Red Rover Supports a High School District's Block Scheduling Needs With a Customized, Seamless Solution

About Glenbrook HS District 225

The Glenbrooks, also known as Glenbrook High School District 225, provides public education to around 5,000 students residing in Glenview, Northbrook, and parts of unincorporated Northfield Township. Situated in a suburban area 25 miles north of Chicago, Glenbrook North and Glenbrook South High Schools are renowned for delivering a top-notch, comprehensive education to students. Alongside the two high schools, The Glenbrooks also offer alternative learning opportunities through Glenbrook Off-Campus.

- **Medium suburban** district
- **5,132** students
- **387** teachers

By 2021, time-consuming workarounds to keep systems functioning effectively had become an unfortunate reality for the staff at Glenbrook High School District 225, a medium-sized suburban district outside of Chicago, Illinois. The necessary task of managing teacher absences, as well as the substitute teachers needed to provide coverage, was consistently an uphill battle.

Like many high school districts, Glenbrook employs a block schedule, which involves replacing the traditional schedule, consisting of six or seven short 40–50-minute periods each day, with longer class periods that occur fewer times throughout the day and week. Glenbrook uses an A/B rotating block schedule, which is set up to accommodate four blocks a day that last about 90 minutes. Students generally attend four classes a day and possibly a study hall, meeting every other day with their teachers. (One alternative school within the district operates on a Carnegie schedule, which follows the classic eight-period day, while the other two use a block schedule.)

Block scheduling, while an effective means of increasing instructional time, reducing transition time, and allowing for students to focus more deeply, brings with it some inherent complexities. "Of course, in true high school fashion, there are a lot of special schedules that exist," says Dr. R.J. Gravel, the district's Associate Superintendent. "Assembly schedule version one, assembly schedule version two, all the way through probably 20 versions. Then we have late arrival schedules, and so on."

The district needed an efficient way to track teacher absences, as well as to find, place, and compensate substitute teachers—all in a way that meshed seamlessly with the block schedule system and all its variations.

"Individual substitutes don't simply work a half day or a full day; they work a part of a day or a full block, and then there are multiple blocks," Gravel explains.

But the absence and substitute management system the district had in place at the time simply wasn't built to accommodate block schedules, necessitating constant adjustments.

Prior to turning to a digital tracking and recordkeeping system, the district had been doing everything "by hand," including calling substitutes on the phone at 4 in the morning to fill an unexpected absence. But even the digital system was "indescribably tedious," says Lisa Sly, Glenbrook's Information System Specialist.

"The number one thing we would ask our provider every year was 'Are you doing anything to address a block schedule?'" she explains. "The entire setup, frankly, was a workaround. It wasn't great for subs, and it wasn't great for teachers. It was very tedious for teachers and department assistants to enter absences. Everything we entered came up as a conflict. It basically did not serve a block schedule. Period."

The extra busywork wasn't helping Sly achieve her key goal. "My mission is to help people be more informed, productive, and efficient." says Sly, who was a teacher herself for 10 years before moving into her current position, where she focuses on back-end data management as well as training and support.

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Lisa Sly
Information System Specialist
Glenbrook HS District 225

Enter Red Rover

In 2021, Gravel began to receive some email outreach from Red Rover. He asked a member of his HR team to follow up with an exploratory phone call.

"And the next thing I know, I'm getting a chat from my colleague, saying you really need to meet with these people. Like you *really* need to meet with them," says Gravel. Soon, Gravel connected with Larry Foxx, a Red Rover representative, and had a chance to experiment with the platform. He quickly saw the strengths of the product and began to envision how it could streamline Glenbrook's absence and substitute management.

"First of all, the product is designed in modern technology, meaning it's not a system that's evolved over the last 15 years. It's been built from the ground up on a modernized platform," says Gravel. "That means it's faster; it has a nice user experience."

But the true kicker for Gravel and his team occurred when they inquired how Red Rover might be able to work with the district's block scheduling system. Red Rover's platform wasn't strictly designed to do so at the time, but they had a solution.

"They worked with us to build it," says Gravel. "They knew it was a need, and they were specifically looking for a high school district to partner with that could help them build it out. These folks have worked in this industry for years and they know the pain points."

Creating the solution was a collaborative effort, in which Glenbrook's team shared wish lists, recommendations, and feedback along the way. By August of 2021, the system—now tailored to work with block scheduling—was up and running before the first day of school.
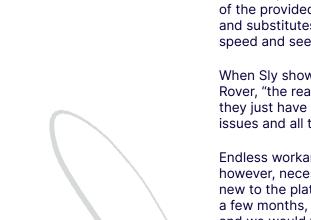
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R.J. Gravel

Associate Superintendent
Glenbrook HS District 225

Implementation and Fine Tuning

"Implementation was fast," says Sly. "We created some training materials, including a video and a handout for teachers. I used a lot of the provided Red Rover materials for our department assistants and substitutes, and then I had meetings with staff to get them up to speed and see how to use it."

When Sly showed teachers and department assistants how to use Red Rover, "the reaction was universally 'That's it?' Because it was so easy; they just have to check boxes now, instead of all the resolving of little issues and all the things we had to do before."

