

# The Value of Online and Blended Learning

## A Snapshot of WDLC Partners

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Written by

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## ***About Wisconsin Digital Learning Collaborative***

The Wisconsin Digital Learning Collaborative (WDLC) is a unique statewide partnership with a mission to “Provide equitable access to high-quality online and blended learning resources throughout Wisconsin.” This partnership results in every student in any school district with access to quality online and blended learning offerings. It also provides digital learning resources for teachers to use in their classrooms. Access to online courses, technology, and resources are available to districts through the WDLC regardless of size, geography, or learning model.

The WDLC consists of three collaborating organizations. The Wisconsin Virtual School (WVS) provides supplemental online courses, as well as services to support the planning and implementing of digital initiatives to a large majority (200+) of the school districts across Wisconsin. The Wisconsin eSchool Network (WEN) is a consortium of 28 partners that provides access to online courses, technology, operational support, digital learning professional development, and other services to its members. Together, WEN and WVS form the foundation of the Collaborative. The third organization, the Department of Public Instruction (DPI), provides quality assurance and helps raise awareness of WDLC. It also provides some fiscal support through the segregated universal service fund administered by the Wisconsin DPI.

In addition to the WDLC representing the digital learning interests of all districts, it also leverages shared knowledge and best practices to reduce costs. It offers a wide variety of resources, services, and benefits that districts need in order to offer online and blended learning options to students.

See the end of this report for a full list of WDLC district and affiliate partners.

## ***About Virtual Learning Leadership Alliance***

The WDLC is honored to partner with the Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute as part of our collaborative partnership of The Virtual Learning Leadership Alliance (VLLA). With a commitment to quality, the VLLA is an association of the chiefs of virtual programs that provides collegial support and collaborative opportunities to individual members and member organizations to share resources, services, and expertise. This project is one of many collaborative projects related to the VLLA. The WDLC would like to thank the Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute for our partnership in studying our partner practices across Wisconsin.

## *About Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute*

In 2012, the Governor and Michigan Legislature passed legislation requiring *Michigan Virtual*<sup>TM</sup>, formally *Michigan Virtual University*<sup>®</sup>, to establish a research center for online learning and innovation. Known as *Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute*<sup>®</sup> (MVLRI<sup>®</sup>), this center is a natural extension of the work of Michigan Virtual. Established in 1998, *Michigan Virtual*'s mission is to advance K-12 digital learning and teaching through research, practice, and partnerships. Toward that end, the core strategies of MVLRI are:

- **Research** – Expand the K-12 online and blended learning knowledge base through high quality, high impact research;
- **Policy** – Inform local, state, and national public education policy strategies that reinforce and support online and blended learning opportunities for the K-12 community;
- **Innovation** – Experiment with new technologies and online learning models to foster expanded learning opportunities for K-12 students; and
- **Networks** – Develop human and web-based applications and infrastructures for sharing information and implementing K-12 online and blended learning best practices.

*Michigan Virtual* dedicates a small number of staff members to MVLRI projects as well as augments its capacity through a fellows program drawing from state and national experts in K-12 online learning from K-12 schooling, higher education, and private industry. These experts work alongside Michigan Virtual staff to provide research, evaluation, and development expertise and support.

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# Introduction

This report explores program value approaches in Wisconsin's online and blended learning landscape. A survey was sent out to the 28 *Affiliate* and *Invested* partners of the Wisconsin Digital Learning Collaborative (WDLC) members to collect information that provides a bird's eye view of what value online and blended learning bring to each program's learners, instructors, and other stakeholders. A total of 25 out of 28 programs responded to the survey. In addition to survey data, case studies of seven programs, including Janesville School District, Middleton-Cross Plains School District, Wisconsin Virtual School CESA 9, Rural Virtual Academy, Racine Unified School District, Appleton Area School District, and Franklin Public Schools. John Jacobs, Executive Director of Wisconsin eSchool Network, emphasized, "Our collaborative work has positioned access to quality and equitable online and blended learning throughout Wisconsin. Our collaborative work also centralizes much of the operational and contractual needs of online and blended learning; at the same time, it decentralizes academic and instructional expertise by putting it back in the hands of our partners, aligning with our mission of local autonomy at the program level. Our collaboration combined with our core belief in local autonomy allows each partner to leverage knowledge sharing, quality practices, and lessons learned to generate the desired outcomes aligned with each local partner's goals, objectives, and policies (which vary as you can see by this report)."

# PROGRAM VALUE

PARTNER	DIST/ORG SIZE	GRADES SERVED	PROGRAM STRUCTURE(S)	STUDENT EXPERIENCE	LOCAL VALUE	WDLC VALUE	FUTURE WORK
			VC DP SS VIRTUAL CHARTER DISTRICT(S) PROGRAM STATE-WIDE SUPPLEMENTAL	 FULL-TIME ONLINE PART-TIME ONLINE (supplemental) BLENDED (some required amount of in person instruction)	Support and elevate the role of the teacher in blended and online learning  Offer more choice to meet the needs of students and districts	Local control for full autonomy with program design and delivery  Cost-effective infrastructure	Grow online and blended learning  Continue to increase student choice
Middleton-Cross Plains Area School District		K-12	VC DP		Elevate importance of both online and blended options	Single partner with flexibility to customize to meet each district/school's needs	Implement use of more local online teachers
Racine Unified School District		5-12	DP		Centralize blended support for rural districts who lack staffing	Collaborative thinking and problem-solving	Build and strengthen community partnerships
Rural Virtual Academy Multi-District Charter School Consortium		K-12	VC		Grow community partnerships	Increased professional learning opportunities	Improve operational capacity
Janesville School District		K-12	VC DP		Increase annual completion rate	Equal access for all locales	Cross-pollinate ideas
Wisconsin Virtual School		6-12	SS		Complement district offerings vs. disruption	Colleagues share resources, ideas, and instruction to grow online and blended learning across districts	Adopt more offerings and increase choice.
Appleton Area School District		6-12	VC DP				
Franklin Public Schools		6-12	DP				

WDLC enables schools and districts to provide Wisconsin students quality online and blended learning opportunities and effectively meet a wide array of needs for choice, flexibility, and instructional support.

8 out of 11 of the largest school districts in WI

Numerous rural school districts

Districts who have been in online learning for 10+ years

Districts who have no experience in online learning

Summer school

Credit recovery, gifted and talented, AP/Honors

The remainder of this report provides a brief overview of the survey data and then presents more in depth discussion about the seven featured programs in the words of those who know them best. The report concludes with contact information and resources.

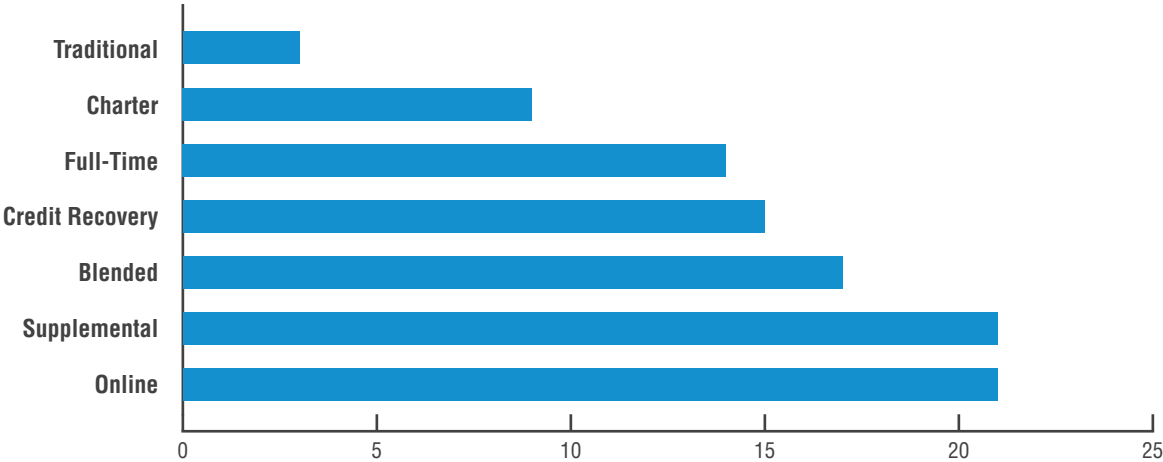
# Overview of Survey Data

## Program’s Purpose and Target Audience

As can be seen from the data in Figure 1 below, the types of programs vary greatly. For this question, programs could select all the answers that applied.

For 25 respondents, the most frequently indicated categories were “online” and “supplemental.” Approximately 70% of the respondents also indicated a “blended” option, and more than half of the respondents selected “credit recovery” when describing their programs’ characteristics.

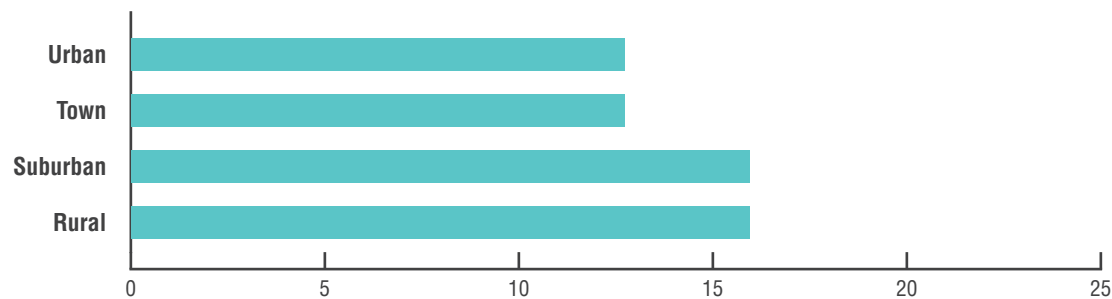
FIGURE 1. **Describe your program.** (n=25)



When asked about their program’s purpose and target audience, some of the programs mentioned that they offer their courses within district, while others offered courses both inside and outside of their districts. Some of the programs mentioned that they only offer courses that are not available at their district; this includes both credit recovery and those students who have scheduling conflict issues. These course offerings help the programs meet students’ diverse needs and offer students the chance to develop their own paths. The idea of offering students choices and support in their educational paths was a theme when it came to the program’s purpose. Programs mentioned that they could not maintain the quality online programming they have without the support and state advocacy they receive from WEN and WDLC.

Question 3 asked about another aspect of program characteristics, focusing on what locales the program serves. Figure 2 shows the results.

