

# How Grand Prairie ISD Seamlessly Switched College and Career Planning Solutions (Without Staggering Growing Pains)

## The District: Enormous—and Growing

[Grand Prairie Independent School District \(ISD\)](#) is a 58-square mile district that serves 30,000 students in Grand Prairie, Texas. Its 30,000 students are spread across 43 campuses that include 22 elementary schools, seven middle schools, four high schools, and two early college high schools.

## The Challenge: Endorsements Required Students to Narrow Down Their Interests Before Entering High School

Before Jackson took on her current role, she was lead counselor at one of Grand Prairie ISD's high schools and noted that there was a need for more online academic tracking and career planning tools.

It was 2013 and Texas legislators had just passed House Bill 5, which restructured the state's graduation requirements, requiring students to earn endorsements in specific areas of study by completing four additional credits. The endorsements include:

- STEM
- Business & Industry
- Public Service
- Arts & Humanities
- Multidisciplinary Studies

“Before they enter high school, students must choose their ‘major’—and their academic & electives courses throughout high school will be geared to that particular endorsement,” says Jackson.

The goal of the endorsements is to help students focus on areas of education and eventual careers that interest them, so they'll be better prepared for college and careers. However, the endorsement requirement created a lot of paperwork for counselors. They needed to find a solution that could store and track all of the student endorsement

information.

Jackson did some research and immediately fell in love with Career Cruising. “I loved the course planner feature. It matched up perfectly with what we needed.”

And they quickly discovered the multi-grade benefits of the tool. “What attracted me to Career Cruising was its K-12 component. Most other tools only focused on Grade 9-12 or 6-12. We use the K-5 program with our students so they can explore careers at an early age.”

The Matchmaker tool, which helps students find careers that fit their strengths and interests, was helpful for middle schoolers who were considering their high school endorsement. “By using Matchmaker to research careers and career clusters, students were better able to select the right high school endorsement choices for them,” says Jackson.

## The Implementation: Moving from Career Cruising to Xello

Jackson says the switch from Career Cruising to Xello was uneventful. Although there was apprehension about a “new” system, the counselors and career teachers quickly realized the functional differences were negligible. “We packaged it as a sleeker Career Cruising, like Career Cruising 2.0. Once they got in the system and saw it was the same thing, but looked and worked better, it didn’t take a lot of training,” says Jackson.

“Xello’s new look and functionality is wonderful. The clean lines, customization, Instagram-like dashboard, storyboard where you can upload, more areas for journaling and an interactive map for colleges were all very impressive. It was everything Career Cruising offered and more. Plus, it looked and navigated better.”

Grand Prairie ISD’s Xello customer success manager arrived on-site to train high school counselors to make sure they understood the soon-to-be-implemented college features. Xello also assisted Grand Prairie with ideas to customize features in Xello, with external links, to make sure the system completely met the unique needs of the district.

Meanwhile, Jackson and the Counseling Services Team worked with the district’s communications team to create a [Xello Website](#), posters and [videos](#) introducing Xello as their dedicated college and career planning tool. Flyers with login information were prepared to be paired with every student’s schedule during schedule pick up dates in August.

“It’s really important that Xello is promoted throughout all campuses to make sure students are getting the benefit of it. Teachers have also been trained by counselors on how to use the program with the students.”

## Advice for a Successful Implementation

When it comes to transitioning from one college and career planning tool to another, Jackson recommends:

- **Research.** “Talk to other districts who have used the tools you’re considering. Look closely at how each system works and where they gather information. Find out if they can customize their program for your district. And ask about customer service. This is critical! You want a customer service representative who is responsive and helpful.”
- **Get buy-in from all stakeholders.** “Make sure everyone working with students are on the same page. That means building relationships with different sectors and explaining the benefits to their area. We may all want a good program, but for different reasons.”
- **Engage your district’s communications department.** “Communications is helpful for branding your tool with your district and helping push out information to students & parents on different campuses. They are instrumental with promotion design concepts and in getting the message out there.”
- **Include use of the tool in counselor evaluations.** “Our counselors are required to use Xello as part of their work with students. The concepts covered in Xello also align well with the requirements in both the Texas & ASCA Comprehensive Counseling Program Models
- **Partner with another district that uses the same program.** “Link up with other people who use the program. Xello helped us make connections in our area. Though we do not require as much support now, it’s helpful to have partners when you’re in your first year of implementation.”

## The Result

Grand Prairie ISD is beginning a school year with students exclusively using Xello. Jackson has high expectations for its impact.

“I already know that Xello is an amazing program and I see that it helps all kids, not just those who want to go directly to college, but also those interested in going to the military or earning additional industry certifications. We want every student to be future ready and have a strong plan in place for success.”



### ABOUT HEATHER

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