

Public School Districts Master the Online Learning Game



By Michael Horn

Online learning made its debut in higher education, but now it's changing the face of K–12 education. According to the marketing research firm Ambient Insight, roughly 1.75 million K–12 students in the United States are enrolled in at least one online course.

Although much of the online learning growth in K–12 first occurred in virtual charter schools that served home-schooled students and in state virtual schools that provided courses to supplement the offerings available to students at their local high school, this scenario is beginning to change. Public school districts are no longer sitting on the sidelines.

Online learning offers some exciting opportunities for public school districts today.

In the 2009 report *Keeping Pace with K–12 Online Learning*, published by the Evergreen Education Group, Gregg Levin, vice president of KC Distance Learning, explains: “Across the country, strong demand for online learning is pushing it from a fringe offering to a strategic imperative for districts. This is likely being driven by the growing popularity of statewide virtual charter schools, increasing acceptance of online learning for all populations of students, and its cost-effectiveness during tough economic times.”

A recent Innosight Institute case study of Utah’s Alpine School District helps shed light on this trend and reveals some exciting opportunities for public school districts and the U.S. education system.

Alpine’s Online Start-Up

In the winter of the 2005–2006 school year, Alpine School District administrators received a phone call from a troubled resident. Utah’s Davis School District, just 50 miles north of Alpine, was offering online curriculum for grades K–8 to support home-schooling families. The caller wanted to know why Alpine was not offering a similar option.

What unfolded next is a story of entrepreneurship. Noting that there were a significant number of home-schooled students within Alpine, the district reasoned that if it were in the business of public education, it should ensure that the public was educated—even those who were being educated at home. Given that the number of home-schooled students is rising in the United States—there were roughly 800,000 home-schooled students in 1999 and there are now around 2 million—and that approximately 175,000 K–12 students attend full-time virtual-schooling programs, many districts are in similar circumstances.

Home schooling can be difficult for parents; gathering curriculum, planning instruction, and executing it all require attention, time, money, and expertise. An opportunity therefore existed for Alpine to organize an online school similar to Davis’s to help its home-schooled population. Although children living in Alpine could attend Davis’s online school, a local option was preferable because Davis’s program facilitated field trips and social activities that were hard to access from outside Davis.

Seeing the opportunity to better serve the district’s students, Alpine’s leaders investigated how they could set up an online school. The district’s officials had done nothing like this before, and they did not know what steps to take or from where they would obtain the resources.

Investigating Cost

Alpine’s district leaders learned that the state office of education would pay its standard annual amount per pupil to Alpine for each home-schooled student enrolled in an

online school, which would be roughly \$2,500—more than half of what the district typically spent per student.

As the Alpine team researched the costs to run a virtual school, they learned that it would be able to operate the school with the state funds alone. No additional money from grants or district funds would be necessary.

The first significant cost would be the online curriculum and learning platform. After reviewing several online curriculum providers, Alpine chose a company that runs virtual elementary and secondary schools and offers a K–12 curriculum.

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When Alpine contracted with the company, it selected from its menu of options to create a package that could serve students with the resources available. The contract included teacher subscription fees to access the online curriculum, a student-progress portal, and material costs for manipulatives and books, as much of the learning does not actually occur online, especially in the younger grades in the provider’s curriculum.

Other costs of running the online school included hiring experienced, Utah-certified teachers; providing teachers with laptops, cell phones, and Internet access; and conducting social outings, such as field trips. Alpine was able to make the available funds cover all these costs because a full-time online school has no capital, transportation, or cafeteria costs, for example.

A full-time online school could also have a higher student-to-teacher ratio—and therefore fewer expenses associated with hiring and compensating teachers—than that of a typical school. In a traditional Alpine elementary school, the student-to-teacher ratio was 20 to 1. In contrast, in the online school, that ratio could be 75 to 1. This higher ratio was possible because a teacher’s job in a full-time online school would be quite different from that of a typical teacher.

For example, a teacher in a full-time online school could reallocate the time spent preparing and presenting (which parents and computers would handle) to tutoring, mentoring, and providing feedback. Online teachers would also spend far more time contacting the students and their parents by phone or email, as Alpine mandated that they contact 100% of home-schooling families at least weekly. In many cases, a family would have two students enrolled in the online school so a teacher could contact about 50 families a week and reach multiple students at a time.

An exciting part of implementing the provider's online curriculum was that learning became much more tailored to the individual students' needs than it would have been in a typical classroom. Online assessment tools placed and tracked students at their appropriate learning level. Students progressed at their own pace through the curriculum and could move on to the next unit only after demonstrating 80% mastery through assessments. As a result, instead of the typical school arrangement where time is held constant and each student's learning is variable, in the online school, a student's learning was held constant while the time became variable.

Community Involvement

Once Alpine Online was operational, the school's leadership started a community council with about 20 parents to provide the school with feedback. At the meetings, the school learned that parents and students wanted additional curricular choices for more customizability to their needs and interests. The school acted on the feedback, as it began offering a Saxon Math option so families could choose between that and the provider's curriculum. An added benefit for the school was that the Saxon Math option was nearly \$200 less expensive than the provider's math.

The school also began offering foreign language options from Rosetta Stone, in addition to the provider's offerings. Alpine Online purchased 500 Rosetta Stone online licenses with 14 language options at a substantially discounted rate.

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Alpine Online also made an effort to engage its students socially by providing opportunities for students to interact in person with their peers at least once a month. During the school's first two years, the families took trips to a local aquarium, a dinosaur museum, and various parks. In its second year, Alpine Online began allowing some students to take some of their courses—like orchestra and art—at the local school and their other courses from home.

Serving All Students

Thus far, the test-score results from Alpine Online have been similar to those of the district's test scores as a whole. Parents have largely enjoyed the experience; some

report that being able to choose when, where, and what their children study has allowed many of the children to accelerate and enhance their learning.

As online learning continues to grow in the coming years, districts can use it to better serve their students who come from different walks of life and have different needs. Already, *Keeping Pace* reports that "there is a wide spectrum of programs at the district level, including fully online programs, blended learning, summer school programs, credit recovery, alternative high schools, programs providing [advanced placement] courses and/or other electives, and ad hoc individual courses. These types of programs are not mutually exclusive and often overlap."

What is so striking about the Alpine case is how the district used online learning as a mechanism to respond to the needs of its community. Although Alpine Online is not for everyone, by discarding many of the traditional rules of school, Alpine created something of value that is less costly than a typical school and is more flexible. Its solution will not be for every district, but the school and the process of setting it up do illuminate the potential for each district to meet the needs of its community creatively and affordably and to move toward creating a more student-centric education system.

For more on the Alpine Online program, download the case study at www.innosightinstitute.org/innosight/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/Alpine-Online.pdf.

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