A Principal’s Guide to Using an LMS
Cutting Through the Noise to Find the Right LMS for Your School

Let’s face it. There is still a tremendous amount of ambiguity when it comes to learning management systems (LMS). District technology coordinators and curriculum directors are likely to have their own ideas, and you just know that your school needs an LMS. If you’re involved in evaluating and selecting an LMS, these seven characteristics will help you identify the right one, allowing your teachers and students to be successful when it’s time to actually put it to good use.

We’ve also created “A Principal’s Guide to Using an LMS” to increase user adoption and to help ensure that your LMS will be safe for your teachers and students to use. Throughout this ebook, we’ve identified how these characteristics impact LMS usage at your school. Our hope is that after you’re done reading, you will be able to work closely with your teachers and use your LMS to promote the power of digital communication and collaboration.
## 7 Characteristics of an LMS

### Accessibility
Can teachers, students and even parents access your LMS on smartphones, tablets and desktop computers? What about on Wi-Fi at home or even without an internet connection? An LMS created only for mobile devices limits its potential for usage. Similarly, an LMS that doesn't provide the same standard desktop features on mobile devices prevents anytime, anywhere learning, which is a common objective of any learning management system.

### Safety
Student safety is overlooked in most learning management systems. The privacy and security of student data is paramount. Schools and districts should be assured that the LMS accounts they provide to students are reviewed and used to protect students. These safety controls are either nonexistent in most learning management systems, are severely limited or force school officials and even teachers to spend time looking through blocked content logs or just ignore them.

### Content
An LMS should allow for the creation of coursework, assignments and assessments. Whether it's elementary math, digital citizenship or AP physics, the delivery of online content, including video, inside a learning management system provides opportunities to support new teaching and learning modalities such as the flipped classroom.

### Collaboration
At the core of any LMS are its tools for online learning. Discussion boards, email, chat, blogs, classwork management tools and calendars are only a few of the many applications that typically appear inside an LMS. These tools help students learn in new ways, save time and often differentiate one learning management system from another.

### Interoperability
A learning management system should also play nicely with other technology. If nothing else, an LMS should support single sign-on (SSO), account provisioning from a school's student information system (SIS), and be able to include content and resources from other sources besides what the vendor provides.

### Analytics
Many LMS providers will point to the creation of personalized learning plans as a result of adoption and usage. While true, the use of student data is a hot topic, and schools listening to this vendor pitch as the reason to use a solution should proceed with caution. Plan on at least using your LMS to track more common student outcomes, such as progress throughout a semester or year and grades in an integrated LMS gradebook.
Choose an LMS that Empowers Anywhere-Learning

Incorporate Learning Spaces

A learning space—whether face-to-face, hybrid or totally online—should be a comfortable place that empowers learning. More often than not, teachers utilize an LMS to incorporate an online component to their course. And while an LMS can be very effective in an online or hybrid course, your teachers will want to be careful not to forsake the notion of classroom design.

Assignment organization

This one might seem like a no-brainer, but without good assignment organization, students don't have a clear path to follow. A common route is to break the course down into modules and use folders to organize assignments relevant to each module.

But what if teachers offered other "options" to students in addition to modules? Teachers could use folders to organize other resources where students aren't required to do assignments in every folder. Instead, they could choose the one that is most interesting to them. Whichever format your teachers choose, make sure there's some sort of flow for students to follow.

Transform discussion boards

Discussion boards are a great way to assess if students are grasping foundational knowledge. It's a way for them to "show their work" particularly in disciplines other than math. Typically, discussion board posts are rubric-focused and require a certain number of posts and responses. Instead of simply following traditional methods, allow teachers to transform discussion boards to forums. Give students the opportunity to join the conversations that are most comfortable for them. Think of it like a Facebook post where users scroll through their timelines all day and comment on the posts that spark interest. Imagine how incorporating a similar concept could transform the learning space.

Provide a feedback loop

Student surveys aren't normally implemented at the K-12 level, but when teachers are designing their learning spaces, feedback can be the key to making sure the design is effective and efficient. Instead of giving out written surveys at the end of the course, teachers can create an area within the LMS for students to leave their comments. Make sure teachers encourage students to provide feedback by asking questions about the course design and allowing them to share how it helped them or how it might have stood in the way of their learning.
Support Differentiated Instruction

Structuring syllabi or lesson plans for differentiated instruction takes a bit of effort, but when teachers make your school's learning management system work for them, the task can be simplified. Learning management systems can greatly reduce the time required to plan, develop and implement differentiated instruction inside and outside of the classroom.

Group work
Breaking students up into smaller groups is always a good way to make instruction and learning more palatable. By using your LMS, teachers can assign group spaces for students, which allow them to work together from anywhere.