FIGURE 2. **What locale(s) does your program serve?** (n=25)

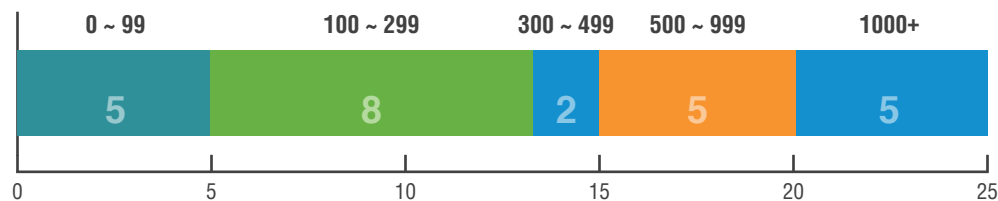


According to the most frequently reported combination, all of four locales, approximately one third of respondents indicated that their programs serve students who reside in all locales. There are some programs that serve students who reside in a particular locale. For example, four respondents chose only the rural code, and an additional six chose only the urban or suburban code.

With regard to results for the five highlighted programs, we found that four of them serve students regardless of their geography and one of them focuses on serving only students in suburban areas.

Figure 3 illustrates the results of Question 4, the program's annual enrollment.

FIGURE 3. **Q4 – What is your average annual enrollment for a full year?** (n=25)



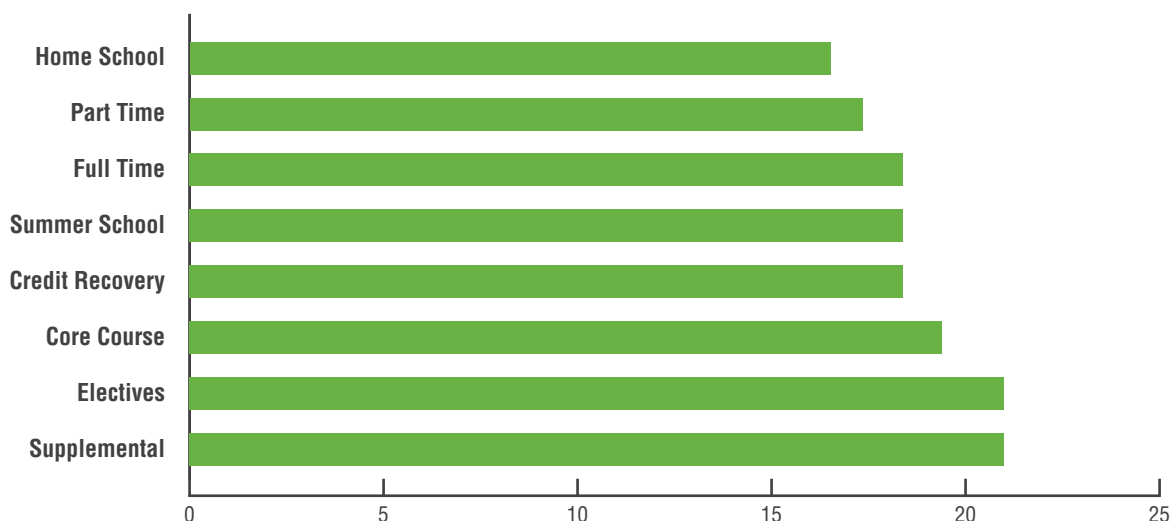
Among the five options, 100 to 299 enrollments was chosen most frequently. Having more than 1000 enrollments on average was found in five cases, while another five programs were reportedly quite small, with the average annual enrollment less than 100.

Question 5 asked survey participants to specify how they share information with various stakeholders; Figure 7 summarizes the results. The audience was listed in columns, and percentages of each communication type are presented with data bars for individual audience categories. The longer the bar, the higher the value. The data (percentages) should total to 100% per column (the audience type).

## Services Provided

Question 7 asked about services provided. The programs were offered a list of eight options, and Figure 4 presents the results.

FIGURE 4. Q7 – Why are people choosing your program? (n=25)



More than 70% of respondents reported their program offered all services except for home school and part-time. For those two services, more than 60% of respondents indicated that their programs offered them.

Notably, one third of respondents indicated their program offered all eight services. Programs also shared that they highlight in their information sharing many other different features of their program, such as course titles, descriptions, enrollment numbers, new initiatives, and teacher quality. Additionally, they share how their programs are accessible, accountable, flexible, and innovative. Some programs share information specifically based on what the students say they need, including but not limited to how to succeed in online courses, popular course offerings, non-academic opportunities, and social events.

## Information Sharing: Opportunities & Challenges

When thinking about the most effective information sharing strategies to employ, programs said that they like to use their email and website to communicate. Also, face-to-face meetings help, especially for newer programs that are not relying on word of mouth. Some of the schools offer an example view of the courses to stakeholders so that they can see what the students see in the courses. Some programs are using paper-based communication as well to get information to communities in their areas. Providing information through a school district to those interested in online options has helped some of the programs that are not based within a district make themselves known. Some programs also reported that they have counselors who are the information providers to various stakeholders, and that helps with having clear and consistent communication.

When programs were asked if there were any challenges they faced when reaching certain stakeholders, some mentioned that there is a perception among some district staff that online courses are “not as good” as in-classroom content. There is also a perception that students think the courses will be easier; when they take the courses, they see that is not true. When sending out information, because there’s no indication as to whether or not the stakeholder(s) received and/or read the information, the program is left wondering whether or not they are getting their message across to the intended audience. There is also a struggle with programs deciding whether they should create more information for stakeholders or work on improving offerings for students. Some programs, because of budget restraints, cannot do as much information sharing. Collectively, parents seemed to be the hardest stakeholder group to reach for information sharing purposes.

# Program Case Studies

## 21st Century eSchool

Middleton-Cross Plains Area School District

*Jill Gurtner, Principal*



### Why Online & Blended Learning

The district made the initial decision to have an online program when we began losing students to other school districts because of open enrollment, but it was driven by a couple of students in particular. When students with disabilities open enroll out of your district, the receiving school district can charge back for services. At that time, the virtual schools were sending students to private services, so the price tag was very high for the district. We had to bring those kids back and decided to open an online school the next year. That was the initial motivation to create something, and we expected other families would be interested.

How we can meet the needs of the growing diverse population of students without using digital technology? That's the world the students live in; if we aren't helping them learn how they learn, how they access information, and how to navigate learning technologies, we aren't serving them well. We're working on 100% of students having a truly online, truly blended experience but are probably somewhere in the 50% range. We have a lot of technology rich classrooms, and most if not all our students are in Google Drive and using Google tools. The value of online and blended learning is that we're keeping kids in school that wouldn't be in school. We have a project-based high school where we started really low tech, but once you get kids engaged in learning, their ideas and their passions go all over the place. You'll never have all the staff you need to meet all of their interests, so if you want to engage and empower students, you have to use the digital resources. The value there is designing the schools that students need to prepare for their future.

### Program Description

The initial decision to create an online program came from the top down. Over the years, we've gotten more and more staff involved. A district office person was in charge the first year. As of the second year, the program was me and an administrative assistant who got her counseling certification and is now our counselor. Next we hired the elementary school teacher and began training more of our teachers to teach online. At the 6<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade level, we've gone from one teacher who went through an online teacher training program to two or three dozen teachers who have some experience and some training in teaching online. Many of them teach just a couple of students in some particular sections as an additive. A small number have a portion of their FTE committed to teaching online. We've been able to build staff capacity over time, and we haven't had to force anybody into it. People have been excited.

As we have moved into the blended arena, we've pulled in a whole other group of teachers. We have elementary math teachers at one of our schools looking at differentiating math within the classroom; until

this point, students who are accelerated actually get up and move to a different classroom during math time. That has prompted us to ask, “How do we support all students staying within their classroom and still meet the needs of different learners?” Our goal is to serve everybody, to create a universal practice that makes it easy for us to differentiate, depending on the tiers that are needed.

In the beginning, there was a sense that you could make money bringing in students from outside your district, so we were open to open enrollment ourselves and were serving kids from other parts of the state in our online program. I took over as the principal in the second year of the program and quickly learned that, from an educational perspective, I was not comfortable with trying to serve the population of students that the online world was attracting from a distance. We already had such difficulty supporting students who were struggling, many of whom were trying to avoid school by using online learning, that I decided, “We can’t continue. This can’t be our program.” We gradually moved to requiring kids to come into our building. You could still open enroll, but you had to be able to come in. After a few years, we decided not to continue to accept open enrollment and started working on how we could serve students in our online program. We continued to move to a more blended program for our fully online school where students came into our buildings more often. We hired a full-time elementary teacher who began to run face-to-face programming. The students do field experiences and projects. They have a very robust community service aspect to what they do right now, so we built on that.

Over the course of time, we’ve been looking at blended for all of our programming in the district. For the last two years, the focus has been on how we could use a blended approach to improve the instructional practices in our face-to-face classrooms. This is where professional development comes in: we made the decision to emphasize building the instructional practice side of things – building readiness. Rather than quickly going to a one-to-one initiative or getting a learning management system (LMS), we started building our internal capacity. We’ve done a couple of the Ready to Blend trainings internally, but we’ve also started introducing our district leaders to using an LMS as learners. That has had the intended impact: all of a sudden they’re seeing all sorts of ways this could be really useful. The most recent example is from the district-wide trauma-sensitive schools training that we’ve been doing. Leadership wants all of the district staff to have this training within the next couple of years. A few buildings were able to get it scheduled, but two of our biggest buildings just couldn’t figure out how to fit it into their professional learning programs. Now we are taking what was face-to-face delivery and pretty much sit-and-get and turning it into a blended PD experience. All of our new staff this year started their new staff induction on Buzz (the LMS). All of the district ed services people and the district leadership did little video introductions of themselves in the LMS so people could put the faces with names and hear a little bit of their personal stories. We had the idea that if we started with leadership, they would see all these opportunities for our professional learning. We are trying to put staff in the student position so that they can start seeing how they can use the technology with students in their classrooms as well. In addition, we have a cohort of about 15 teachers using blended learning strategies in their classrooms with students right now. We are working to build their capacities so that we have people embedded in the buildings that are comfortable with an LMS and learning those instructional practices. We are building it naturally and have a three-year roll out plan, so that we can get to the point of really using it as a tool to help support all of our learners in classrooms.

