

By Don Brown



Rural Districts Bolster Choices with Online Learning

Find out how four small rural school districts use online learning to offer enrichment courses to advanced students and give struggling students a way to retake courses to graduate.

All schools can benefit from giving students the option of online learning, but for many rural schools, online learning is a lifeline. In the past two years, Lane Education Service District in Oregon, USA, has developed online resources for 14 Lane County school districts, which vary in size from 170 students to as many as 17,000.

Many of the smaller districts, which offer fewer courses due to the size of their staffs and limited space on the schedule, turn to online learning to give students a richer selection of offerings. Some have found online credit recovery courses to be an excellent tool for helping students graduate on time. And most of our districts use online curricula to customize instruction for students.

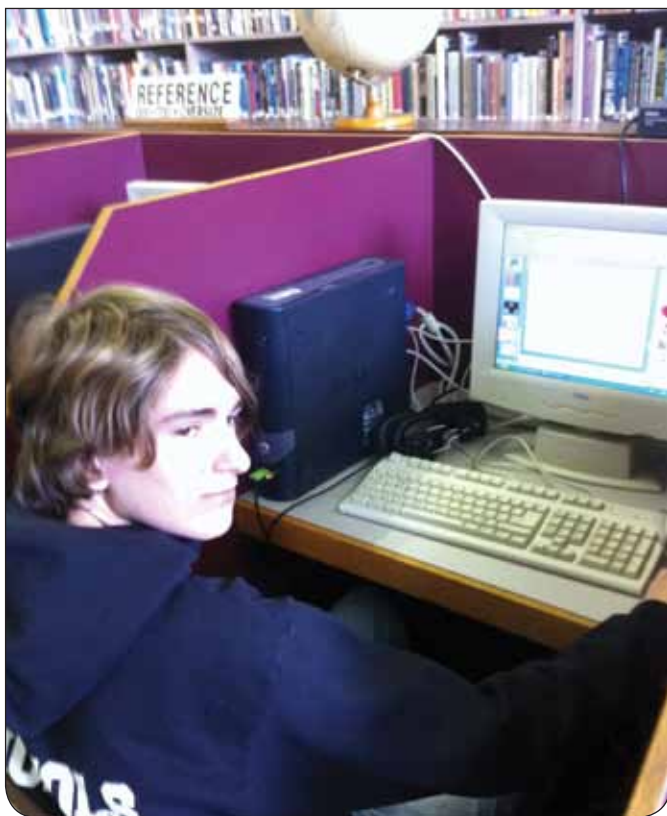
Our goal is to remove barriers, develop free and low-cost shared services, and innovate using online tools.

The first phase of our collaboration with the districts was to purchase turnkey courses that provided everything—the learning management system, teachers, and courses. Now in our second phase, we are building courses ourselves and trying them out with local teachers. We also have online enrichment programs for fifth and eighth grade gifted students.

During this project, we have found that each school district has a unique story based on its students, teachers, and community. What follows are examples of ways that four of our rural districts have not just implemented online learning, but tailored it to fit their needs.



Sue Bowers, a mentor at Creswell High School, carefully tracks and supports students. Last year she achieved a 100% pass rate.



Jaren Nichols, a student at Lowell High School, takes Spanish II online. His rural school can no longer afford a full-time Spanish teacher, based on the number of students that would enroll.

Creswell School District: 1,300 Students

By the time we began working with Creswell, the district already had years of experience using online courses from a variety of vendors. The district developed a sound procedure for identifying students for online courses, and the staff had considerable expertise in mentoring them. They established a tiered approach to enrolling students in online courses, with gifted students getting top priority, followed by juniors and seniors who had at least a 3.5 grade point average (GPA) and wanted a course that was not available at their school.

Creswell was so ahead of the curve that we turned to Sue Bowers, the district's instructional assistant in charge of monitoring online students, to help guide our initial vendor picks and early best practices in mentoring. She began using online courses in 2005 and last year attained a 100% completion rate. She attributes the success to the following district procedures:

- Students may take only courses that are not offered by the school already.
- Students pay 10% of the course cost.
- Students work on their online course (usually just one at a time) during a dedicated period at school with a mentor.

If money is available, students with GPAs as low as 3.0 can take an online course, and in rare cases, sophomores may take them as well.

This year, the district began offering credit recovery. The credit recovery model is a bit different, in that students do not have to pay up front for the courses, and the courses must be required for graduation.

When students work on courses every day, at a set period, they get the support they need for success, said sophomore Rebecca Bowers:

Taking online classes is a really good way to explore who you want to be and what you want to know without having to worry about whether or not your school will have the resources.

Technical, scheduling, and progress-monitoring issues exist, but the most challenging part is helping students stay on track. Sue Bowers said:

The scheduling piece is most difficult for the students. If the course does not generate a pacing chart, be sure to have them build one with due dates for assignments and tests. I review the pacing charts with every student individually each Friday. More students tend to fall behind than work ahead. Without consistent support, students may fall so far behind, they give up.

Lowell School District: 280 Students

Before we began working with the district, Lowell High School had used a less expensive online course product for credit recovery, with mixed results. That's why, during the first year of the countywide effort, many students felt like the courses were more difficult. But the monitoring we provided, along with better interactivity in the courses, allowed students to be successful.

Using credit recovery, regular courses, and electives, Lowell has integrated online courses for all students.

Student Jaren Nichols sums up the advantage of online learning for him:

My school does not offer a Spanish II class, and I need another year of Spanish to get into a four-year university. Without these online courses, I wouldn't be able to get into college as easily.

