

South Carolina Saves Money and Improves Student Success

If a school reported a 75% success rate (the percentage of students that pass their courses) in a state whose average success rate hovers around the 65% mark, that should be considered a success, right? Well, what if another school had a success rate of 88.8%? That would sound almost too good to be true. But in this case, fantasy is a reality as the South Carolina Virtual School Program (SCVSP) has far exceeded state averages, thanks in large part to a full curriculum of highly-engaging and effective online courses powered by Blackboard Collaborate.

Operated by the South Carolina State Department of Education since 2007 to improve graduation rates, SCVSP enables students to take up to three fully online courses per year in order to get ahead or to get help if falling behind. SCVSP, ranked 2nd in the nation for online guidelines, policies, and accessibility by the Center for Digital Learning, offers a full curriculum across all subjects, thereby allowing students to re-take a class they might have failed or to take an AP course that may have been cut from their regular schools due to budget shortfalls.

To make its virtual classes - which are held entirely online - as effective and engaging as possible, SCVSP relies on Blackboard Collaborate. 20 teachers teach more than 10,000 students each year, all of whom live throughout the state. They engage via audio, video, and application sharing to ensure each class is highly collaborative because, as data shows, the more the collaborative a class is, the better the students perform. And with SCVSP's 88.8% success rate, this rings truer than ever.

"We use Blackboard Collaborate in our virtual school program for conducting online course sessions with students and virtual office hours," explains Bradley Mitchell, Office of eLearning LMS Technical Support and Training Manager, South Carolina State Department of Education. "But we also use Blackboard Collaborate for most of our meetings and teacher trainings."

Our last report showed an 88.8%

Bradley Mitchell Office of eLearning LMS Technical Support and Training Manager, South Carolina State Department of Education

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Like many other states since 2008, South Carolina educational institutions of all sizes, missions, and scopes were forced to resolve the fact that their budgets were being reduced

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while enrollments and the need for operational efficiencies continued to grow. Administratively, they also confronted the need to hold meetings, trainings, and professional development sessions more efficiently and cost effectively.

Enter Blackboard Collaborate as a meeting and training tool. After all, it's a live collaboration platform designed for education that goes beyond web conferencing and traditional instant messaging to facilitate highly effective, engaging online instruction, help and administrative meetings.

"Due to budget cuts and travel funds being reduced, we use Blackboard Collaborate to conduct professional development courses and different meetings statewide rather than travel out to the school districts," adds Mitchell.

For instance, throughout the state there are numerous professional development courses that teach teachers about technologies available to them in the classroom such as Microsoft Office, smartboards, and online course tools. In the past, trainers from the State Department of Education would travel to various school districts to conduct the trainings. But now, via Blackboard Collaborate, these teacher trainings are done live online and the teachers still achieve a high level of proficiency and are able to renew their teaching certificates.

Further, the State DOE also conducts trainings on other tools like the state's online registration system. Prior to budget cuts, trainers and teachers all traveled to Columbia, SC to learn the new systems. But since the budget cuts, the state can no longer reimburse travel costs, so everything is conducted via Blackboard Collaborate.

"We can conduct the trainings basically same way we did them face-to-face," says Mitchell. "A lot of other offices are using Blackboard Collaborate in similar ways. So instead of conducting a training in which state trainers went to into a school to meet with the principals or teachers, now, because we're unable to provide reimbursements, we simply offer online sessions with administrators from the school districts rather than travel." "The state superintendent cut all travel completely in the last three months," Mitchell added in February 2011. "We now have a lot of committee meetings where our state team meets with the administration of local school districts. We conduct four or five of these online per month.

But as always, the proof is in the reports. The DEO conducts a yearly report to track how successful the virtual school program has been. The 2010 report found an astonishingly high success rate of 88.8%. The success has been so great that adult learners have started to enroll in virtual school so they can gain high school credits to earn a GED.

And in December 2010, the state saw its first class of students who got their diplomas taking their entire curriculum online. In fact, by taking courses online, these students actually reduced the amount of time normally needed to earn a GED.

However, sometimes numbers don't always tell the entire story. In 2009, a student had liver disease and leading up to her liver transplant she took courses online as part of SCVSP so she wouldn't fall behind her classmates as she awaited her surgery. Then, during her recovery after a successful transplant, doctors wouldn't allow her to go back to school out of fear of germs and infection. Therefore, SCVSP officials permitted her to take a full Blackboard Collaborate-enabled course load online (normally students can only take three classes all year at SCVSP), enabling her to keep pace with her classmates and graduate on time. She even ended up going to college in Fall 2010!

Saving time. Saving money. Improving Grades. Improving lives. Thanks to SCVSP and Blackboard Collaborate.