We are in year seven of having a separate online school. Consistently, we’ve had students out of school, whether that was a medical need or a mental-health need, athletes who because of their training schedules could not be in school, students who would have been homeschooled previously, and

students who have struggled one way or another. The difference is now we're serving them in a way that isn't about their escaping, but about our supporting them. Hiring our elementary school teacher in year four was kind of a turning point as far as starting to build a much more local program and creating the blended element. The population initially at the elementary level was primarily students and families who would have homeschooled otherwise but wanted some connection to the school district, either for social reasons or for access to curriculum. The high school population was primarily students at risk who had lots and lots of attendance struggles. As time passes, one of the things we're seeing at the elementary and middle school level is while we continue to have some homeschooled families, we're seeing a lot more students with disabilities. We have students on the autism spectrum, for example, and students with significant anxiety, for whom being in a school for a full day, every day is just more than they can handle for a multitude of reasons. One big reason we want to get to a place where kids stay connected to their buildings is because we're trying to use blended and online as tools to help students continue to develop the skills they need so they can stay with their peers and stay connected to their schools. Rather than, "Now you're going to that eSchool, and you're an eSchool kid," we can say, "You're a student in your building, in your classroom, who's accessing digital learning as part of your day." It helps us make those transitions much more naturally and support the students wherever they are.

At the high school level, the district has done a much better job of building up more and more of our internal programming related to students at risk. We try not to serve them solely online, because it's just not effective. We're using online classes or we're using digital resources, but we're trying to provide those students a much more significant presence and support in the buildings, at least during the partial days that they're here. Consistently we've had students with significant medical issues and students with significant mental health issues. We've learned so much over the years about these kids and their families who are at the end of their rope and think that online is going to be the thing that saves them. Then they separate themselves from school, which is causing them stress, and they get back into their homes, and all of a sudden their actual anxiety and mental health issues get worse because now they're not connecting with anybody. This is another space where the blended approach really makes so much more sense because we can give them that escape valve without it having to be a whole separation. We go to our high school and say, "Yeah, this kid is struggling, but don't move him completely. Are there a couple of places within these students' day where they feel like they can connect?" Then the counselor can find, for example, an art class that the student can stay in, and we provide some of the support as well.

## **Meeting Everyone's Needs: Teachers & Students**

Our goal is to use digital resources to serve everyone in a way that best meets their needs. For example, we have a student with significant medical needs who just can't have much exposure to other students, so he is almost never in school. But he's one of our kids, and he's connected to the school, and he can sometimes make social connections with other students. We can meet that need. On the other end of the spectrum are our kids who would probably never consider themselves online learners. In that case, our goal would be to provide blended options within the classroom so that teachers can meet the needs of all their students. It's really about using the flexibility. Blended learning is our human resource multiplier. Having and using blended online options for well suited courses, allows our staff to use their time and energy better.

For us, it's about using the right tool and the right level of online and blended learning to meet the student's needs. It's not about being something separate or different; it's about using those tools and resources to support the good instructional practices that we already have. A student who cannot be in our buildings has access to online curriculum and high-quality teachers who are connected with our school district. For the vast majority of our kids, it's going to look like they're in a traditional classroom, but they are taking much greater ownership as learners, and they have access to much better tools. That's the vision.

One aspect of our professional development is working to develop staff capacity related to online and blended learning. We do our own internal training of teachers who want to teach online and our own blended learning trainings. But the other growing thought is, "We could provide all this professional development we're already doing much more effectively if we were using online tools, if we were using a learning management system." It could be just capturing something from one year to the next that we can improve and roll out again, but it's also being able to just give people access at the right time and place. The other big area of focus for us, in addition to the trauma-sensitive schools training, has been equity and diversity training. From my lens, some of the things we do face-to-face would actually be better delivered online for many people. It would give participants the time and space to process it on their own and then come together and have a conversation about it. I'm just scratching the surface now with the people who are doing the PD to say, "Can I talk to you about what online and blended learning would offer to make professional development even more effective than what it is?" People very quickly connect with the flexibility of time and space.

Online and blended PD has been good for a number of reasons. For one thing, teachers think they want to get started in June and then all of a sudden it's the middle of July and they haven't started and I'm asking, "Can I help in some way?" Those experiences are so valuable to help teachers see, "Oh, yeah. This is it. This is the kind of support we need to offer. This is what my students are going to need." It also helps alleviate some of the fears that this is going to be the thing that steals all the teachers' jobs, because it really helps them see that if they don't have a good connection with somebody on the other end, it is not nearly as effective.

## Unique Challenges

The typical challenges we face are the misperceptions of what online learning is and how hard it is. We've struggled to educate people internally that online learning in and of itself cannot be considered an intervention. The math program is a good example. When I started talking to our elementary math people about the power of blended learning to perhaps help differentiate, people quickly went to "I don't want to just put all these gifted kids on computers all the time." My response was to clarify that wasn't what I was suggesting at all and to say, "Let's talk about what you think online and blended learning is, and let's talk about what we imagine it being." We also have students whose parents have very real concerns about them spending any more time online. How do we help those kids learn how to manage their technology when they have really serious addictions, whether it's gaming or social media? Those are very valid fears, too.

Another big challenge is the actual logistics of implementing an online and blended program, having our student information system talk to our LMS, and getting data back and forth — the types of things that only the tech people worry about but that are a really big deal when you're trying to get teachers

to use it in their classrooms. But the tools have gotten so much better, we can put teachers on an LMS, give them a little online tutorial and say, “Go play around with it.” Then there’s all these other little behind the scenes things that are not worked out, and I have to say, “We’re not quite ready yet. Here’s all the problems you’re going to run into if you try to go any faster than we can support you.” Those are all just natural pieces of being out in the front end of a change process.

## **In Hindsight**

Online and blended learning are not moneymakers, and any school district that wants to use them as such needs to think again because you just can’t do it well and save money. It can help you reallocate resources, but it’s not about saving money. The whole idea of online learning taking over and taking away jobs is so misinformed that we have to say again and again, “You actually need more people who understand how to use online learning, and you need more people who understand how to support students.” You have to work to develop your staff capacity along with building your program. The way we started is not uncommon, when the district doesn’t put any resources into developing staff capacity. We’ve had to do a lot of backtracking and are really fortunate that we made the choice to join the Wisconsin eSchool Network (WEN) and WDLC because I don’t think there’s any way we could have done it had we not had that additional support from other people going through it at the same time.

Educators are not necessarily accustomed to functioning in the world of technology services. When a salesperson tells you that their product is going to do X, Y, and Z, there’s a really good chance the product isn’t really going to do X, Y, and Z. That was a big learning curve for me. You believe your technology people are going to be able to figure it out, and the salesperson is saying, “If we don’t have it, we’re going to have it by September.” They consistently over-promise, and then you end up with kids who don’t have what they need, and you’ve signed a contract, and it hurts the students. That’s been a little painful learning sometimes.

## **In the Future**

We’re going to continue professional development and the natural integration of digital learning tools throughout our district into more and more classrooms, certainly at the high school level but maybe younger. The result will be giving students much more flexibility in their time and space so that they can pursue things that are really interesting to them. For example, we have a great relationship with our city and our Chamber of Commerce. The potential is great for kids being able to set up partnerships as their time gets freed up because they are using more digital tools. As for staff, our goal is to have 100% of the high school teachers set up in Buzz by fall of 2018, but certainly by fall of 2019, and then continue to work on answering the question, “How do you use it most effectively to support instruction?”

Right now, we have high school students coming into one of two high schools, middle school students coming into one of our two middle schools primarily, and then we have one satellite elementary school. We’ve seen a definite separation between the online program and the building, coupled with the fear that all these kids were going to choose online and teachers would lose them. Gradually, within the next couple of years, we intend not to have a separate online school anymore. Students will still be able to be fully online, but they are going to be attached to their homeschool — in their own buildings — accessing online curriculum to the extent that they need to.

In addition, the high school principal and I have had great conversations about things like substitute teachers. Could we better allocate our money if we had a space where students could report if their teacher was absent but had left something in the hopper that they could do digitally? As we get better at developing digital content, teachers could have lessons ready for students, and we wouldn't need to hire subs who often aren't particularly effective in delivering content. We have so many more possibilities as we naturally integrate digital tools into what we're doing.

## **Local Value**

As a community, people have become or are becoming much better informed, so online and blended learning are growing in value. We get a tremendous amount of support, so the only barrier right now is having really good understanding of what could possibly come from it. Parents, in general, are excited about opportunities for kids online. Early on, they had the same misunderstandings about online learning as many of our students did, which was that online courses will be easy. Then, when the student was really struggling, we had to do a lot of parent education. That has changed over the last couple of years. Parents have a better understanding now. Word is getting out, so kids no longer come to us thinking online is going to be easy. They come to us with, "I really need a fully online class, because I want to take band and world languages and can't figure out how to get my health class in," or they want to experience online learning because they know it's going to be valuable to them.

## **Valued Partnerships**

I could go to WEN with any topic, and somebody within that group is going to be thinking about it or talking about it. The resources, the knowledge base of that group, is huge, so having that infrastructure helps us do things more effectively. We're a big enough district that we have people certified in most courses, but I don't necessarily always have somebody certified who's also interested in teaching online, so access to the content and the sharing of teachers so that our kids can take any of the courses is great. We would never have been able to start if we hadn't had the network for support. It has allowed us to grow at a pace that was appropriate for our district.

Something else I appreciate about the network is that everybody has their own lens and their own area that they're most interested in. Because many people who are on our board are either teachers or in middle management leadership positions, we have a lot of questions about the readiness developed in districts. Because we take so many different routes, somebody there can be supportive of all of it, and there's definitely trust. By being a part of WEN, I know that if the District says this is the thing we want to move on next, I can find somebody in the network that's doing it and talk to them about it. That's always a huge benefit.

# Digital & Virtual Learning

Racine Unified School District

*James O'Hagan, Director of Virtual Learning*



## Why Online & Blended Learning

Initially, the district wasn't meeting the needs of every student in our buildings. Our virtual learning effort started off as a credit recovery program, and then we evolved into offering original credit options for students. The first year that we offered online courses, we had only about 12 enrollments; now, our enrollment numbers are around 1,000, and that includes out of district, as well as our district enrollments. In the last five years, the program has expanded tremendously, especially now that we have approximately 100 online teachers (most from the district), all of whom do this as a supplement to their regular teaching jobs.