Now in the second year of development, Lowell educators are establishing criteria for students who want to participate in the program. Students must have a teacher's recommendation, and juniors and seniors get first priority for credit recovery courses, but younger students can also take them as space allows.

District Superintendent Aaron Brown looks forward to the day when staff teach online content themselves.

Several years ago, Lowell educators experimented with sharing Spanish courses via a statewide interactive video-conference (IVC) service. That program "didn't take off," Brown said, "probably due to the supervision issues associated with different schedules at different sites." Unlike IVC, online courses offer more opportunities for students to work and interact with each other asynchronously. Brown said:

Getting more of our teachers using online resources will help us serve students at both ends of the spectrum—enrichment courses that allow capable students to move ahead and other components of online learning that help students who are in the alternative-education model.

In addition to full courses online, Lowell teachers use an online supplementary math program in the computer lab to differentiate curriculum. The math teacher, Liam Pilong, designs the courses, and students complete them at their own pace. Testing is proctored at school. Pilong has found this to be a good way to serve students who need a wider scope of resources than grade-level materials, and it's less expensive than buying a full suite of supplementary materials.

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Superintendent Susan Nakaba and Crow High School Principal Ron Osibov have engaged the entire staff to make agreements about implementing online courses.

Next, the staff at Lowell High School is thinking about using a commercial online mathematics curriculum that can be tailored for each student. Some of the teachers on the Lowell staff have embraced online learning and are developing course assets on their own. But building a full course is a long-term process, so teachers are beginning by hosting a collection of websites and reading resources. As they gain more expertise developing a blended model using the Moodle course management system, they discover they have many options for instruction that were not available before.

Pleasant Hill School District: 840 Students

Pleasant Hill School District was already using an online math curriculum before we began working with them. This year, the district is using online courses for students who have been exposed to content already but need to make up the credit and demonstrate more mastery. Online credit recovery courses have had mixed results at Pleasant Hill, and school officials cite “less motivation” as one reason why some students are not as successful.

Pleasant Hill’s credit recovery model involves students attending the online course every day for 50 minutes in a computer lab with a trained mentor.

In addition to credit recovery, some students take courses online for enrichment or because they want to take courses not offered by staff, such as German, Japanese, Mandarin, physics, or computer programming.

Mentor Inga Perham says, “Online courses allow us to provide courses we can’t offer due to a smaller staff, and it allows us to compete with nearby in-town schools.”

The biggest barriers in implementing online courses are communicating offerings and enrollment qualifications to students and finding room in the schedule. District administrators are working on contract language that allows students the flexibility they need but keeps them from laying off staff because of small class sizes. Staff can supervise students taking online courses and take on the role of the mentor, and the online class has its own highly qualified teacher doing the grading and answering content-specific questions.

Pleasant Hill still needs to develop clear procedures for students who are not completing work or who are earning low grades in an online course.

Crow-Applegate-Lorane District: 310 Students

Crow High has been using online courses since the school became part of our Online Options program in fall 2010 [see “Right on Course,” *L&L*, August 2011, pages 26–29]. In addition to providing courses that would not normally be available, such as world languages, Crow-Applegate-Lorane uses scaffolded courses with a variety of students, including those on individualized education plans (IEPs).

Sean Bradshaw, the primary online mentor for high school students at Crow, acknowledged that it’s easier the second time around. “Students understand how to navigate courses and work with mentors to pay special attention to pacing,” he explained.

Bradshaw has set a baseline expectation of completing 6% of the course each week, and he keeps a close eye on how students are progressing.

Online courses not only provide content knowledge, they also teach kids technology skills and prepare them for the future, Bradshaw said, adding, “We need to train these kids for their world.”

Establishing a collaborative structure to remove barriers was essential to getting the program started. We assumed the financial risks by setting up a dedicated fund to pay for course seats in AP, regular, and credit recovery courses. The number of seats was proportional to the total number of students each district had compared to all students in the county. This allowed districts to try different courses with various student populations without spending their own money.

After the first year, the ESD continues to pay for credit recovery courses, and the districts each have unique models for using the other courses. The ESD kept the credit recovery courses so we could continue to monitor progress, develop best practices, and obtain a bulk purchase discount.

Removing the financial barrier allowed students and staff to try things out and gave them time to develop policies and procedures. Now, at the beginning of the second year, principal Ron Osibov and staff have worked together to

update the old “distance learning” language in the student and teacher handbooks. These are the criteria they consider before enrolling a student in an online class:

- Is online the best setting for this student?
- Will it affect the jobs of teachers in the district?
- What is the cost for this student to take the course?

Online courses are broadening choices for students, providing an effective alternative for students on IEPs, and helping students graduate who certainly would not without the opportunity to make up a course online.

The Path Ahead

We are now developing local course resources, training teachers in Moodle, and offering our own courses. Using *Collaborative Statistics*, a college-level statistics textbook by Barbara Illowsky and Susan Dean, as a guide, we are developing our first full-year course. We chose *Collaborative Statistics* because Oregon students will soon be required to have three years of mathematics at the Algebra I level or higher, and most high schools have a difficult time providing options for students who don't want to take calculus. We have branched the course from the textbook to use some

of the project-based instructional strategies that have proven successful in alternative high school settings. Students can complete the traditional path or go the project-infused route. After piloting this year, we will share the course via Creative Commons.

One way for teachers to create content if they don't have time to build an entire course is to create miniblocks of web resources. Using bookmarks saved over the past two years in Diigo, we will begin offering minicourse blocks in high-interest topics to encourage others to give blended learning a chance.



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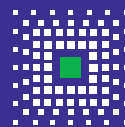
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