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MSOC

A Maryland consortium helps local systems implement successful programs by developing resources together, building on each others' sucesses, and sharing lessons learned.

The five students taking Advanced Placement Statistics at Carver Center for the Arts and Technology in Baltimore County, Maryland are actively engaged in their course routine, communicating with the teacher on a daily basis, completing class and homework assignments, and preparing for the AP exam. In one respect, however, the course is anything but routine. For the first time ever, Carver Center is offering the course completely online.

Almost non-existent five years ago, the use of online courses has grown dramatically in Maryland, with more than 25 courses now available. Online course enrollments have also increased from 31 students in 2003 to more than 600 in 2006. A major reason for this remarkable growth has been the Maryland Students Online Consortium (MSOC), a state-local partnership involving two-thirds of Maryland's 24 school systems (23 counties, one city) and the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE).

The MSOC story is primarily about setting the stage for future growth in online learning statewide by enhancing the internal capacities of individual school systems to offer online courses. For the past 3½ years, the consortium's main priorities have included developing system-level procedures and guidelines for online courses, training site-based coordinators and mentors, and working with school staff to increase the understanding and acceptance of online courses as a viable strategy for meeting students' needs. MSOC participation has resulted in a variety of outcomes for its individual members. Some districts have experienced spectacular growth in student enrollments. Baltimore County Public Schools, for example, had no students enrolled in credit-bearing online courses in 2002. They enrolled two students in one course the following year, and 75 students enrolled in 10 different online courses last year. In school year 2005–06, more than 160 students enrolled or completed online courses ranging from Advanced Placement Biology to American Literature to Multivariable Calculus. Montgomery County's online course en-

rollment also jumped in Summer 2005 when it served almost 200 students with 19 sections of its online Health Education course. Baltimore County expects its rapid growth to continue this school year, while Anne Arundel County plans to make 140 seats available per semester for online courses this year after serving 44 students in school year 2005–06.

Many MSOC members are laying the groundwork for future growth by starting small. For example, Carroll County Public Schools, a medium sized district (~28,000 students) that joined the consortium in 2004, served just one student in 2004–05 but enrolled 12 students in five different online courses last school year. Worcester County Public Schools, a relatively small district (~6,750 stu-

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dents), moved from "starting from scratch" after joining the consortium in 2004 to being "on-the-ground" last year with four students in online courses. Other MSOC members have focused on implementation strategies that meet specific student needs. For instance, Charles County targets AP course for students with scheduling or accessibility issues, while Prince George's County uses "just-in-time course assistance"—filling ad hoc needs at the start of each semester with online courses.

Working with MSDE

MSOC is a grant project funded by MSDE's Enhancing Education Through Technology Program, using Federal No Child Left Behind Title II-D funds to support MSDE's

efforts to implement the Maryland Virtual Learning Opportunities Program (MVLO) for online courses. MVLO is a program established by a state legislative directive in 2003 to create policy, develop curriculum in conjunction with core content areas, provide professional development, and manage a distance learning program for high school students. The virtual learning program is responsible for approving online courses used for high school graduation credit. In the past three years, MVLO has also developed course and service provision standards, reviewed courses and courseware to ensure that they meet appropriate standards, and purchased and developed Internet-based learning resources and courses for students and staff.

MSDE funded MSOC because it realized that local school systems were struggling with similar issues and concerns about online learning, and the state department of education did not have the internal capacity or funding to support them adequately. The resulting collaboration has been mutually beneficial; MSOC support has been essential in enabling the state to accomplish virtual learning tasks such as reviewing online courses, identifying needed courses, and publicizing

the MVLO program. This year, for example, MSOC funds and member involvement will help MSDE to review 44 additional online courses requested by Maryland school systems.

Likewise, MSDE's active project participation has benefited MSOC members. State-level involvement has enabled a coordinated approach to using online courses with students. The consortium structure allows local school systems to have considerable input and control over projects while providing an effective mechanism to access state resources. MSDE helped its members develop local system policies and differentiate state and local responsibilities for student governance supports and policies. The MVLO course catalog also enables many MSOC members to provide courses that they otherwise could not have offered locally because of inadequate enrollments or other constraints. State involvement has also helped local districts iron out issues before they became serious ones. For instance, MSDE's purchase of an AP Computer Science course in 2004–05 and use of an in-state teacher addressed most of the issues Charles County had with the vendor-supplied version of the course used the previous year.

Developing Resources Together

Developing resources, reviewing and modifying courses and course content, and providing professional development collaboratively has enabled the partnership to benefit from economies of scale and efficient use of resources. For instance, MSOC has developed a high-quality, instructor-facilitated, half-credit online SAT Preparation course using staff from four member districts as writers, designers, and content reviewers. The course meets the new SAT test requirements, allows for flexible scheduling while accommodating staffing constraints, and is available to Maryland school districts for a significantly lower cost than vendor-developed products.