The district has gone forward with the academy model where we offer specific trade courses at certain high schools. We're also a district that is struggling to keep up our enrollments. Wisconsin allows students to move to other districts. That has caused a bit of a budget crunch so we can't necessarily have an AP French teacher or an AP Computer Science teacher at every high school. Online courses allow us to offer a complete course catalog to every student even if there isn't a teacher physically in their high school for that course.

## Program Description

The majority of students that we serve are in grades 5 through 12. I was an elementary school teacher in my previous life, and I struggle with the quality of curriculum for kids who are in K through 4<sup>th</sup>. For 5<sup>th</sup> graders, we make mathematics available. For 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade, we do more supplemental work. We started offering online as a full-time option for students in high school, but not before. We have had middle school students come to us in the past year who have requested a full-time online curriculum, and we've actually said no. That's more of a philosophical decision at this point, because we feel that we can't necessarily support middle school students very well right now.

We provide all of our students access not only to their online teacher but also to an online mentor teacher. In middle and elementary school, we have someone working with those students, but it's one person serving a constantly expanding number of students. We have online mentor teachers at each of our comprehensive high schools, as well as one of our charter schools full time, so that is a tremendous asset on top of our online teachers.

A couple of years ago we initiated block scheduling. Now we have an A day and a B day, and that's allowed us to do more for students interested in taking virtual courses. We say, "Virtual full-time is a lot of work, but let's look at you as a student and see what can we do face-to-face and what can we do virtually. What courses do you prefer to have a little more control over the pace of? What courses would you really like to do face-to-face?" That's allowed us to create hybrid schedules for students. So on an A day, they may take their face-to-face courses; and on a B day, they'll work on their virtual courses and don't necessarily have to come into the building. It is a tremendous way for us to tell students that they don't have to do just one or the other, that our learning is fluid and that we can define what our learning

environments are on a course-by-course or class-by-class or even a semester-by-semester basis. It doesn't have to be all or nothing.

We've started on the blended learning path this year. We were having a problem getting students to go beyond level one and level two in either French or Spanish. In April 2016, we called the appropriate stakeholders together: the person who oversees our foreign language department, and our Chief Academic Officer, and the principal of one of our buildings who had two foreign language teachers that were having a problem. We said, "Let's rethink foreign language. We want our foreign languages to be more conversational." We have two teachers who teach for us online. I suggested we use our online courseware and create an environment that is more conversational. Instead of separating out our level three, four, and five students, we're going to put them all together in one class. Language doesn't happen in levels. You learn as you go, and you learn from speaking to people who speak it very well, and you learn from people who don't necessarily speak it very well. Now it becomes conversational. It was a complete rethink of how we're doing our foreign language instruction, and we are using our virtual courseware to allow students to have more control over their pace and where they're at naturally in their instruction.

We have created a 5<sup>th</sup> grade advanced math program, too, a pathway to taking geometry at the high school level. It is an opportunity for students to experience virtual learning at the 5<sup>th</sup> grade level, but we sell it as the opportunity to take an advanced math course. Students are able to work at their own pace, which is important because a lot of the students who are your high-flyers are the ones who can get bored quickly or who want to work very quickly through the math courses. Students who find they are not comfortable in a virtual environment can go back to their 5<sup>th</sup> grade math course, but they have a pathway to accelerate at a later time so by the time they reach high school they can be on par with other students who took the online course.

Our number one target audience is students who are accelerating or who want to accelerate. Other students are those dealing with mental health issues. A lot of students who come to us have areas of high anxiety. They just don't fit into their school in some way or haven't made a connection with somebody. Full time online is not always a good choice, but we do offer options for those students. We also have some students who just need to finish, and their schedule is off, especially those who are close to graduation. The course may not be available at their high school, or the one that's offered to them locally may not be at the time that they need to take it.

## Space to Learn

People talk about how they want school to change and how we need to change school. I compare this to the invention of the light bulb: the light bulb was not invented because people kept redoing the candle. For hundreds of years, people may have made a candle taller or maybe made the wick a little different or put something else in it to make it burn longer, but that didn't lead to the invention of the light bulb.

That's the way I think about our virtual learning. We don't work on a traditional school schedule. We allow students to take more time if they need to or allow them to complete their courses sooner if they're able to because we work toward their competency. We are looking at changing our approach to more of a standards-driven set of courses. We're definitely different in the sense that we allow students more control over the pace and place of their learning, which is not to say that they're learning has to happen all in one place, either.

One of the things I realized very quickly when I came onboard is that when you look at students, and even when you look at ourselves as professionals, we usually have a first, second, and a third place. The first place a lot of us go is our homes, the second place that we go is work, and then the third is a place where we connect with others in the community. For a lot of our online learners, their first and second place was home. They did not have another place to go. We looked at our learning spaces very critically and said, “What can we give students who have issues with anxiety or want to accelerate or need that one-off class where they don’t necessarily have to come to the school building? What can we do for them?” So we created, very specifically, a place where they can feel comfortable, come in when they need to, have a variety of different seating styles, and have a variety of different rooms and quiet spaces so that they can continue to get the work done that they need to.

We’re a district that’s in crisis; a lot of parents are leaving and taking their kids with them. “What’s the invitation to learning?” is the question that I ask. When I talked to our board and our leadership cabinet, I said, “The idea behind this space is, imagine you’re a parent, you left several years ago, and you’re coming back to Unified for the first time. What should the space look like? What’s going to make you believe that Unified is a place where you want your children to be?” When they walk into this space, a lot of people are really impressed. They’ll even say, “I wish I could come here and work.” Actually, I’ve said to parents before, “If you’re able to come here and you want to work in our space, you’re more than welcome to.” So it’s not just a space for our students who are working in our virtual courseware. It’s really a community space.

Our schools have online mentor teachers who have rooms where their students can come if they need to work on their online courses. When you go to the traditional high school and you walk into an online mentor teacher’s classroom, it’s going to look like a classroom: there will be computers, there will be desks. When you come into our building, you come up to the second floor, and it doesn’t open up to a classroom or an office. It opens up directly, immediately into the space. You’ll notice that there are no desks, per se, but there are tables and soft chairs and quiet rooms. This is not just a space for students who are working on their online original credit work; we also have students come here for credit recovery. We have students who have been expelled who have been offered virtual learning options and may not have access to computers or the Internet at their home. They can come here and use our Chromebooks and Internet access. We don’t keep a student out because of their situation.

In the past students have been told where to go, and what time to be there, and what class to focus on, and then they move on. Students think it’s great that they’re going to be able to do all their learning online, but they don’t realize how much work they have to put in and how much they have to take ownership over their learning. This space represents an invitation to them to take ownership over their learning, because they can come up here and choose what they want to work on, and how they want to work on it, and where they want to work on it. The message of this space when they walk into it is, “I have choices. I don’t know where to go, but I can find where I want to be.” Taking ownership of their learning is something that they haven’t done in the past, typically, and having this space here helps. We’ve said to students, “Before we let you go off and just do this all from home, we want you to come here and actually work with us. We want to see how you work for a few days and just make sure that this is going to be a good fit for you.”

## Unique Challenges

Because we don't have a virtual school and we don't operate outside of the traditional school model all the time necessarily, one of our challenges is attendance. It's a struggle with data clerks who work in a very rigid, traditional school environment who say, "Well, the child wasn't here today." The hardest thing for people to understand is how a student can finish a course in May and be done. They ask, "Well, what are they doing now?" The answer is, they don't need to do anything; but a lot of people cannot make that shift in their thinking.

Another challenge for us is helping people understand that we work to competency rather than a schedule. They think, "Well, if they're not getting it, then they should get an F." For so long, we have defined failure as being something that exists between September and January and January and June. Knowing what we know about how people learn, we can't continue to believe that failure is defined in this way. One of the things the district is moving towards as a whole is standards-based learning. If we're going to start looking at how we grade students on a standard, and standard learning can happen at all times, then we should think of our school district as one big one-room schoolhouse where students are going to move between grades and subject areas on a constant basis, not defined by their age or how long they've been sitting in a chair in a certain building. That changes the whole paradigm of what is virtual learning and what is face-to-face learning. It becomes more blended. And then it also redefines what our school schedule looks like. Now what does the footprint of the building look like if students can move in and out of it?

For a lot of students, this new freedom is not something to be taken lightly, because a lot of them have never had that freedom before. Some of the students react because they don't have somebody telling them what time to do things and where they need to be. Not all students do well in this situation because they've been told, "You sit in the chair from September to January; and if you're quiet, and you play school really well, and you take the test, and you pass the test, we won't bother you, okay?" That's different than what is asked of a virtual student.

## In Hindsight

It's messy. Before this, I was in alternative ed and special education. It's good to have those experiences because this is alternative learning. This is not your traditional way of doing things. But you have to understand the traditional mindset, and you also have to understand alternative ways to get students from point A to point B. What we do is really student-centered. This is not about the teacher, and this is not about what the data clerk wants, and this is not about what the principal or the school district wants. At the end of the day, you have to ask, "What is best for this student?" Sometimes, the best thing for that student is taking eight weeks to finish two or three courses. If it doesn't fit into how you're doing your attendance, or if it doesn't fit in with your grading cycle, so be it. The ultimate goal is to identify what we want this child to learn in order for us to say, "Yes, we can bestow upon you a diploma." For a lot of people, it becomes an ego thing when they can say, "Our attendance is this, and we've graduated this many students." Again, we work to completion. When the student finishes the course is when it goes on the transcript, not at a traditional time. For a lot of people, that's hard to understand.

## **In the Future**

As our district moves to a standards based approach, we would be happy to be the first to move ourselves to a standards based way of grading because virtual learning teachers are already used to doing things a little less traditionally. Virtual plays very well to standards based grading because it is all about evidence, and the evidence is usually very concrete. It allows us the opportunity to be the ones who caused the pockets of disruptions in the school district to become the pockets of readiness, showing that yes, we can do these things, or no, we have to take these things back to the drawing board.

The future brings higher expectations. We've put a lot of money into this space with the expectation that we will attract students back. One of the problems we've had is the students we've attracted back who've said, "I hear you got virtual," are not necessarily the students who are going to be a good fit. They've been doing everything they can to avoid school. I would like to think that for a lot of these students there is a place where they fit. Unfortunately, in the past, some have not fit in the traditional. But that does not mean that they'll fit well in the virtual either. There has to be another way. There has to be a way that we can meet all the students' needs. A lot of times when people don't know what to do with their students, they say, "Well, let's do virtual," when somebody says that without considering all the other options or even talking to us ahead of time, it becomes a big problem.