Group work allows students to interact in peer-to-peer environments where more challenged learners in the group begin to model the practices and techniques of the stronger students. Once teachers assign group spaces in the LMS, make sure they assign roles to each student based on their strengths so the group gets the most from the experience.

Project-based learning
Sometimes projects can seem like an ordeal, however, projects are a great way to offer students a variety of paths to the same learning outcome. Teachers can use your LMS to build the various pathways for a class project, allowing each student to choose a project based on their learning styles. The versatility of your LMS should allow teachers to provide all relevant resources and track student progress all in one place.

Assessment
There is no way to implement differentiated instruction without some form of assessment. It's important to assess students to determine what they are grasping so teachers can continue to personalize the learning path as much as possible. Have teachers assign assessments directly inside your LMS and track their progress.
Reach the Tough Kids

A learning management system has far more power than simply housing course materials and student grades. There are plenty of creative ways to use the tools and applications available in your LMS to reach students who wouldn’t otherwise get the attention they require.

**Virtual office hours**  The chat tool inside an LMS is a great way for you, or a teacher, to reach out to students and begin conversations with them about areas in which they’re struggling. Using chat can help make students feel a bit more comfortable opening up, providing an opportunity to get to the root cause of why the student is having a tough time.

**Calendar alerts**  Oftentimes, students need a little more handholding. It can be helpful to work closely with them on setting attainable goals so they have successes to celebrate. Setting up alerts within the LMS’ calendar can be an efficient way of helping students set goals and stay on task. Teachers can add actionable benchmarks in the calendar with both the student and teacher receiving alerts.

**Student blogs**  Some students might not always show the most interest and engagement in class. Still, that doesn’t mean they don’t have the desire to participate. Try using student blogs as a way for students to engage with classroom materials. For introverted students, consider allowing them to keep their blogs private, making them only viewable by the teacher. For those students who simply have a tough time focusing in the classroom, use the blog as an outlet for them to refocus their energy.

Stay Connected During Snow Days

Snow days are typically fun for students. But when they pile on into the school year, snow days melt away valuable instruction time.

**Video lectures**  Teachers can put together a short video of the concepts they want their students to learn and post it in your LMS for easy access. They should give students guided examples and provide practice questions for students to walk through as they watch. Make sure the videos aren’t too long so they don’t lose students’ attention.

**Discussion boards**  Have teachers utilize discussion boards to encourage deeper thought about the video lecture. Teachers should start with 2-3 questions related to the lecture and encourage students to answer the questions and reply to some of their peers’ responses.

**Assignment submissions**  Once students watch a lecture and participate in the discussion board, they’re likely ready to attempt an actual assignment related to the topic. Encourage them to get creative with assignment types and consider allowing students the option to submit video responses.
Track Student Progress Online

Encourage the Paperless Shift Throughout School

While many teachers continue to join your school’s digital movement, it’s important to include everyone involved in the K-12 experience.

Digitize announcements

Instead of using printouts and flyers for announcements, guidance counselors can switch to email announcements. Students check their email frequently for their assignments, so why not share announcements with them the same way? Another way to digitize announcements is with an online blog that students can follow.

Rethink your school’s scholarship submission box

Use cloud storage for students to submit their scholarship applications. This gives students a simple way to get their scholarship applications in as soon as they complete them. Counselors can organize the submission box by class, allowing separate boxes for freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors.

Transform students’ study habits

The ACT and SAT still are considered to be very important tests. Older students often reach out to their guidance counselors for study tips. Have them offer additional options for students to study outside of school hours by using your LMS to create a blog or a class page with study and testing tips. Having the material available online makes it more accessible for students, and the tips can help students conquer their test study habits when they need it most.

Automate scheduling

Guidance counselors don’t have to fall behind the times when it comes to scheduling appointments with students. LMS calendars allow counselors to create appointments with students and have the appointments automatically sync to their personal calendars.

Implement Paperless Grading

Paperless grading allows teachers to take back valuable instructional minutes and increase productivity. Within a learning management system, teachers can easily create, assign, collect and score digital worksheets and align questions to state standards.

Is your school’s LMS considered home base? It’s important for teachers and students to have a consistent place to come back to, which includes lesson plans, announcements and directions.

Have your teachers discussed expectations with their students and added a tech policy to each class syllabus? Make sure that parents are aware of the new process for grading their children’s work.

Encourage teachers to try different types of assessments. Students are digital natives. They will adapt easily to the different online activities teachers assign.
Advantages of Going Paperless!

4.3 million files shared by teachers in Gaggle Digital Lockers during one semester.

1,194 Hours of classroom time saved by not handing out and collecting paper.

25,000 dollars saved on paper costs.