MSOC also recognized the need for increased online professional development for Maryland educators involved in supporting online courses. For example, MSOC identified a need to train site-based mentors who work directly with students to provide encouragement and weekly monitoring. After reviewing and using products from other states and organizations, the consortium decided to purchase an online mentor training program for statewide use. MSOC members and MSDE also collaborated in purchasing, developing, and modifying other professional development courses and modules on facilitating online learning, parent orientation, and student orientation. The result is a suite of online professional development resources that all Maryland school systems can access from the MSDE server and use to meet their specific needs. Involving MSOC members in the review and development processes has increased psychological ownership and resulted in products that meet needs across systems.

MSOC also assisted MSDE with the online course review and approval process by providing reviewers for several online student courses, including a pilot for the online Algebra/Data Analysis course for Maryland's High School Assessments project. The consortium supported the development of two videos about online learning (titled "What You Need to Know" and "Seize the Opportunity") that were distributed statewide as a resource for district personnel to use with staff, students, parents, and community members. The consortium also developed a set of stakeholder surveys (student, teacher, mentor, site coordinator, and parent) that provide periodic feedback on program implementation and emerging issues.

Sharing Lessons Learned

MSOC members held monthly meetings in person or by telephone conferencing during the school year. Meetings included updates from the MSDE facilitator on state-level activities as well as more formal professional development activities such as learning management system training, an instructional design seminar, and working on resolving intellectual property issues.

The most commonly cited benefit of these meetings was giving members time to describe progress, issues, and lessons learned. Sharing enabled members to benefit from their diversity by learning from their commonalities and differences. For instance, during the project's first year MSOC members quickly learned the importance of specific and well-established system-wide policies, procedures, and guidelines in laying the groundwork for a successful implementation process. They also learned that obtaining input from all stakeholders was essential to the process and that effective implementation takes time. Other common themes for discussion included the essential role of the course mentor in the course delivery process and the need for student and parent orientation. Members also learned to appreciate their individual differences by sharing divergent experiences. For instance, while Baltimore County learned that meeting with high school schedulers was a vital part of identifying course needs, Prince George's County found that meeting with school counselors was more helpful for sparking interest in using online courses.

Building on Each Other's Successes

Sharing lessons learned also enabled MSOC members to build on each other's successes. Newer MSOC members particularly benefited from learning about the successes of more experienced members. Worcester County greatly accelerated their implementation process by using procedures and guidelines documents from Baltimore and Somerset Counties as models to create their own document. Carroll County also found it "extremely helpful" to discuss policies and procedures-related "pitfalls and issues" at MSOC meetings and to have other MSOC members' models available when creating their own. Building on each other's successes was not limited to older members helping newer ones or larger districts helping smaller ones, however. Montgomery County's Richard Jolles noted that more upfront sharing among districts increases his district's ability to offer high-quality online learning opportunities to its students, while Baltimore City's Stacey Davis appreciates how MSOC members have served as "role models" for implementing online learning successfully.

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Encountering Common Obstacles

Collectively, MSOC members have encountered a number of common obstacles while implementing online learning, most notably:

Stakeholder education about the benefits and demands of online learning is essential—for instance, to address the lack of understanding about instructor-led online learning relative to other forms of distance education.

Obtaining administrative buy-in, which MSOC members perceive as both important and often difficult, can be slowed or delayed by the pull of competing priorities. Obtaining buy-in requires an organized effort to link online learning initiatives with school improvement plans and district master plans.

Adequate funding is a major concern for MSOC members. The pull of competing priorities for scarce resources is the short-term issue; one member noted, for example, that the two people in charge of implementing online learning in her system "are spread so thin that [it] is not always the priority it should be."

Sustainability is the long-term issue, and MSOC members are discovering the importance of seeking line item funding for online learning initiatives in district operating budgets.

Sharing Is Powerful

As their narratives illustrate, each MSOC member has its own unique story to tell about implementing online learning. Despite distinctly different experiences, MSOC members cite collaboration most frequently as the greatest benefit of project participation. As Anne Arundel County's Sally Regnier noted, "We would not have gone anywhere without [the consortium]… it has really been a very effective collaborative process."

Washington County's Anne Higman is "extremely grateful" for MSOC's and MVLO's role in enabling online learning opportunities for students. Many MSOC members have noted that mentor training, online facilitator training, and other MSOC professional development opportunities have increased the number of trained and knowledgeable educators in their systems who can provide assistance in various forms.

Perhaps the most important lesson of the MSOC initiative is that sharing is powerful. By enabling diverse members to share their experiences, issues, and lessons learned, the MSOC-MSDE partnership has made considerable progress in implementing online courses and programs for students in Maryland.

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