## **Local Value**

We definitely have our place. We've become part of the district's culture. If we weren't providing this opportunity, it would have a negative impact on the district because it would negatively impact student learning. We are not a climate change anymore; we are embedded in the schools' culture.

## **Valued Partnerships**

We would not be able to handle the financial burdens of keeping up a quality program without WEN and WDLC. We do things differently than every other district in the state, but that doesn't mean that we're being told how we have to operate. That does not mean there's any disrespect between organizations because we do things differently than others do either. It's a valuable organization because we are able to look at the big picture as an organization within the WDLC and WEN and then apply the knowledge where we need it to fit with our programming. Quality curriculum is one of the big bucket items that we would not be able to sustain financially on our own. That's a huge win. Our program would be minuscule without it. I've seen other districts who try to build their own; they cannot offer the breadth of curriculum that we do.

# Rural Virtual Academy

## Multi-District Charter School Consortium

*Charles Heckel, Principal, and Sara Holewinski, Dean of Operations*



## Why Online & Blended Learning

The initial thinking behind Rural Virtual Academy (RVA) started in 2004 or 2005 as a way to recoup students that weren't taking full advantage of traditional public schools. We are a geographically large school district of small populations, and we had students traveling over an hour one way to get to school and families that were choosing to homeschool their children. When charter school legislation passed in Wisconsin allowing us to open a virtual charter school, we started with a consortium of five districts — all with the same kind of needs and all of which are rural, contiguous districts — as a way to reconnect with some of those families that weren't taking advantage of public schooling. The consortium is now at 20 (soon to be 22) districts. As it evolves, we're trying to produce a product or build a school that would be appropriate for any student and not just a choice for the small population of traditional homeschooled kids that weren't being served. RVA has expanded into a school that we think is appropriate for any student, regardless of disability, need, or want. Our synchronous instruction and our full-time virtual school side are somewhat unique, as is the volume at which we are using the courses in the brick and mortar school. We're probably the largest user in the Wisconsin Digital Learning Collaborative (WDLC) of the content in the blended format as well. We're taking some of the successes we've had and lessons we've learned in the full-time virtual school back into the classroom in our Blended Learning Initiative. Our blended side has evolved into about 5,000 enrollments in the classrooms and about 60 teachers using digital content and personalized pathways in some way, shape, or form for all kids in the classroom as well.

In our first decade, we were a pre-K through 8 school. A lot of our parents and students wanted to see us add on, so four years ago, we started a high school program that we grew one grade level at a time. In 2017-18, we have added 12<sup>th</sup> grade, so we are a full pre-K-through-12 school as of this year. Our Blended Learning Initiative is only two or three years old. We primarily support grades 6 through 12 in the brick-and-mortar schools.

## Program Description

The RVA started at the superintendent and school-board levels. Initially overseen by a curriculum and instruction director from one of the school districts, we had one half-time employee who acted as the teacher. I [Charlie] have been with the program since the beginning and was on the sidelines for the first two years, but I was asked to take over in 2007. Because our average rate of growth was about 22% a year, they needed somebody with more time to dedicate to operations.

We grew 50% last year on the full-time side, and we had exponential growth on our blended learning side. It takes a lot of support from all of our consortium districts, partners, superintendents, and school boards to secure the needed additional personnel and funding to make our rapid growth work. In this part of Wisconsin and rural northern Wisconsin, districts play really well in the sandbox because we have to be able to share resources so everybody doesn't have to reinvent the wheel and we can use

our taxpayers' resources to the best of our ability. We have contact people at schools understand the structure well enough to be the liaison between their schools and the RVA. We try to work with a high school counselor, an administrator, or a special-education person, so that we can disseminate information most efficiently. We have support staff in all of those districts, too, when we're dealing with enrollments, for example. We try to tailor the connection to what those districts need.

Open enrollment creates a very competitive market between school districts. Our model is built on cooperation, which is one of our core philosophies. We started as a consortium because we didn't feel the need for everybody to have a virtual charter school and compete against enrollments to make money. Working in a consortium also provides our students and families greater access to local school district programming. Here in Wisconsin, if you are part of our consortium, students can go into the buildings in those districts and take advantage of services and activities because those students are still counted locally. They're still local enrollments; they're not open-enrolled. They can play inter-scholastic sports and take advantage of local extracurricular activities, as well.

Our virtual course catalog offers students access to AP classes and a variety of different courses, many more than what most of our consortium of small districts would otherwise be able to provide. One of the values of working within the Wisconsin eSchool Network (WEN) is that high-quality digital course options are fiscally attainable for us, and we provide them back to schools at a price that they can afford. Another value is simply the fact that the catalog gives students access to 21st century kind of learning. It gives them access to using a Chromebook or a one-to-one device in learning mode so that when and if they choose to go on to college or a technical school after this, they've had some exposure to what it's like to take an online class as well.

We offer a year-round educational solution through high school, so the RVA provides a flexible pathway for all kids to get an education that works with their family's needs. More and more families want greater flexibility; for example, they want to be able to go on vacation with their kids at certain times of the year. Some families feel their kids are ready to graduate a little bit earlier and want them to be able to take college credits ahead of time. As we continue to grow, that sector seems to be expanding.

Our largest group of students is traditional, private homeschoolers. We serve some at-risk students or disenfranchised kids, kids who have tried a traditional public school setting and it didn't work. Our special education enrollments are full because it has been such a great option for students with special needs; we could probably double our special education staffing and still have no problems filling the enrollments. We have some medically fragile and outlier types of kids, too, but we're seeing the largest growth in kids that would fall in the middle of a normal curve, so that's students from families that simply want more flexibility in their education. In addition to students, another target audience for RVA is the brick-and-mortar schools that we serve and those students who are looking for something other than what they're getting in the building.

## **Extending Ourselves: Relationships, Values, Academics**

We say RVA stands for Relationships, Values, and Academics — in that order. Sometimes people prioritize those three words differently, but academics to us is a secondary outcome of putting people first, building relationships, and supporting them. People come into this worried about ACT test scores and state exam scores and academic outcomes first. The reality is that all of that stuff will come if

you see to the other pieces — which are more critical — first. Over the years we've learned that the key to a successful endeavor in this arena — and the very first thing you need to do — is establish good relationships with the parents and the kids; you have to be willing to support their values and the reasons why they want to be here. If you do those two things well, the academic component just follows. Once kids can trust you and parents can trust that you care about their kids and you're in it for what's best for them, they'll work their tails off for you, and they'll do whatever they can to be successful. We're proud of that.

Unlike other models in our state where there is some daily direct instruction, our consortium makes it possible to provide live, daily, direct instruction in all core areas to students in grade 7 through 12. Class size looks very similar to traditional schools with about 25 but a maximum of 35 students in a class. We decided to add the direct instruction component when we were creating the high school because we saw that most high school students aren't able to get through the online content on their own. We found that when you pair content with a teacher to help oversee and guide them through their first online experiences, the students are much more successful. Families that want their kids to be in front of a teacher receiving instruction can receive that here.

We require that our high school RVA students attend daily direct instruction classes for two weeks. At the end of those two weeks, if the students are doing well — keeping pace, earning good grades — they don't necessarily have to come to class. Earned Flexibility is a model I [Sara] developed primarily for our full time virtual students. If they're able to keep up and do well, they can go ahead and move through the content pretty much on their own. We still have what we call Mandatory Monday for everyone. At a minimum, they have to come to class for announcements and to touch base with their teacher every Monday. We find that even when we give students Earned Flexibility, they like to continue coming to class. They like that interaction with their peers; they like to listen to their teacher; they like that form of instruction.

Our core classes are synchronous, and most of the students participate from home. We have eight Blackboard collaborate classrooms with links that are provided to the students. They log into those classrooms, and their teacher is there, along with their class. The students receive a high school schedule that says, for example, algebra is from 8:00 to 8:30 in Blackboard room one and science in Blackboard room three from 9:00 to 9:30. The students move between Blackboard or virtual classrooms like they would go from room to room in a traditional school. If they're on pace, if they're doing well, they can be excused from showing up in the Blackboard classroom. We also have students in the building who have combination schedules; they can be in the virtual setting for part of their day and in the building for the other part of their day.

We know of other virtual schools that provide some synchronous instruction, but we're one of the only programs that provide it in all core subjects every single day. Research has borne out that some of the early models of virtual learning that were highly independent were not successful academically, and we did not want to go that route. We use our consortium school districts to share staff. If we need an algebra teacher, RVA doesn't hire a teacher. We can go to our consortium and see whether anybody has a teacher available who wants to do synchronous instruction of algebra online. It's another cooperative model: we not only share students, but we're sharing staff to help us with our instructional needs as well.

We've been very conscious when we onboard teachers that they get plenty of mentoring and have a partner mentor. We're conscious about teachers being well prepared to provide a high-quality

experience for our families and establish relationships if we're going to put them in front of students in this school. We do have to grab the reins a little bit on our growth; even though we're growing at 50%, last year we capped our enrollment and said, "Okay, we have to stop now and make sure that we are still producing something of quality."

We have seen incredible success with our full inclusion model for special education students in the RVA. We have four full-time special education teachers on staff. We have a school psychologist and a director of special education who travel to different sites to meet with students and do testing and meet with the IEP teams. We have low student-teacher ratios; each of our special education teachers has a maximum of 25 students on their caseload, so they work with them a lot one-on-one. In the high school and the middle school, we have pull out classes; when the students are in their regular classes they have a resource room that they go to with a special education teacher who helps them with homework. Our special education teachers are often in the classes and help the regular teacher make modifications.

The RVA also gives teachers the opportunity to personalize and blend their classes. Without the online content provided, it's very difficult for a teacher to do that. As Sara likes to say, it is textbook replacement. The easiest way for us to explain it to teachers who are new to the blended side is that they are infusing digital content in the classrooms, then we see them using the digital content, either in partner with or in place of the traditional textbook. The process and final product is very much guided by the teacher. When we talk with teachers about blended, a lot of them think it's going to be an independent option for students. However, just like in the virtual setting, we feel it's best for the students if they are not working alone, so we really encourage a lot of guidance by the teacher.

