By Don W. Brown

Right On Course

Lane County, Oregon, has 16 school districts, and up until last year, every one of them had its own online learning program. Some were more like correspondence courses, while others were closer to online curriculum delivery. No one had ever explored the options available, the cost savings that district collaboration might provide, or the benefits that a central "go-to" for support could offer.

During the 2009–10 school year, district superintendents decided to work together to create better online options countywide. That January, they directed the local education service agency, Lane Education Service District (Lane ESD), to try something new. In addition to providing special education services and delivering teacher professional development, Lane ESD would create a diverse collection of online options for all students in the county.

Many results were dramatic. Interest was high, so enrollments began earlier than we had initially planned. In fact, fall semester enrollments exceeded the anticipated numbers for the entire year. The service added a "proof of concept" class for gifted elementary students and offered ongoing teacher professional development to support the move from face-to-face teaching to online courses.

The phases that followed included hiring part-time teachers and building Lane ESD's first fully owned courses, but getting to this stage required some serious planning and lots of support for individual school districts for technology infrastructure and communication.

Getting Started

When the mandate went into effect, the first step Lane ESD took was to work with superintendents to define common goals that corresponded with local district goals:

- Expanding course offerings
- Improving student retention
- Increasing options for non-traditional students
- Establishing regional oversight

The next step was to map out a timeline of critical events. The ESD staff created this timeline and quickly handed responsibility over to a cadre of teachers, instructional assistants, principals, and even two superintendents. They defined the research needed, decision points, and funding estimates necessary to get the project under way.

We then began visiting schools and talking to principals, counselors, and students about course services. After visiting high schools in 14 of the 16 county school districts, we saw some specific trends. First, many students needed credit recovery classes, and second, some teachers were concerned that a student could be outsourced to an online teacher for the wrong reasons. Many districts agreed to allow only online courses that were not available in the existing curriculum at the local high school. These were mostly world language and AP courses. Finally, a few students were homebound or suspended from campus. Those students would require full-time courses, but with regular adult contact from a district teacher or counselor.

Partners and Resources

Our local community college became a partner early on, and we found an important mutual resource: Moodle. The college already used the open source learning management system as a platform for all its courses, but there was one challenge. In the College Now program, high school teachers collaborate to teach college credit–bearing courses at their high schools and often use Moodle for content. The problem was that the college tied its Moodle server to its calendar and registration system. That meant that high schools, which often use a semester system, had to work around the college's quarter system. It was a tricky problem. The solution was to have the college provide ongoing teacher

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Collaboration among 16 Oregon school districts led to better online learning options for students countywide.

OnlineOptions.org offers credit recovery, core classes, electives, AP courses, and college credit courses through Aventa Learning, Florida Virtual Schools, SK Online, and Lane Community College.

training in Moodle and have Lane ESD provide a Moodle server that was not tied to a calendar of any type. This allowed College Now teachers to migrate their courses to our Moodle server. The partnership works well, and we continue to find partnerships that bridge K–12 and the community college through online learning.

Course Offerings

With Moodle support planned and a timeline for development of services in hand, we gathered data to find out just what the school districts needed. We had a goal of visiting at least one high school in every district in the county. We talked with principals, students, and counselors to assess the needs. As we completed visits, three distinct types of needs for online courses emerged. First, and the most obvious, was the need for courses that smaller districts could not offer, including AP courses, electives, and some advanced mathematics courses. Next was the need for credit-recovery courses, and finally a mixture of unique cases.

We built three profiles and used them to design the web portal:

A fresh challenge. These students need challenging courses or courses not offered at their school. Occasionally, at rural schools, students may have scheduling conflicts that are serious enough to warrant an online course substitute.

A different pace. Often students needed the flexibility to work on a class at any time and from any place. Students who cannot come to the campus need full-time enrollment in online courses. This is problematic because of the project's commitment to blended learning, but so far, this hasn't been done.

Credits in a hurry. Some students want to retake a course they have failed. Online credit-recovery courses make use of assessments that allow them to skip the sections of the course they remember and help them learn the parts they didn't understand. In addition, they can take the courses during a class period or after school.

Selecting Vendors

The second big task was to select vendors for the new service. We evaluated 13 potential vendors using the iNACOL National Standards for Quality Online Teaching rubric and the Quality Matters Inter-Institutional Quality Assurance in Online Learning rubric. The education district contracted with Aventa Learning and Florida Virtual School to prepare for fall enrollments. We had planned to use a provider from within our state, but scheduling issues kept it from being used much.

We felt ready to begin in the fall. We had the web portal ready with preassessments, talking points for counselors, and links to course catalogs. We had narrowed the providers to those that we felt had the highest student engagement and best content for the cost, and we had an initial budget to purchase courses so that districts could focus on infrastructure, professional development, and equitable methods for using online courses.

To our surprise, two districts requested to begin immediately, in hopes of enrolling students in June 2010 for summer school. We said yes, thinking all of the enrollments would be for credit recovery, but remained flexible when they were not. As a result, a gifted incoming ninth grader was able to earn high school credit before her first day in high school. The two districts had an overall passing/completion rate of 80% for summer programs—much higher than the previous year in both cases.

