

21st Century Cyber Charter School Maximizes Student Achievement

“Blackboard Collaborate essentially is our school,” says Bill Egan, technology and design specialist and business instructor at 21st Century Cyber Charter School (21CCCS) in southeastern Pennsylvania. 21CCCS is arguably the highest performing cyber charter school in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and a large part of its success is attributed directly to its pervasive use of Blackboard Collaborate.

In 1999, the Intermediate Units of Bucks, Chester, Delaware, and Montgomery counties (Pennsylvania) saw the need for a cyber school to serve their students, but they wanted to ensure that the school offered a high-quality education. In 2001, these IUs and their 64 member school districts formed 21CCCS, a Pennsylvania-chartered, diploma-granting school serving Pennsylvania students in grades 6 through 12. As with all charter schools, it is funded by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, so there is no fee to attend.

Its mission is to provide students, for whom an asynchronous environment is an appropriate educational setting, with an individualized learning program utilizing the latest information and communications technology. The basis for all learning plans is to maximize student achievement of the Pennsylvania Academic Standards while developing higher-order thinking and complex problem-solving skills. 21CCCS assures that students master essential content and skills while preparing them for their future goals.



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Jon Marsh
Chief Executive Officer
21st Century Cyber Charter School



“When our school opened in 2001, we needed a product that allowed direct instruction with our students,” recalls Jon Marsh, now the Chief Executive Officer of 21CCCS. “Students still need direct instruction; they need to talk to their teachers and other students, and Blackboard Collaborate became our avenue for that. Unlike in a brick-and-mortar school, at a cyber school, this can be one of their only avenues for socialization. Blackboard Collaborate is the component we needed for instruction. We wanted something that was kid friendly and could be managed by someone who doesn’t have a high-technology background.”

Communication Essential for Student Success

To ensure student success, 21CCCS believes communication is essential. Its website even boasts, “Personal communication is one aspect that sets us apart from other cyber schools. Our students are important to us. The better we know them, the better we can serve them.” In addition to ongoing communication during the school day via email, the Moodle® Learning Management System, and telephone, 21CCCS teachers regularly communicate with parents and students via Blackboard Collaborate during non-traditional times of day. As some students work predominantly later in the day, 21CCCS teachers hold regular live evening office hours online.

“We have a track record of student success that we take very seriously. We are one of the highest-performing cyber schools in Pennsylvania,” says Egan. And perform highly it does.

According to Marketing Specialist Lauren Weidenmuller, 21CCCS is the only cyber charter school to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) six of the last seven years. She attributes her school making AYP consistently because of its use of Blackboard Collaborate.

“We make AYP because of the access students have to their teachers for that extra help,” Weidenmuller says. “Communication is really important to us, so we try to keep our student body around 800 students instead of thousands.”

According to Marsh, 21CCCS’s retention rate is much higher than most similar schools because of the live engagement when students are online. “The premise of my research is that if the kids participate in the live sessions with live interaction, we’ll reduce our attrition rate,” he says. “We’re hearing of schools that have a 20-40% churn rate each year, but it’s nowhere near that at our school because Blackboard Collaborate helps reduce it. It’s all about engagement.”

One Learning Platform, Many Uses

21CCCS offers an exhaustive list of virtual sessions via Blackboard Collaborate, such as middle school and high school offices, a guidance office, and offices for each subject area. Each office can have up to 60 students at one time, and approximately 50 teachers can break them out to give students more personal one-on-one instruction. Teachers also hold a one-hour live class once a week for each of their courses.

“We follow a mastery process. If a student struggles on a concept, that student can come to a teacher to make corrections so they get up to the mastery level before they move on to the next level,” Egan says. “When it comes down to math and science, it makes a big impact, and that also impacts our AYP record. Students come to our school for individualized attention.”

All 21CCCS classes are written and developed by faculty and staff, which is “really nice because we don’t offer generic curriculum,” Egan adds. While the school obviously covers all core curriculum, it also offers unique classes, like the History of Rock n’ Roll, Mandarin Chinese, Graphic Novels, and an online keyboarding class, to which students in traditional brick-and-mortar schools in Pennsylvania normally wouldn’t have access. 21CCCS also offers unique special education programs, including those for gifted and talented students as well as programs catering to students with individualized education plans (IEPs) and 504 medical plans. The resource room, a special services virtual office through Blackboard Collaborate, allows teachers to modify, monitor, and enhance students’ educational needs.

Unlike traditional schools, 21CCCS does not have scheduling conflicts. The flexibility available in its online setting allows students to work at their own pace. Student schedules are flexible, but teachers help their students with organization to maintain consistent progress. This flexibility teaches students time management skills, self-motivation, and self-advocacy skills necessary for success after their time at 21CCCS.

“We’re focused on college prep. We require four credits each of math, science, social studies, and English. That’s what colleges tell us they want to see, so we set up our students for success,” adds Weidenmuller.

Improved Outcomes, Significant Savings

When one talks about student success, one need not look any further than 21CCCS graduates.

“Most of the school’s students are college bound,” says Egan, “as an average of 73% of 21CCCS graduates attend college.”

21CCCS graduates attend elite institutions, such as MIT, Yale University, Drexel University, Cambridge, Penn State University, Curtis Institute of Music, Temple University, and the Manhattan School of Music, among others. Student success can be attributed to Blackboard Collaborate for providing the ability for teachers and students to interact.

With the flexibility of 21CCCS teachers being able to work on location, the school increases the amount of time teachers are available to students, while operating on less money than the taxpayer is paying to the school districts to educate a child. While most of 21CCCS’s 41 teachers work out of the Exton, PA, office during the day, there are those who work remotely from their homes during evening hours.

The school also holds numerous professional development training online via Blackboard Collaborate, most often for staff meetings for teachers who can’t physically be in the Exton office. Administratively, 21CCCS offers everything from small teacher trainings to large-scale, organization-wide meetings.



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Technology and Design Specialist and
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“We’ve actually started using Blackboard Collaborate for our staff meetings,” says Marsh. “We’re able to include staff working from multiple locations and can send recordings to those people who may not be able to attend. Using Blackboard Collaborate also gives us the freedom to hold special education and one-on-one meetings with families from across Pennsylvania, without incurring travel costs.”

Looking to the Future

Ultimately, it’s the flexibility that Blackboard Collaborate offers that makes 21CCCS so appealing to its diverse student base. Some students enroll to take honors courses, while some need additional time to train for the Olympics. There are students who attend 21CCCS to escape bullying and gang violence and even one who takes advantage of the flexible schedule to pursue acting roles on *Saturday Night Live* and films such as *I Am Legend*.

As 21CCCS looks to the future, Egan believes the intuitiveness of the new Blackboard Collaborate web conferencing capabilities will help the school thrive even further. “I credit our staff for learning it quickly, and also Blackboard Collaborate for making the new product very intuitive. Blackboard Collaborate gives us the most interactive experience plus the safety and oversight you need for our students in an online environment.”