Another value added aspect of the RVA is that we have split the state into seven regions where we have regional event coordinators, basically moms that plan events so kids in those regions of the state have a wide array of face-to-face opportunities. We also have online clubs and events going on all the time like other virtual schools do, but our region for activities is state-wide. Our consortium's 22 districts are very centrally located in Wisconsin, but our regional event coordinators live throughout the state so that kids who live geographically remote from our home base — say 300 or 400 miles away — can get together with other RVA kids and families and be part of activities without having to travel very far.

Families have been exposed to virtual learning for well over a decade in Wisconsin. Parents, in particular, are good shoppers of what quality is. If you produce a program that is not of good quality, they may come in the door, but they're not going to stay. You have to be able to put out a really high-quality product — and rightfully so — in order for a mom to want to keep her kid involved in your school. We put a lot of energy into value-added things for RVA beyond the curriculum and the teacher oversight. In the high school, we have different clubs and activities for the students. We have technology support. We have school psychologists on staff. We have special education teachers. So really, anything a student could get in a building setting can be provided to them in the RVA.

## Unique Challenges

The learning curve for teachers can be challenging. We're a pretty unique school with our technology component, all the different curriculum options that we have, and the mindset that is so different from when you are in a building; it takes about a year for a teacher to feel comfortable teaching in a virtual setting or at professional development.

Trying to stay ahead of our rapid growth, making sure that we've got enough trained staff to support our families, isn't as much of a challenge as it is a constant need to educate the public about what a virtual school is, what blended learning in a traditional school is, and what virtual schooling is, because there are so many public misconceptions. It will take a long time before virtual schooling becomes part of the average taxpayer's understanding of what options families have. We need to be in front of people constantly, educating them constantly. Usually it starts with the school administration, and then sometimes we're invited to the school board meeting to talk about who we are and what we do. If they become a consortium member, we have an open house within the school district — as many times as they want us to. We also go into the schools and meet with groups of teachers to talk about the online content and different options that partnering with the RVA gives their school.

The revenue that comes into the RVA from open enrollment and other resources are shared among our partners. The authorizing school district that covers the charter and other administrative costs keeps 5% of the open enrollment revenue; 95% comes back to the consortium. It is a real consortium in that we share all the expenses, but we also share nearly all of the revenue. It's a win-win for everybody and a fiscally smart decision for a district to join us as opposed to starting their own virtual school. RVA opens that door to local parents for their kids to come into the building to take part in classes and receive special education services locally and participate in athletics again. All of the students in our consortium districts also receive a local school district graduation diploma from the local school board, so for multiple reasons, it makes sense for school districts to partner in consortia as opposed to trying to do this on their own.

## In Hindsight

We have put significant energy into growth but never thought we would grow as rapidly as we have. I [Charlie] started as a classroom teacher, and then I was an assistant principal; Sara was a classroom teacher. I would not have guessed that I would have been immersed in so many different aspects of education. In many ways, Sara and I act more like superintendents than we do principals. You have to know the budget. You have to know the law. You have to know the policies. You just have to have a wide array of knowledge about education, outside of the limited scope of providing a good educational, academic experience for kids.

It's a massive time commitment, too, to travel and meet with everybody and establish the kinds of relationships necessary to make something like this work. It is like a year-round school. There's no downtime. People typically think you're not quite as busy in the summertime. Actually, in the virtual setting, our summer months into the fall are the busiest. There's so much change from year to year. The virtual setting is constantly evolving. Having an unlimited view of what virtual education is and looking for what else we can provide to our students has expanded what we do.

It would be easy to believe that you couldn't establish good rapport with families and kids because of the distance. But the relationships established with teachers and kids in this school are unlike any other I've experienced. They're better. You get to know your kids better. You get to know families better. We hear that echoed from our teachers, as well. When we get new teachers, they have the misconception

that they're not going to have the relationship with our students that they did in the classroom. I [Sara] was a classroom teacher for a lot of years; I would see my students every day, and I knew them well. In the virtual setting, I'm meeting with the students, but they're in their home setting. I get to see their pets, and mom and dad are there, and they come on field trips, and Grandma and Grandpa are there. We have students year after year after year, so you really build a great relationship with them.

Intuition tells you that if you're in proximity to someone physically day after day after day, you're going to get to know them differently because your paths cross more often. But maybe it's the intentionality of the relationship that helps. I [Charlie] wouldn't have thought about the knowledge of the extended family being greater online, but it makes sense. For those who think that online is impersonal and that you're disconnected, it's always gratifying to hear that establishing relationships is possible.

Since the inception of this school, we've matched teachers with families as opposed to looking at grade levels. We have pre-K through 5 elementary teachers, middle school teachers, and high school teachers. In the pre-K to 5 years in particular, chances are you'll have the teacher you started with for four, five, or six years, year round. Parents can always ask for a different teacher, and we make modifications; but, by and large, families really appreciate having that one point of contact especially, for example, a mom who homeschools all of her kids and they're all little. Now the student is with that teacher for multiple years, there is no more summer slump, there is no more reeducating the teacher about the student's strengths and weaknesses. Pretty soon you're on the Christmas card list and you're getting invited to the First Communions!

## **In the Future**

The school has two arms: the full-time virtual school and blended learning. The full-time virtual school side will sustain growth. We're not going to make 50% growth every year, so we need to be realistic about when it is that we're going to plateau for budget and planning. It takes a lot of energy to make the blended learning side work successfully. It's a real concern that without enough hand-holding and support using digital content in the classroom and personalized learning, those wheels can fall off quickly because we're trying to reinvent those wheels in some of the brick and mortar classrooms. Learning how to use an LMS and how to personalize pathways for kids and all the technology components takes a lot of energy. If we don't do that well, we may see some collapsing on the blended side.

Overall, it's exciting because we get to be on the tip of the spear. If you're on the tip of the spear, though, you will bleed a little bit more than everybody else, too. You have to know that you're going to be the one that gets bruised. That's okay. It also provides you the freedom and autonomy to try to do things differently.

## **Local Value**

We go into the schools quite a bit beyond the open houses and the school board meetings. A lot of our staff members are in the buildings on a regular basis; for example, our special education, director, nurse, and school psychologist will go in and meet with the special education teams. Our school counselor frequently meets onsite with the school counselors of all of our districts. We saw

such growth with the online content being used within the buildings that we hired basically a full-time blended learning coordinator who works exclusively with teachers in the buildings to familiarize them with the online content, help out wherever needed, and show them how to do blended learning within classroom setting. We make rounds, too; we go to all 22 districts at least once a year to focus on the superintendents and the school board aspects.

The online side of what we do is well-known and valued. The blended learning side needs continued massive support on our end to make it a successful endeavor in the brick-and-mortar classrooms. Once we establish a couple of teachers who are doing it well in each of those districts, it will grow naturally. Whether that side of our operations is still valued is a question mark.

## Valued Partnerships

The WDLC provides opportunities that we wouldn't otherwise be able to take advantage of, such as Heather Staker, who comes into Wisconsin several times a year to host trainings. An obvious value to being part of WEN is the fiscal benefits. We don't have to go out and negotiate our own contracts with vendors for buying content and curriculum. More broadly, WEN is a great roundtable of people using virtual education in different ways and sharing ideas. That gives us a lens to look through that's different from our own. I've been impressed with the ability of the group to be cohesive and collaborative. In addition to the collaborative relationships among the members, the WEN team does a great job of helping us navigate enrollments and giving us the tools that we need. Any time we have a problem or a question we can reach out to them, and they're always there to support us and find the answers.

### **ARISE Virtual Academy**

Janesville School District

*David Parr, Dean of Students*



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## Why Online & Blended Learning

The loss of students prompted the development of online and blended options in Janesville. We had 85 students leave our district to attend other online schools during the 2006-07 school year, so we opened the virtual charter, ARISE (Achieving Results in Student Education Virtual Academy), and turned the tide rather quickly. Within three years, almost all of the students had returned. They just wanted a different opportunity for themselves. In 2017-18, only 12 have left, most because they did not want the rigor of our program.

Going forward, we're continuing to build on what we've been doing with the high schools, and we have begun exploring blended learning, starting with a foreign language program and an algebra course. We've also been exploring blended learning with the middle schools where there is a lot of interest in doing something online.

## Program Description

ARISE is a K through 12 program. We are not alternative ed, which people typically think of as problem-based. Our students don't create problems; our students are the results, the bad end of problems. Teachers have to be of a certain ilk to be here. We support self-regulation and independent learning in a very secure, trusting environment. They have to have a deep understanding of emotional issues and help students walk through them. Every one of our teachers and aides either has that ability or they leave quickly because they have to have empathy to get through to the students, but they also have to have a guiding hand.

Our program has rigor. We have traditional students who need classes that don't fit in their schedule and students who need to catch up on credits. The students don't get a lot out of credit recovery at the high school and the other charter schools. We try to get students to try us first and then, if they can't possibly do it, they go back to the high school credit recovery courses. About 70% of our kids are socially awkward students at the high school, middle school, or even elementary level. Some feel bullied and some feel uncomfortable, so this is a good alternative for them. We have a program for expelled students. We also have a small population of students with severe mental health issues and a very small population with drug and/or alcohol issues because we can work with students that are in treatment. Those students may be with us for only one semester. Today, most of our students are in high school and can't fit something into their schedule, are behind in credits, or need to graduate early. The way our school system is set up, they get eight credits a year. By the time they're juniors they have 24, and they only need 26-1/2 to graduate, so we're able to let them graduate first semester of their senior year.

## Building Relationships: Know & Serve Your Students

Students can create their own social paradigms here; they create their own comfort zones. For instance, if students feel uncomfortable in a large student setting, that is not part of their day. If they have trouble interacting with other students, that is not expected. We do a lot of counseling about how to deal with other people. We have two counselors on the staff, and Janesville Lutheran Services provides services to our students free of charge. We help students regulate themselves, but they can determine when they see people and what they say to people. If they don't like the situation, they can leave. They can work by themselves. If they become uncomfortable, this is a safe place: they can be in the open area, go to their desk, or find a different space to work.

I was a union president and kind of a corrective behaviorist. I try to help staff be better teachers. I noticed that a lot of high school teachers especially never got to know their students. The first thing I train teachers to do is to know everybody in their class. When they sit down, they should know who's absent. They should be able to look through the crowd and see who's gone. We emphasize that here a lot. Teachers have to work nights and weekends, too, because that's when people want to talk. If they can't do that, this isn't the place for them. We've had our turnover, but good teachers stay because we make them feel appreciated; the not so good teachers, we find them other places to go.