When fall came, additional schools and districts were prepared to start online learning based on their own logistical models. One immediate lesson emerged: Students must have an email account they will actually look at to enroll in a course. Most districts did not offer student email and relied on parent permission to use the students' personal email accounts. This was a good thing in the end, because students checked the accounts regularly. For the few students who did not have an account, the parents (or school personnel acting on behalf of the parents) opened a free personal account.

Improving Communication

Supporting the IT infrastructure for 16 organizations was a challenge—not in servers, switches, and software, but in communication. We quickly realized that, although we had a cadre of teachers, instructional assistants, and administrators (at least one person representing each district), this was inadequate to facilitate the learning curve that the IT staff in each district faced. We had few issues when downloading new plug-ins or software. When technical difficulties did arise, the most frequent result was a breakdown in student access and great concern that teachers would need a lot more services from district-level tech support staff. What was actually happening was that those working directly with students were not getting information we had shared with either administrators or technology staff as quickly as we would have liked. We worked hard to facilitate this communication by instituting three changes:

1. We began copying administrators, mentors, teachers, and tech staff on any email that dealt with technical issues that had arisen in other schools and districts.
2. We set up a subgroup of the cadre called the Logistics Special Interest Group (SIG-Logistics) that would facilitate communication between technology staff in different districts.
3. We ensured that tech staff received updates, not just by emails and a dedicated wiki, but also in person through existing face-to-face meetings that did not include information about online courses prior to the project start-up.

By mid-November, we had turned a corner on communication. Most of the staff members with concerns about implementing online courses were helping to meet the needs of students, and some even became enthusiastic supporters.

Price of Service

Of course, to meet our goal of removing barriers during the "proof of concept" year, we needed to offer some funding to get things going. We put a dedicated fund together for the first year and devised a plan for "costing" the service: seats, slots, and courses. This proved to be far more complicated than anticipated.

PHOTO COURTESY DON W. BROWN

Alva Brentmar, a student in Eugene School District, needed to make up credits to graduate. OnlineOptions.org allowed her to complete earth science, geography, and health classes while working and living remotely.

Our first attempt to distribute funding was to take an average cost of the anticipated seats, then let the first districts to take advantage of the seats be the recipients of the dedicated fund. That quickly gave way to a plan that allocated each district a portion of seats based on their total district enrollment. This was because the administrators guiding the group knew that each district was in a different state of readiness to implement online courses. Some were already offering limited online courses and had years of experience, and others had just started considering how to best use the resource.

During the school year, we began to discuss sustainability once the initial funding was over. We started by providing a free online professional development opportunity called Moodle Monday. Every Monday at 4 p.m., teachers could drop in for webinar sessions that alternated between direct training in elements of the Moodle LMS and chat sessions where everyone could suggest a topic and learn from each other. We enrolled all who attended Moodle Monday in a "sandbox course," so they had a common place to experiment within our actual Moodle LMS. We also explored uploading free content to the Moodle server from a variety of sources but soon found that the quality of

PHOTO COURTESY CAMERON YEE, LANE EDUCATION SERVICE DISTRICT

Siuslaw School District Superintendent Jeff Davis (left), Fern Ridge School District teacher Michael English (center), and McKenzie School District principal Kyle Cox (right) discuss course management during the kick-off cadre meeting in Eugene at Lane ESD. Administrators, teachers, instructional assistants, and tech staff all play a role in the online options cadre.

PHOTO COURTESY DON W. BROWN

Dave Sheehan, a teacher in Eugene School District, assists fifth-year senior Jose Gonzalez, who used online credit recovery in geography and health to meet graduation requirements this year.

many free resources was not up to par. Using the iNACOL Standards for Online Learning, ISTE's NETS, and research on best practices, we are now in the middle of developing our own course standards for blended learning. Our cadre will continue to discuss and guide this framework using their firsthand experience with students.

We also want to progress from the "turnkey" purchase of courses (where we purchase the course, LMS, and a teacher from a vendor) to a place that will allow more local teachers to take advantage of teaching online. We have the Moodle training in place for this reason and will move to leasing content as a bridge while we develop courses with our own course standards, which may include project-based options within the course architecture. We also want to use community engagement as a mandatory element of all secondary courses.

Lessons Learned

We have learned a lot in our first year of operation with more than 525 individual course enrollments:

- We now know that every online course varies and every online teacher varies, just like in brick-and-mortar schools.
- Our most critical role in developing a consortium for implementing online learning has more to do with facilitating communication within districts than actual computer specifications and course selections.
- For online learning, the role of the teacher breaks into three distinct roles: the mentor who is with the student, the teacher providing online instruction, and the course designer (or instructional designer) who makes the course engaging and aligned to standards. As we look ahead to hiring our own staff, we must consider the unique training and experience requirements for each of these roles.
- Finally, we have learned that online learning can be very engaging for any student, especially using the blended models that are present in our consortium. We have an overall success rate of 75% of students passing online courses for both summer school and courses completed so far this school year. We would like it to be higher, but that rate of success for a proof-of-concept year points to a higher success rate once more mentors, teachers, and instructional designers are trained and gain experience and after we collect even more data about what works with the students in our schools.

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