

View from the Field: How to Launch District Virtual Learning

Over 1.5 million students were engaged in fully online and blended learning for the 2009-2010 school year, a 47% increase over prior academic years, according to iNACOL and data from the Sloan Consortium¹. And budget-constrained districts continue to turn to virtual learning to improve student performance, save money and empower teachers to enrich instruction and maintain their teaching credentials. As more and more districts go virtual, it's important to think about long-term success. According to 17 experts, the key is securing buy-in from teachers, administrators, parents and the community; convincing students of online learning's value is the easy part.

According to Clayton Christensen and Michael Horn, coauthors of *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns* (McGraw-Hill, 2008), by 2019, approximately half of all high school courses will be offered online². Whether your district pioneered this technology-fueled learning explosion and is looking to expand to new areas or is considering launching an inaugural virtual initiative, this white paper enables you to learn from those who have gone before. Using these effective practices, new learning and case studies from the field, your district will be poised to capitalize on one of the fastest growing trends in K-12 education.

The Panel of Virtual Learning Experts

In all, 17 virtual learning experts who have led online learning initiatives participated in the interviews that form the basis for this white paper. The experts agreed on the importance of answering seven key questions before launching or expanding a virtual learning program. The seven questions apply equally well to any of the three most common paths to virtual learning: blended learning, course expansion and professional development. First, here are the experts and how they started out, although many have since branched out beyond these categories:

Blended Learning – a teaching model combining face-to-face interaction with online learning

- ▶ Jason Bailey, Director of eLearning and Instructional Technology, Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation (IN)
- ▶ Traci Dami, Director of Staff Development, Collier County Public Schools (FL)
- ▶ Amy Hance, Instructional Technology Specialist, Collier County Public Schools (FL)
- ▶ Scott Smith, Chief Technology Officer, Mooresville Graded School District (NC)

Course Expansion – offering a richer, more comprehensive curriculum through fully online courses

- ▶ Ryan Fuller, Online Learning Specialist, Cobb County School District (GA)
- ▶ Ryan Gravette, Technology Director, Idaho Digital Learning Academy (ID)
- ▶ Jana Hickey, eLearning Specialist, Jefferson County Public Schools (KY)
- ▶ Becky Nunnally, Online Learning Specialist, Cobb County School District (GA)
- ▶ Tara Park, Teacher, Pennsylvania Virtual Charter School (PA)
- ▶ Linda Schriver, Distance Learning Specialist, Clay County School District (FL)
- ▶ Cheryl Rowley, Online Learning Specialist, Cobb County School District (GA)

Professional Development – continuing education online to attract and retain top teachers

- ▶ Cathy Brown, Office of Professional Development and Support, Volusia County Schools (FL)
- ▶ Jill Montoya, Online Professional Development Coordinator, Jeffco Public Schools (CO)
- ▶ Amy Phipps, Director Online Learning, Albuquerque Public Schools (NM)
- ▶ Tom Ryan, Chief Information Officer, Albuquerque Public Schools (NM)
- ▶ Paty Savage, Director of Instructional Technology, The Schultz Center for Teaching and Leadership (FL)
- ▶ Pam Willingham, Learning Technologies, Volusia County Schools (FL)

Guide to Getting Started

Today's constrained budgets open up the potential to implement online learning as a means to address tough challenges, but also put extra pressure on education professionals launching or expanding virtual learning efforts to deliver success – quickly and efficiently. Answering these questions will help readers design a plan for district-wide virtual learning that leverages the research, experience and expertise gained through pioneering programs.

1 What challenge are we trying to address?

Successful virtual learning programs do not stand alone; they fit tightly into a district's overall educational plan. District-level administrators turn to virtual learning for several reasons, including:

- ▶ **An observed gap between what current curricula offer and what students need**
- ▶ **Constrained finances that make a cost-efficient solution imperative**
- ▶ **New state policies requiring swift changes to teaching and learning**

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One of Kentucky's top initiatives focused on re-engaging students at risk of failing, but Jefferson County students had to wait until the end of the grading period to begin credit recovery. "Telling a student to wait until a new grading period to re-take a class was a missed opportunity. We started an online, open entry/open exit, competency-based model that allowed students to go through the material at their pace and on their schedule," explained Jana Hickey, Jefferson County Public Schools in Kentucky.

SEVEN QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE LAUNCHING VIRTUAL LEARNING

- 1 What challenge are we trying to address?
- 2 Who are our champions?
- 3 What is our messaging?
- 4 How are we going to pay for it?
- 5 How do we get teachers on board?
- 6 How are we going to create and deliver the courses?
- 7 How will we measure success?

The leader doesn't need to be a virtual learning expert, but needs to understand the role virtual learning can play in supporting district goals - and then broadly communicate this to teachers, administrators, parents and the local community.