Our school is open seven days a week. We have set hours that we're in our building, but we bend those all the time. Our Saturday program, when the expelled kids come in, is normally 8:00 to 11:00, but I can come in earlier or later. We're open Sunday afternoons a lot, especially during exam week, because so many of the students work. They will come in at 6 or 7 o'clock Sunday morning or late Sunday afternoon,

because they just want to get their exams done and they can't come in during our normal hours. Let's say we have 140 students. That's probably about 1,000 exams they're going to take over that exam week, and we will have probably 40 or 50 exams during Christmas break. The expectation is that we are all available all the time. Your cell phone should never be off. Ever. You should be answering phone calls and texts. Students and parents get to know that. If you don't answer the phone because it's late at night, you're expected to talk to them the very next day.

We have amazing mentors. I have visited a great many online programs, and I've attended a lot of workshops across the United States, and none of them have the amount of mentorship we do. All of our students have a one-on-one connection with their teacher. We limit that mentorship to never more than 30 students, but 25 ideally. This year we're at 22 so the mentors get to know those 22 students and their families incredibly well. Some programs have mentors who are like homeroom class teachers; but they don't get to know the kids, and that's a key component for us. We have a set of questions that we talk to our students about. What is the last song you listened to? What is the last TV show you enjoyed? What was your favorite movie you saw last month? We want very specific answers and we keep track of those answers on a spreadsheet so every teacher can build on it and use it for conversation, developing special content, and making a connection any way we can. We have to have a lot of phone conversations. We have to have a lot of texting and a lot of emails. We encourage face-to-face with our students, too, but getting all of them to come in is difficult, of course, especially with the problems they have. Every one of our students tells us, "I know you better than I've ever known any other teacher." Students that I've never even seen tell us that.

We have aides, in addition to mentors, who create bonds with students. All of our students with low reading scores who need extra reading help have a minimum of one hour a week with their aide. Some of the students have two hours, depending on the need. They have set appointments when they have to come in and work with the aide who's there to help them read. She can take them to any part of the building and listen to them read. They can read to each other. We're training older students to read with younger students right now. It's all about relationships — building a relationship and having somebody. The students have the opportunity to avoid a truancy if the aide speaks for them or if students come in with them. The students are given that opportunity because it's important they have an adult they can trust.

We are connected to the community and have many people who are more than willing to come see us and be used as guinea pigs, including firefighters and police officers. For example, the students have 10 prepared questions for an interview with a community member and will ask questions on their own, too, hopefully. One student is interviewing a Gazette reporter. The reporter comes here so it's a more controlled environment. The activity itself is very scripted but leads to other opportunities eventually. We also have groups students can participate in, for example, yearbook. In fact, we have two yearbook groups this year. One group is what you would think. The other group is led by a social worker who students don't know is a social worker. We took this approach because the parents of four or five students called us and said, "What can we do to help our kids have more interaction with humans?" The group is very limited in size and just happens to be all girls this year. They meet on Wednesdays at 10:00 in our room, in a very controlled environment. They interact with each other first, and by mid-year, we have them interacting with other people. Last week, one of the girls who has a camera walked around taking pictures. She didn't talk to anybody, but took pictures of everything. She can interview teachers or aides, whomever she feels comfortable with when she's ready. She's going to be interviewing students eventually and people that aren't in our room by the end of year. That's our goal.

## Unique Challenges

We've been doing this for 10 years so it takes time to educate people and get the programs underway. At first, people were very upset, thinking online options were taking jobs away. I was the union president at the time, so at a union meeting of about 120 people, I was answering their questions and explaining the situation. "This is what we do. This doesn't take jobs away. It actually creates jobs because students were leaving, and now we're bringing them back." The second year, we just happened to have a mammoth layoff — 100 people. All of them were called back because it was just a funding thing, but people were very concerned that online programs were the reason for the layoffs. It was a very trying two-or three-month period. Now they actually embrace us to meet their needs, although that is sometimes different than meeting a child's needs.

Even our best efforts are not the answer for everyone. The only rule for the expelled students is that they have to bring a responsible adult with them for the Saturday program. I tell them, "If you're ornery, don't come in." It's that simple. "I'm not making you come in, because there's no need if you don't want to be here." We didn't always have the responsible adult rule, until we had just one incident. The dad was as challenging as the kid. Luckily I knew a police officer who was across the street, and he came over and said, "Hey, time for you guys to go home. You don't have to be here. Why are you doing this?" I never felt insecure; I just thought, "Yeah, this is uncomfortable." Nonetheless, the student was done.

People tend to be afraid of new things and can be skeptical. They still don't look at students first. For instance, we offer every AP class. The high schools each offer four or five. Why aren't they offering students the opportunity to take other AP classes? They are still reluctant. The way it works in Janesville is whoever's giving the diploma is the primary school, so they receive total funding. This means a student can take four classes with us and four classes at the high school; the high school gets funded for eight classes, and we don't get funded for any. The money issue was a leadership problem. We were a very money-dictated district for about eight years. Now that we have a new leader, that will change, and they will start to accommodate students more around the students' needs rather than where the money is coming from. Every school in our district was competing for the same dollars, so I don't advertise in my own city. The only students we get somehow stumble on us. If we ever start letting more parents know that we're available, we're going to blossom, and the high schools are going to lose students. That's what they're afraid of.

## In Hindsight

We made a lot of mistakes with our early hires. I wish I had been able to tell myself, "This is what you're looking for." I felt, in my heart, that every teacher thought the good of the student comes first. Now, I rarely hire a teacher that I don't know, because you can't get what you need to know in a half hour interview. Even if I interview them twice and we have two levels of interviews, I can't get to know them. Do they have that inner drive to want students to succeed? We know now that you have to have a very particular skill set, but there also has to be responsibility for and an understanding that the student has to graduate. If someone is a good classroom teacher, odds are they're going to be good at this. If they're a bad classroom teacher, we know they're not going to be any good at this because they don't have the basic skill set.

Know who you hire. They have to believe what you believe. I've had teachers that are good teachers and decent online teachers, but they don't share the vision that these students have to graduate. We had a teacher who told his entire mentor-load of 25, "You don't have to take the state exams. You can opt out," and eight of them decided not to test. We got pure zeros. When we investigated, I said, "How come there's eight students not taking the exam? Now we're a failing school. Either you change or you're unemployed. It's that simple. I don't care if you don't feel tests really judge a student's ability. That's how the state judges us." My biggest regret is not being better at picking my people. But now that we've been around for 10 years, I'm very comfortable with who I have. Not that I can't make improvements, and I will.

## In the Future

Every year we've grown 20%. Our high school population is actually down this year, but our elementary and middle school have just blossomed. We may see a slow increase, but maybe we'll stay level with where we are. I see our role as facilitators increasing and our teachers doing more at schools. Our middle school teacher already goes to the elementary level to help one day a week. I see our math teacher going to the middle schools one day a week helping the students with high-level math classes. We did that in the past, but our new superintendent sees that as a great opportunity, so we're going back to it. I see us being more involved in how students learn. I see all of us, no matter what we teach, going to middle school classrooms and training teachers to be blended learning teachers. I see us as facilitators of technology through the district. We use technology really well here as a supplemental tool. We need to show teachers that, every other day when the students are on the computer, you can make a better lesson for the next day: "If you only had to plan for every other day, think how much better your lessons would be." We're also teaching them how to share spectacular, attention-grabbing lessons, which we do decently at the high school.

We are exploring blended learning for foreign languages as a separate initiative to provide more district-wide course offerings. The current plan is for the students to see the teacher every other day and then be in the computer lab every other day with an aide. Over a two-week span, they'll see the teacher for five days, and have five days online learning. Because math is well suited for this, I've also talked to the high school about a blended algebra course. Those students will have a 30 minute period of online learning and 25 minute of face-to-face. We've explored the option of social studies blended learning and are exploring blended learning with the middle schools who are far more interested in doing something online. They would have a day of classroom instruction and then a day of group activities. It would be social interaction and group work every other day, and then every other day would be online learning and dictated curriculum.

My superintendent really believes in school-to-work, so we're going to have a satellite at our tech school, Blackhawk Tech, and we'll facilitate students that are half a day there and half a day at the high school, but they will never go to the high school. They will be online learners. We're going to have a classroom out at Blackhawk Tech, and when they don't have a class or a prep period, they can come into our lab and have their high school. They'll finish with one year of Blackhawk Tech and a high school diploma. That is a new population, because we have a lot of students who want to be at Blackhawk Tech. In theory, freshman, sophomores, juniors, and seniors can go to tech school and can go to college to get the education they need. I see us helping those students go through the pipeline.

I see us being integrated into the high school through learning labs, a classroom filled with computers that will have an actual teacher present. Appleton already has this, as do Kenosha and Racine. Students

come in and do their online learning in a classroom. As soon as 2018-19, students will be going to two or three classes with us, it's going to be built into their school day, and they will report to room 313 at Parker or at Craig, and there will be a teacher there, and they will be working on their online class. I see the teachers rotating eventually. On Monday, there's a biology teacher; on Tuesday, there's a math teacher, and so on.

I also see us stepping into special needs in a different way than we do now. For instance, our high functioning special needs students can really use this technology. What if we didn't have to send them home to do this? What if they had a room at the elementary level where you had small groups of students coming in to work but you had a teacher present? That isn't what happens with severe ED. Often, they go home and are not successful because the parents can't control the situation either. What if we gave the students half days online but in a school setting? They're not going to get their art, music, fine arts or health class, but they are going to get basics to help them learn and reach their educational goals. We have a fabulous special ed teacher here that can demonstrate to others what we do and why we're successful.

## **Local Value**

We have a lot of business and community interaction. I am very lucky that I know so many people in our school district and in the community. You have to have somebody leading the program that is able to communicate well and is known and trusted. Over the first three years, I made the Golden Knight [Knights of Columbus who are 65 or older] circuit. Generally for us, they're well-known people in the community who have stopped working but know a lot of people. I spoke to the Rotary at least twice a year. I spoke to the Optimists Club. I also went to all the Forward Janesville [Chamber of Commerce] meetings. I spoke to them regularly, probably three or four times a year, and explained what we do here. Now businesses come to us because they know our students can work. They ask me, "Can you help this kid get a diploma? Can you help him so he can work during the day and go to school at night?"

