strategy to take on new and innovative teaching models in the years to come. And D2L is dedicated to supporting Gwinnett with both products and services as they expand their operation and increase their online education offering.

“We’re really pleased with D2L and especially our CSM [Customer Success Manager]. D2L understands K-12 and how to coordinate things in a way that supports our faculty and students.”

*Matt Waymack, Director of eClass Development,  
Gwinnett County Public Schools*