Endless workarounds were a thing of the past. Fine tuning was, however, necessary. Because block scheduling integration was new to the platform, "there was a lot of tweaking," says Sly. "For a few months, I met with the systems department pretty regularly and we would talk about fine tuning—like you do with any new implementation, right? You're fine tuning for those first few months, but we were securing subs by the first day of school."

The Glenbrook team would brainstorm additional features and functionalities, then convey them to Red Rover. Sly and Gravel were consistently amazed at how responsive the Red Rover team was to their input. Their feedback was not only being heard, it was actually being implemented into the platform, improving it in real time.

One example, recalls Gravel, was when Red Rover "asked us for feedback on what kind of diagnostics and reporting we need to have on the administrative front to understand the health of our substitute pool, and the success of our pool. And so, we just started throwing all these ideas out there. A month after we had the conversation, they sent us an email saying 'thanks so much for your feedback. Here are all the reports that we built, and here's a live dynamic dashboard that's going to give you the answers you need.'"

Sly also recalls struggling with an unusual, complicated schedule arrangement that seemed to flummox the system. "We had an honors and awards assembly. And one of our buildings rearranged their schedule," she explains. "Because the day was starting so late, they moved the lunch block to the beginning. So, block three was supposed to come before one, two, and four. I thought, 'There's no way I'm going to be able to make this work.'"

She called Larry Foxx at Red Rover for assistance, and the two put their heads together over a Zoom call. They were both initially stymied.

Two minutes later, Foxx called her back. He had discovered a fix: A simple drag-and-drop feature that was already built into the platform but was hard to spot.

"I was able to just drag block three up above block one and it worked. I almost fell off my chair," says Sly. "And in the next update that Red Rover released, I noticed that they had moved [the drag-and-drop button] so that it was more obvious."

The collaborative spirit of the Red Rover team makes Sly feel confident and supported, and she never hesitates to reach out with a question. "This is the best company I've ever worked with," she asserts. "You don't feel like a number. You don't just feel like a client. You feel like a partner."

"After we adopted them, they actually care about what I have to say," concurs Gravel. "They recognize me not just as a medium-sized high school district in the state of Illinois. They recognize me as R.J., and when they have questions, they reach out and they take my direction, and then they actually implement and take feedback and make the product better. In the tech world, we're so used to seeing a lot of feedback collected, and nothing ever happens with it, or it happens three years later."

An Ongoing Partnership

Now that Glenbrook has completed a second school year with Red Rover, they continue to enjoy the ease and efficiency of its absence and substitute management platform. Its ability to handle block scheduling was the biggest game-changer for Sly, but she appreciates all the built-in features and extra add-ons that save time and reduce stress.

"With Red Rover, the teacher can say: I need a sub for block one. Check. Block three, check. Block four, check. And they just check the boxes. And then Red Rover will go seek out qualified substitutes," she says. Substitutes receive push notifications via text, and everything is supported through a mobile app. And, as opposed to other solutions that require separate usernames and passwords, Red Rover fully supports single sign on.

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Other value adds include a very simple sign-in sheet for subs, which lists all of the blocks and all of the locations in the building where individuals need to be for each block. When a sub reports to the front desk, and doesn't know exactly where they should go, they can see their schedule at a glance. The school can also pinpoint where the sub should be throughout the day.

Even with the block scheduling customization, Red Rover made sure to work within Glenbrook's budget. R.J. Gravel appreciates the fact that "one of the commitments that Red Rover made was that they don't want a point of entry to prevent anyone from becoming a partner. So, they commit for their first year to make sure that they are at or below what you're paying currently for a solution...They also made a very important commitment, which is that future increases would be tied to economic factors. [Often] in the tech marketplace, we see increases of 10-15% just out of the blue without rationale. And I thought that was huge as well."

Conclusion

As Red Rover's capabilities continue to evolve, the team at Glenbrook looks forward to maintaining their collaborative partnership. To that end, Gravel shares a couple of suggestions for future improvement. "Areas for growth for Red Rover include expanding the number of integrations that they have with API's," he says. Another feature that Gravel would be keen to see roll out is the ability to simultaneously notify all the substitutes who have a scheduled assignment that day, especially when last minute changes happen.

Overall, Gravel is grateful that Red Rover has allowed him to regain some time back in his day, instead of being forced to engage in tedious workarounds. "Ultimately, my job first and foremost is to ensure that our students and staff have the resources that they need in order to be successful and to maintain efficient operations. That's the whole focus of my job." Every second that he saves by minimizing clicks is another second that he can devote to his mission.

"I can confidently say Red Rover is the only solution I have seen in the marketplace in this area that actually supports a block system in the way it needs to be supported," Gravel concludes. "There are enough configuration tools within the solution that you can make a customized experience without additional expense. It's all part of the product, which is wonderful."

About Red Rover

Red Rover's modern, intuitive absence management and time tracking solutions simplify and improve life for administrators, employees, substitutes, and students.

To learn more, visit RedRoverK12.com or call us at (717) 897-6837.