Going paperless not only saves time and money, but provides these benefits:

- More efficient and organized classroom workflow.
- Better student access to learning materials.
- Increased collaboration regardless of location.
- Fewer difficulties reading poor handwriting.
- Quicker communication to home.
- Easier records retention.

Source: One semester of Gaggle Safe Classroom LMS aggregate usage.
Offer Student-Led Conferences

Student-led conferences give students an opportunity to put themselves in front of their education. Having them lead conferences with their parents helps foster stronger relationships between the parent, student, the teacher and you, which can only have positive benefits. Follow these three steps so students can actively participate in parent-teacher conferences.

Step 1 Prepare

It’s a good bet that students won’t be used to the idea of a student-led conference, so you will want your teachers to take steps to prepare them for the experience. Teachers can create a student preparation sheet that helps students gather the work they want to share with their parents. In addition to compiling a few of their best pieces, students should also make notes of what they do well and where they think they should improve. Teachers can use your LMS to house the preparation sheet template for easy access and assign it to each student.

Step 2 Collaborate

Once students complete their preparation sheets, teachers should take a few minutes to meet with them and review their sheets. The review will get everyone on the same page so the teacher and student are a united front when they meet with their respective parents. Teachers should walk through each section of the preparation sheet and compare notes. Encourage them to also help students get comfortable with sharing details about their work.

Step 3 Reflect

Since student-led conferences are still a fairly new concept, it’s a good idea for students and teachers to review areas that went well and areas that didn’t go so well. Use student blogs to give students an opportunity to share their thoughts on the experience of leading the conferences with their parents. As you and the teachers read through the students’ blogs, take note of any highlights that show the positives of the student-led conferences and identify any challenges to make adjustments the next time.
Prepare Students for Tests

Build a study schedule
There’s likely a calendar tool available in your LMS. Suggest that teachers provide study schedules for their students. Teachers can use the Pomodoro technique, which suggests that students budget smaller increments of time to study, i.e., study for 25 minutes, take a 5-minute break, etc. Teachers can explain to students that their calendars have sample study schedules available with suggested topics, but can make adjustments according to their schedules outside of school.

Chunk the material
Students’ attention spans seem to be shrinking. But that doesn’t mean that they’re unable to retain information and take what they learn from short-term to long-term memory. Breaking coursework into more palatable chunks is sometimes an easier method for learning. Teachers can use your LMS to aggregate videos on difficult topics. Breaking difficult topics down into smaller pieces can make it easier for students to grasp the information. And students can revisit the videos during their study time as a refresher.
Post to a discussion board

Discussion boards offer prime real estate within your LMS to provide students with additional resources. Teachers can use a discussion board to cite all of the research information in one location, giving students one area to access additional resources outside of their course materials and allowing them to dig deeper into certain topics. In addition, teachers can dedicate a discussion board topic specifically to test preparation. This gives students an outlet to ask questions and share thoughts on challenging areas for some peer-to-peer assistance.

Chat it up

Chat rooms and instant messaging still might not get many teachers excited because they can cause distractions during classroom time. But using these tools to help students study can get them immediate help when they're experiencing a challenge. Allow teachers to create instant messaging groups dedicated to test prep and allow students to ask teachers and other students for help with problem areas.

Share files

Most learning management systems offer some sort of file sharing tool. Make the most of it by encouraging students to share their notes, study guides and other resources they've created for personal study. Many times, resources students create for themselves can be very helpful to other students in the classroom. Teachers can use file sharing to build a treasure chest of study resources to give students more options for their study time.

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**Get Creative with Student Assessment**

**Blog It Out** Instead of assigning a written report or essay, consider incorporating a student blog and allow students to post about what they learned.

**Discuss It** Create discussion boards specific to activities and assignments. Have students participate by answering questions, discussing related topics, and posting about what they've discovered in each assignment.

**Video Reports** Have students watch videos and then report on what they've seen by recording a video response.

**Text Messages** Use text messaging as a reinvented version of the pop quiz. Quiz students on topics and concepts before a large exam. This is a great way to ensure they are grasping learning objectives.
Integration with other Products and Resources

Flip the K-12 Classroom

One of the easiest ways to manage the flipped classroom is with a learning management system. Teachers can use your LMS to get students to work more outside the classroom while inspiring engagement inside the classroom.

Use videos in discussion boards

Teachers can upload a video as a discussion topic, and encourage students to share their thoughts and views on the video in their discussion posts. When students return to class, the teacher can play the video once more and expound on the posts from the discussion. Since the discussion was started outside of the classroom, there also could be room for application during classroom time.

Add an external tool

Most learning management systems offer the option for single sign-on (SSO) to other learning platforms and content. If you’re using a homework manager or assessment engine that lives outside of your LMS, consider an SSO option that allows your students to access those platforms from the LMS.