Students aren't the only ones to benefit from virtual learning. This approach works for teachers as well.

VIEWS FROM THE FIELD

“In 2003 a modification was made to the Florida Consent Decree that stipulates the professional development requirements of teachers needing the ESOL endorsement added to their professional teaching certificate. Following this modification, the need for ESOL professional development increased exponentially, and there were not enough workshops to meet the demand, and in an instant many teachers did not have the credentials they needed to maintain their jobs. The Schultz Center sought to train hundreds of educators who now needed an additional endorsement from the state to teach this population. It was our job to get them the training they needed in order to keep their job and to ensure we have highly skilled teachers, in real terms and according to state mandates,” explained Paty Savage, The Schultz Center for Teaching and Leadership.

“When our budget was drastically cut, we turned to virtual professional development to offer more courses to more teachers than we did five years ago when we were three times the size,” explained Cathy Brown, Volusia County Schools.

2 Who are our champions?

Every virtual learning program needs at least two champions: one to serve as the virtual learning advocate at the district leadership level and a second, equally passionate leader to manage the program's day-to-day operations.

The leadership-level leader doesn't need to be a virtual learning expert, but needs to understand the role virtual learning can play in supporting district goals - and then broadly communicate this to teachers, administrators, parents and the local community. This champion must have the authority and influence to make budgeting and prioritizing decisions that favor virtual learning.

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Dr. Mark Edwards, superintendent of Mooresville Graded Schools, set out a clear vision of doing what's right for "Every Child, Every Day" - which then became the theme of the district's strategic plan. Superintendent Edwards first introduced virtual learning to the School Board as a key part of that vision and followed that with a series of meetings to unveil the new concept to the community, parents and teachers. His efforts gained the approval and funding needed to put laptops into the hands of every student in grades 4 through 12. In addition, he deployed a learning management system that became the conduit for collaboration, communication and staff development.

In addition to the high-level champion, districts need one to two professionals who will spread the leader's vision by working in small groups or one-on-one with teachers, administrators and counselors. These professionals create operating policies, manage content specialists and course facilitators, oversee program finances, ensure the technology infrastructure scales to meet current and future needs, and conduct training.

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"Put people in charge that have passion, understanding of online learning, know the difference between online education and brick-and-mortar education, and can use a district-wide perspective to make decisions," recommends Becky Nunnally, Cobb County School District.

"We train the parents on how to use the learning management system and the laptop to access their child's classes and grades, so they have the knowledge to support their children's online learning. Teacher training focuses on topics that merge technology and pedagogy, such as 21st Century learning. We set aside 10 early release days each year for teacher training and development, and we have created a mentor program for new teachers," Dr. Scott Smith, Mooresville Graded Schools pointed out.

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Our Superintendent met with all 51 principals and asked for feedback about successes and challenges. We were able to understand what they really needed and they knew they had a voice in this process.

Traci Dami
*Director of Staff Development,
Collier County Public Schools*

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No doubt about it, teachers hold the key to virtual learning success.

3 What is our messaging?

Misconceptions about the value and mechanics of virtual learning proliferate among educators and the community. “There are so many misconceptions about online learning: ‘Online classes are easy,’ ‘Creating an online class just means putting face-to-face materials online,’ and ‘You cannot teach what I teach online,’” shared Paty Savage, The Schultz Center for Teaching and Leadership. “It is important to educate people on what online learning is to change the misconceptions.”

Professionals advocating for virtual learning who address these misconceptions directly will advance their cause more effectively than those who allow the misconceptions to linger. The virtual learning expert panel recommends actively communicating with and soliciting feedback from the district community about the virtual learning initiative. This ongoing dialog, which should involve school administrators, teachers and counselors, needs to be informational. For example, define the benefits of virtual learning, describe the educational content of an online class, share examples from proven programs and highlight research to support what you claim.

VIEWS FROM THE FIELD



“Our Superintendent met with all 51 principals and asked for feedback about successes and challenges. We were able to understand what they really needed and they knew they had a voice in this process,” stated Traci Dami, Collier County Public Schools.

Ryan Gravette from Idaho Digital Learning Academy suggested explaining “the level of expected rigor, the impact on your brand and how you are different from other providers, what an online course is and is not, virtual learning nomenclature, and your niche.”



4 How are we going to pay for it?

When it comes to financing virtual learning, educators can seek new funding earmarked for virtual programming, redirect existing monies or create a new revenue stream to underwrite the costs. Some educators pursue a combination of all three approaches.

Grants, state funding and philanthropic resources represent the dominant sources of new funding for virtual learning. However, given the shrinking size of education budgets and the escalating need to do more with less, this approach seems to be less available than it was 5 to 10 years ago.

Today, reallocating existing funds tends to be the more common way to cover the expenses associated with virtual learning initiatives. For example, funds previously allocated to face-to-face professional development, text books and travel expenses are being earmarked for virtual learning.

