

North Carolina Virtual Public School Improves Student Outcomes

How can a 700-square-foot office make an enormous positive impact on the entire K-12 educational system of North Carolina? Just ask Bryan Setser of the North Carolina Virtual Public School (NCVPS), who, through an aggressive distance learning program featuring Blackboard Collaborate, has helped improve student achievement throughout the state while also saving the state hundreds of thousands of dollars.

NCVPS is committed to raising achievement and closing learning gaps with 21st-century innovation by providing access to world class learning opportunities for all North Carolina students. It provides the vehicle for North Carolina school districts to accomplish its State Board of Education's goals of producing 21st-century learners, professionals, leaders, and systems by providing easily accessible, online learning opportunities for its state's most valuable resource: its children. Its mission is to provide skills, student support, and opportunities for 21st century learners to succeed in a globally competitive world. It offers more than 110 courses including Advanced Placement (AP), world language, and credit recovery courses-to students across the state of North Carolina.

To ensure its 45,000+ students were receiving the high-quality online education possible, in Spring 2008, Setser added Blackboard Collaborate to NCVPS courses. "My first goal was interactivity," recalls Setser. "I came from a face to face environment in which I often thought students weren't engaged enough with their teachers. I knew the interactivity inherent to courses that use Blackboard Collaborate would greatly help our program."

Since 2008, NCVPS teachers in countless courses have relied on Blackboard Collaborate's interactivity to help them provide deeper instruction to their students. Not only do they teach lively classes using audio, video, whiteboards, and application sharing,

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Dr. Bryan Setser North Carolina Virtual Public School

but teachers also communicate outside of 'class time' by holding live online office hours and by instant messaging their students to provide constant feedback. And this interactivity has led directly to improved student achievement.

According to Mack McCary, Chief Academic Officer of the Guilford County Schools, by using Blackboard Collaborate in their classes, NCVPS:

- ➤ Science students went from being 20% proficient in 2007-2008 to over 80% proficient in 2008-2009
- Students in two schools in a first year US History class beat district averages by all scoring 100% despite some students only having a 0.3-0.5% chance of scoring proficient
- ▶ Algebra 1 students scored 100% proficient
- ▶ 90+% of Geometry students scored 100% proficient

Blackboard Collaborate has also allowed students to practice their lessons year-round. For instance, Thomas Moncrief of NCVPS uses Blackboard Collaborate to connect World Language students through a Cultural Cafe. Students throughout the state join with language teachers and special guests from around the globe to learn about world cultures. Cafes are hosted by language (Arabic, French, Latin, Mandarin Chinese, Russian, and Spanish) and allow students to join with peers to synchronously practice in the target language – even during the summer when school is out – to ensure academic continuity. Each cafe has a topic, from a dinner menu in Paris to checking into a hotel in Moscow.

"One of the virtual advantages of online instruction is to connect student learners together," says Moncrief. "A unique relationship occurs when the language, not the state, becomes the common bond. This relationship is the one part of the global mindset which is a theme for each of the World Language courses within NCVPS."

Perhaps even more compelling than this significant increase in student achievement is that NCVPS staff have found Black-board Collaborate to be so flexible and comprehensive that they now use it even more for non-academic purposes – such as meetings and professional development – than for classes.

McCary first started using Blackboard Collaborate as a means for connecting 'singleton' teachers. In other words, he would allow the sole French or AP teacher in a small school to connect live online with a fellow French or AP teacher at another small school somewhere else in the state. By building these peer

groups, teachers were suddenly able to regularly meet live online in order to discuss, for example, how to implement new teaching practices or how to create assessment methods that will help students improve test scores. Suddenly teachers had an entire statewide ecosystem at their fingertips with which teachers can connect to one another.

Setser has taken non-academic use of Blackboard Collaborate to a whole new level. In fact, he says, "NCVPS administrative staff uses Blackboard Collaborate in similar ways that our teachers do. In effect, our leadership and meeting structure is a course and e-learning community of users much like our teachers and students in a live virtual classroom."

NCVPS seemingly finds new uses of Blackboard Collaborate each week. "We have had convocations in Blackboard Collaborate of up to 400 teachers during which we've played music, given away t-shirts, and done other fun things to build culture and community as well as conduct our business. Academic use was our initial goal. But once we saw [Blackboard Collaborate's] effectiveness we wanted to model it as a means of using it for non-academic and organizational uses," add Setser. "By doing these large-scale events virtually, we've had significant cost savings because we didn't have the hard expenses associated with these events," says Setser. "And we didn't miss a beat by not convening them face-to-face."

For instance, on Mondays, NCVPS senior leadership meets via Blackboard Collaborate. NCVPS has 21 senior staff members, 10 of whom attend the Monday meetings inperson in Raleigh, NC while the other 11 attend virtually from around the state. Once this meeting concludes, each of these 21 senior leaders then hold meetings via Blackboard Collaborate with their own teams, and then they'll all stay in-touch throughout the week as well.

"With Blackboard Collaborate, there's constant access to education from students and teachers. Everyone lauds Blackboard Collaborate for on-demand access to keep up with leaders and with each other. Had we not had the return-on-investment from Blackboard Collaborate, we'd be out of business."