Store it in the cloud

Using cloud storage makes it easy for instructors to point students towards information for their flipped explorations. Vast amounts of information can be shared safely and securely.

Don’t Allow Password Challenges to Get in the Way

Technology in the classroom almost always means dealing with user accounts and juggling passwords. Your LMS should offer single sign-on to other learning tools and content, allowing your students to access those platforms and limiting the need for students and instructors to manage multiple sites and login credentials.

Students likely need to remember usernames and passwords to log into classroom or lab computers. And with every LMS, there’s another set of credentials students need to remember. Some teachers use generic passwords that they can write on the board while others choose to manage passwords using a paper filing system. Either way, the process of managing passwords can be both frustrating and time consuming for teachers and students.

Imagine students only needing to click a link to log them directly into the platforms you use in the classroom. With SSO, students no longer need to manage usernames and passwords for each online platform used inside and outside of the classroom. SSO allows students to log into one primary system, such as an LMS, and from there,
access all other learning tools. The SSO solution acts as middleware, or a handshake, between the two systems so students do not have to log into each system every time.

When working with secure SSO solutions, students stay within the LMS, which means there’s no need for bookmarks, typing in web addresses or browsing outside of the learning environment. SSO provides quick and easy access with fewer interruptions during learning and instruction time.

Password management no longer has to be a hassle. Choosing a learning management system with SSO is the perfect way to simplify the process of passwords, especially for elementary students.
Understand the Safety Risks

The Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) requires schools to have more than just a website filter. CIPA also states that schools must have technology measures in place to protect against visual depictions that are obscene or pornographic. Unfortunately, inappropriate conversations and content are not uncommon in the applications and tools found in a learning management system.

Check with your LMS provider to see what types of safety measures they provide for schools using their platform. With the Gaggle Safety Management, safety controls are applied and regularly updated to detect inappropriate text and images. Gaggle Safety Representatives review content and alert emergency contacts, such as yourself, and even law enforcement of questionable content or possible student situations, allowing schools to be more proactive and prevent instances of cyberbullying, sexual exploitation, grooming, suicide and more.

Adding Digital Citizenship to Your Curriculum

Help your students become better digital citizens in an effort to keep technology as a positive force in their lives.

Every action has a reaction.

While students continue to become immersed in emerging technologies introduced in and outside of the classroom, digital citizenship lessons can help them understand better decision making.

Digital footprints do not go away easily.

Students don’t always make the connection that the choices they make today could impact their future. Help students see boundaries for online behavior.

The world we live in.

Technology isn’t going away. Incorporating digital citizenship can help students pace themselves with new technologies as they expand their horizons organically.

Multitasking is interfering with attention span.

Digital citizenship practices can help students understand how and when to resist the urge to juggle a variety of tasks while checking every social media platform.

52% of students have been a victim of online bullying, however less than 1/5 of those incidents are reported.
Flip Your Professional Development

It's easy for teachers to feel bored, overwhelmed or not engaged during traditional professional development. When this happens, professional development (PD) becomes a waste of time, and the technology that teachers are encouraged to use ends up with low implementation and usage rates. If this is happening inside your school, now could be a great time to flip your professional development. Yes, just like teachers are flipping classroom, try flipping your PD!

Experience  When you use your school’s LMS for professional development, you’re allowing teachers to use the technology just as you hope they would for instruction inside the classroom. It helps them become comfortable with the LMS because they’re required to do many of the same tasks for their own professional development.

Time  Similar to the diverse rates at which students learn inside a classroom, teachers should be encouraged to move at their own pace during professional development. Instead of boring a teacher who has mastered a skill while overwhelming another teacher new to the concept, they both can move at their own pace.

Follow-through  Instead of your PD taking place during an overwhelming one-day of training, your teachers now get the time to become familiar with their new skills and feel more confident to implement the technology in their own classrooms.

Attitude  Teachers will realize that they’re now able to grow at their own pace instead of being told what they will learn and how quickly. This will create a newfound appreciation and a positive attitude toward their own professional development.

Use Goal Setting for Professional Growth

A learning management system can also help your staff with planning and organization. Planning ahead is a huge component of goal setting, and without being organized, it would be quite difficult to effectively reach any goal.

Priority #1: Start by encouraging your staff to set an attainable goal because there’s no benefit of having a goal that’s too out of reach.

Priority #2: Have them identify the steps it will take to reach that goal and create actionable items with deadlines.

Priority #3: Add the actionable items’ due dates to the LMS calendar and set-up alerts. This is also a great way to integrate the action items with any relevant school or student to-dos.

Priority #4: Review and adjust as needed. Your staff might miss the mark sometimes, but remember that doesn’t mean complete failure. Have them adjust where needed and keep going.