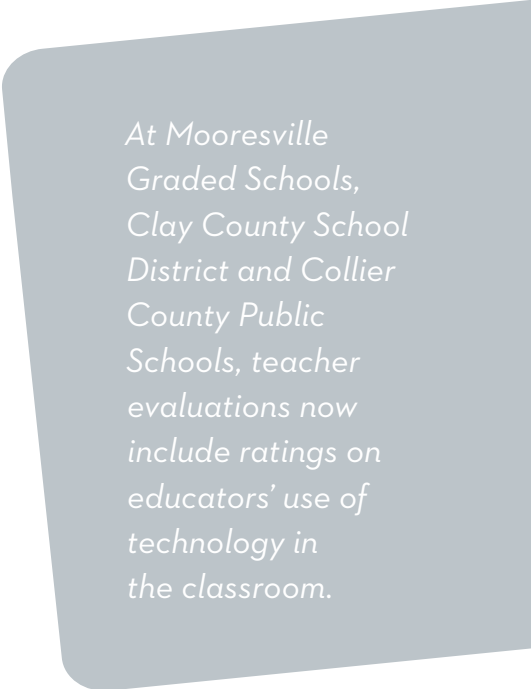
Charging teachers to take courses online and students for supplemental classes can also create a new revenue stream for the district, helping to defray the cost of virtual learning. Additionally, districts that sell their course materials to other districts generate additional funding for their virtual learning programs.

VIEWS FROM THE FIELD



“We financed our virtual learning efforts, including a 1:1 laptop initiative for all students in grades 4 through 12, through some grants but largely through the redirection of funds. Our Superintendent did such a great job of educating the community on the benefits of this program we were able to secure a \$250,000 grant from Lowe’s Home Improvement Store, \$50,000 from the county and \$100,000 from the state. These funds also helped build our virtual learning infrastructure. We put our textbook budget towards this initiative too. When we build our new schools, we no longer pay for wired classrooms – everything is wireless. We have done all of this and are still #99 out of 115 North Carolina school districts in terms of dollars spent per pupil where #1 spends the most and #115 the least,” stated Dr. Scott Smith, Mooresville Graded Schools.

Jeffco’s budget cuts severely impacted professional development opportunities, putting face-to-face courses out of reach. “Many of the department heads reallocated their funding, time and efforts to start developing online professional development courses for their teachers, and we charge for those courses. In-district teachers pay one amount, while out-of-district teachers pay more. We have also started selling our course content to other districts,” stated Jill Montoya, Jeffco Public Schools in Colorado.



At Mooresville Graded Schools, Clay County School District and Collier County Public Schools, teacher evaluations now include ratings on educators’ use of technology in the classroom.

We have guidelines but we give the content creators a lot of flexibility. We want them to be creative and think outside-the-box to come up with the best ways to teach concepts.

Cathy Brown
Office of Professional
Development and Support,
Volusia County Schools

5 How do we get teachers on board?

No doubt about it, teachers hold the key to virtual learning success. District administrators acknowledged that, while there are different ways to secure teachers' buy-in, three strategies stand out.

I. Mandate

At Mooresville Graded Schools, Clay County School District and Collier County Public Schools, teacher evaluations now include ratings on educators' use of technology in the classroom. Mooresville requires teachers to use the learning management system grade book and post at least once a week. Clay County's principals require that every teacher have a website and encourage teachers to use the learning management system as the course website.

II. Support the choice

Albuquerque Public Schools, Jeffco Public Schools and the Schultz Center for Teaching and Learning offer the majority of their professional development courses online only. Clay County's homebound education is available online only, with very few exceptions.

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“We use the learning management system in everything we do. It is our online classroom, it is our portal; we are paperless as we provide all information and forms via our learning management system. Administrative meeting notes, resource articles, school improvement plans are all shared and stored in the system,” stated Traci Dami, Collier County Public Schools.

III. Encourage gradual buy-in

Find non-threatening opportunities to familiarize educators with the online environment. If online learning options are available, easy to use and well supported, teachers will gradually begin using them.

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“Technology can be overwhelming. There is so much out there that it can be hard to get your arms around it all – encourage your teachers to try something new on a regular basis,” recommended Tara Park, Pennsylvania Virtual Charter School.

“We wanted to make sure we were doing everything possible to encourage using technology in the classroom. Every student in grades 6 through 12 is given a netbook. We create a class shell for every class and automatically populate that class with all the teacher’s students. We started an annual summer conference on eLearning, which includes presentations from nationally known speakers, our own teachers and other educators from the state. Our eLearning coaches are teachers who leave the classroom for two years exclusively to promote the use of the new devices and the learning management system in the classroom. But in the end, it is up to instructors when and how they use technology in their classes,” said Jason Bailey, Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation.

6 How are we going to create and deliver the courses?

Policies spelling out how virtual courses are created and delivered play a critical role in virtual learning success. Although the expert panel differed widely on the amount of control that made sense for their respective districts, each has a consistently applied process to make that determination.

Their processes centered on answering the following questions:

- ▶ **Will we build or buy the course content?**
- ▶ **How will we define and measure the rigor of a course?**
- ▶ **Will virtual classes be synchronous or asynchronous?**
- ▶ **Will the classes be delivered on a set term or a continuous basis?**
- ▶ **Will the classes involve teamwork?**
- ▶ **How will we determine the pace of online classes?**
- ▶ **Do we want consistency between the classes?**
- ▶ **What will be the role of the teacher in online courses?**
- ▶ **How much flexibility will teachers have with the courses?**
Is the content standardized?
- ▶ **How will we measure quality?**

I would recommend that educators think long-term when they decide on control and flexibility. When virtual learning programs start out small, it’s tempting to allow people the freedom to do whatever they want. However, when freedom can’t scale, fragmentation is the result.

Ryan Gravette
Technology Director, Idaho
Digital Learning Academy

Success metrics ranged from qualitative benchmarks, such as enrollment, retention, passing rates, dropout rates, number of highly qualified teachers and comparisons of standardized test scores, to qualitative measures, such as online evaluations and anecdotal stories.

Three members of the expert panel explained the rationale behind their level of control or flexibility this way:

VIEWS FROM THE FIELD

“We have guidelines but we give the content creators a lot of flexibility. We want them to be creative and think outside-the-box to come up with the best ways to teach concepts,” said Cathy Brown, Volusia County Schools.

“You must have a standard operating procedure to ensure quality. The more clearly expectations and processes are laid out, the better the outcome. We have a rubric for course quality, facilitator rules for what they can and cannot change in the course, course templates to maintain the same look and feel, extra resources built into the course, required class orientations and strong support,” stated Paty Savage, The Schultz Center for Teaching and Leadership.

“I would recommend that educators think long-term when they decide on control and flexibility. When virtual learning programs start out small, it’s tempting to allow people the freedom to do whatever they want. However, when freedom can’t scale, fragmentation is the result,” stated Ryan Gravette, Idaho Digital Learning Academy.

How districts obtain course content varies widely, with some organizations opting to create it, others purchasing it and still others pursuing a hybrid buy/build strategy. Districts that lack the resources to create compelling content can follow the example Albuquerque Public Schools set, electing to purchase most of their content. At the other end of the spectrum, Pennsylvania Virtual Charter School creates most of its content. The Schultz Center took a quick-start approach, choosing to purchase most of its content before transitioning to in-house development once the virtual learning program was up and running.

7 How will we measure success?

Every virtual learning program, especially the newer ones, needs to demonstrate success to ensure sustainability and growth. The experts attributed not only the initial success of their online learning efforts but their programs’ ongoing funding and growth to having measurable results to share. Success metrics ranged from quantitative benchmarks, such as enrollment, retention,

passing rates, dropout rates, number of highly qualified teachers and comparisons of standardized test scores, to qualitative measures, such as online evaluations and anecdotal stories. Ideally, you should use the initial challenge you identified in step one as a benchmark to measure success; however, you can also find additional areas of assessment.

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“Since implementing our virtual learning program, our students’ performance on our state-standardized tests at all of our schools has increased. We are tied for third place out of 115 districts in state test rankings. In addition, our attendance rate has continued to be over 95%, the college acceptance rate has increased by 12% to 86%, and our high school drop-out rate has declined to 39 students in 2009/2010 from 86 students in 2005/2006,” explained Dr. Scott Smith, Mooresville Graded Schools.

Conclusion

The Pre-K through grade 12 academic segment of self-paced eLearning is growing faster than any other, with a close to 17% annual growth rate³. In K-12 districts across the country, virtual learning’s three proven modalities – blended learning, course expansion and professional development – are proliferating. This trend can be expected to grow as escalating demands from students and teachers on resource-constrained educational systems continue.

Whether your district has pioneered virtual learning or is just getting started, educators involved in these innovative programs stand ready to help with assistance ranging from funding ideas to content creation strategies to measurement. Our expert panel’s recommendations offer a rich resource for virtual learning advocates, operational leaders and teachers.

“Remember that successes like ours took a whole lot of time. Let your program grow gradually – don’t try to take on the whole world. Learn from those who went before you,” said Jana Hickey, eLearning Specialist, Jefferson County Public Schools.

About the Blackboard Institute

The Blackboard Institute draws from Blackboard’s global community to surface and share actionable, practice-driven guidance on how educational institutions are leveraging technology to build better education experiences.

For more information, on effective practices that improve student progression, please visit blackboardinstitute.com.

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