## **Valued Partnerships**

Our partnerships with WEN and WDLC are a great way to share resources. I love being able to offer 240 classes. That is a great benefit to us. It also helps me see new things. The idea of the middle school teachers teaching foreign languages every other day was actually something I heard at one of our get-togethers. It's good to bounce ideas off of one another. We hear what works and what doesn't work.

While I was in the e-learning program, the board president and the superintendent came to me with the idea of extending online learning beyond dropouts. I met with administrators from a couple of established online programs (Appleton and Kiel) and the person who turned out to be my principal, and we talked about what was out there and what we could do. We all applied for and received a grant to get this online learning thing off the ground and the Wisconsin eSchool Network (WEN) was created. The first year it went wonderfully well, so we started adding school districts and now have 30 districts in the consortium. After our fifth or sixth year, we realized that we could not maintain what we were doing without a full-time presence as a director, and we added John Jacobs.

It's hard to meet 30 people's needs. With 30 different school districts, we offer a plethora of opportunity and that's probably the greatest benefit of the partnerships: the opportunity. No matter our realm, we can all find something we're interested in.

## Why Online & Blended Learning

We're not a district and we're not a school, so why does Wisconsin Virtual School (WVS) exist as a state-led supplemental program? The program began as an alternative education program specifically. It was funded through a state grant, and the sole purpose was to create online course options for kids making up credits. Back in 2000, it was kind of a unique idea that students would take an online class with an online teacher to recover credits.

As schools started using online learning over the last few years, the reason students take our courses has expanded. Teacher shortages would have been an indirect or secondary reason why we have seen growth in our programs. We're not seeing huge growth in the numbers of student enrollments, but that may be because now it's on everybody's radar that you can use our own teachers, which they couldn't do in 2000. We didn't even think about using your own teacher with some outside infrastructure and digital content then. Now schools look one or two years ahead and plan for it: "We're going to start with a small group of teachers, they'll serve our kids locally, we'll have some full time virtual, and then we'll grow the program." That's the model from the last five years that we see becoming more popular. When people grasp personalized learning and can figure out what blended learning is and that it includes an online component, we'll see more interest.

## Program Description

Our agency wrote a grant, then, two years into WVS, we worked with a provider for some content and the infrastructure and started training teachers. In 2003, they were looking for someone to lead the program which had only a few enrollments when I was asked to join the team. I was the superintendent at the time, and my heart was in technology and serving kids in that capacity, so it was a good fit. Initially it was me and a program assistant and a handful of virtual teachers in the core subject areas. Spin forward 14 years, and our team has now grown to six. We have another director, and someone who handles professional development — the training of the teachers and the local mentors, coaches, or local educational guides or LEGs. In the last few years, we've brought in two additional associate directors, both of whom have been WVS teachers almost from the day it began. One associate director is working with our content and curriculum quite a bit, assisting teachers and assisting with professional development as well. The other associate director's expertise lies in curriculum and Quality Matters. We went from one full-time program assistant to two full-time program assistants. I can't say enough about those two people. They are front end, 8:00 to 4:00, answering phone calls and emails. We call them The Helpdesk. They have very close relationships with many of our schools.

Our audience is local school districts and their students. Those districts include public, private, and charter schools. We continue to serve only grades 6 through 12, primarily. That is in our memorandum of understanding with the state department, and there is some legislation that says the state had to set up a web academy to serve grades 6 through 12. That's when the Department of Public Instruction turned to us, and we became more of an official state-led program. It doesn't mean we don't have younger kids

that need accelerated learning or older students who are returning back to high school for a diploma, but we serve primarily grades 6 through 12 with the majority of the kids being juniors and seniors. Secondly, we do a lot of professional development with teachers in school districts around online and blended learning.

We ask the students to do an end of course survey, and we also survey the mentors or LEGs at the district. We can see that a lot of students have taken a one-semester course and are following up with the second semester, so we're primarily supplementing at the local level. The number one reason students choose us continues to be "The course is not offered at my district;" more specifically, students can't get AP courses at their school, and smaller schools don't have a robust course catalog but are open to these types of opportunities. World languages and electives right now are huge for us, primarily because those areas have been cut back so much in schools. We're also seeing early adopters who want to try online courses with more underserved populations, as well, such as special education, homeschooled, and home bound students.

## **Personalized Pathways for Stakeholders**

WVS fills gaps in curriculum and provides multiple pathways as part of the Wisconsin Digital Learning Collaborative (WDLC). We draw on experience from all the schools that we have worked with and are helping schools individualize, solve specific student needs, and offer choices. School districts contact us when they're looking for online opportunities for their kids or because the district is losing kids and the goal is to get these kids back. We can provide options to help the district do that. We try to focus on "this is about serving kids locally" and get away from "this is about attracting other kids." Parents are looking for options, and they are very aware that there is good curriculum available where they can tap into high quality teachers.

Many districts are still at the beginning phases. We often offer to come to the school and present to the board or to the administrative team because they all have similar questions: How do we handle attendance? What do you do when the student isn't working? Who's making sure it's them doing the course work? One of the things that we've done really well is help schools understand policies, questions, and issues. I explain who are we, how we serve students, and how can they do it. Then we talk about what they need, for example, you need to have a mentor and you need to be able to inform your parents. Then we go to the student level: how to register students, how much time it involves for the support person, and how to monitor progress all the way down the road.

WVS is a good starting point for any school that wants to solve whatever need it might have for online learning. Should it grow or should they decide they want to enroll some open enrolled students from other places, then they can charter, and they can use the WDLC as infrastructure. Having been a district administrator from a rural district, I believe before you hang up your shingle as a virtual charter school, the number one reason for your decision should be to provide service to your local population. If it is, WVS helps a district set up their own online program or online school, so they can serve their local kids in a full time, part time, or supplemental manner. We're there to support them through next phases, too, including using their own teachers. In the last five years, more schools have started to envision their phases and are keeping those local teachers involved in a more blended approach.

We're trained to build awareness of the WDLC, the diversity of the partners, and the unique way in which districts are serving their kids. One of our goals is to lift up these different partners and help tell this story. Then people will understand better what we mean when we say there's multiple pathways and we're here to support you wherever you may be on that path. We continue to search for venues in which we can make people aware. Our Department of Public Instruction has been helpful with the work that we're doing with blended learning and increasing awareness in the state about what blended learning is. We are now straddling traditional online and the blended learning space. The work we're doing supports districts in training their teachers to teach both full time virtual students and supplemental online students, as well as what we would say falls directly into the definition of blended learning, where the student has some control over pace and place and time and space. We've been offering a blended option/use your own teacher model since we started, but no one ever used it. They didn't understand what it was or how it could possibly be. Probably the most innovative thing we're doing is helping schools and teachers understand what blended might mean and seeing the flexibility it provides them locally. Once teachers understand the infrastructure and get some experience, they see efficiencies in blended learning that free them up for individual time with that student or other students in the classroom.

## Unique Challenges

Our challenge goes back to a lot of change in leadership at school levels and, still, a lack of understanding of what online learning options are available in our state. Unfortunately, we still have to explain we're not a school, even though our name is Wisconsin Virtual School. "Virtual" in our title often causes the misconception that the school or district is going to send us their per-pupil funding and we're going to handle the students. When we go to the school board convention, there will be school board members and administrators who walk by our booth and see Wisconsin Virtual School, Wisconsin Digital Learning Collaborative and will immediately look the other way because they think, "Oh, those are the ones who are stealing our kids." Those very beginning stages, when they really don't know what we do, that's probably our number one challenge.

At one time we had touched at least 75 to 80% of all districts in the state, so that leads me to say that quite a few know about us. Our other 11 CESAs in the region certainly are very well aware of what we offer. Schools are being marketed to by other entities. Sometimes people forget that maybe they should have called WVS. Building awareness is continuous. I don't take it for granted that every school understands that we're around. They may have heard about us in the last 14 years, but then leadership changes, and the understanding is lost.

## In Hindsight

If I could go back, I'd change our name. We have two charter schools in our state with very similar names. It has prompted problems with student records, confusion for parents, and general difficulty in establishing awareness of who we are and in building trust.

## In the Future

In the last five years, we've seen more schools — those early adopters of purely asynchronous supplemental online learning — starting to make the connection to how they can use these digital resources locally with their own staff, have more control over their program, and build from within. Schools will always have a need for supplemental, because there are schools that just will never have the capacity or it will take them that much longer to get up to speed. We're going to shift into more work with a program for three to five years of planning and implementation, in an evaluative process, where we help them evolve their online supplemental program and other things they're doing in district into more blended options. They'll need support for the professional learning and maybe some assistance with infrastructure. We might see more consortium models. I see an expanding menu of services for helping districts implement digital learning options.

I'm hoping the future will bring better understanding of WVS, WEN, and our work with the DPI, which is what we're grappling with as the WEN board. Together, the WDLC is trying to envision what our niche is and build awareness of the amount of expertise, resources, and support we have to share. Are we going to bring the WDLC to the point of being the organization that schools know they can tap into for resources or engage with others who might be able to help us? Maybe a district doesn't want to use any of our resources. Maybe they just need someone to talk through best practices and strategies and their challenges. We don't have to grow by leaps and bounds; we have to sustain ourselves so we can continue to support schools. The challenge is for schools and districts to look inward to our state first, before they look outward and find resources that they might regret they purchased. We do our best regarding quality and customer support for schools, students, and mentors. That's what we're very good at. Others may say they can provide that, but we walk the talk.

## Local Value

We wouldn't be growing if schools didn't think there was a value to what we do. I know we've already met our annual goal to bring on another 5 to 10% of new schools; our enrollments are projected to be up 15% or so. That tells me that we have everybody, from the early adopters who are going to offer a pilot for two AP kids before they decide if they're going to do more online learning, all the way to programs that are on their third year of implementation and ramping up for some really wonderful blended learning opportunities.

## Valued Partnerships

We're the state virtual program, and there's WEN, the DPI, and again, the overarching collaboration, called the WDLC. WVS is also a member of WEN. Because the DPI can work through an Educational Service Agency or ESA — which WVS is a program of — we have a lot of flexibility and lots of opportunities open up for us to work at the state level and bring resources and expertise into the network. WEN invited WVS to come in as an invested partner. We have become a very cohesive collaboration, so the work we do together is very valuable. If WVS was not part of this collaboration or part of WEN, if we went off on our own, we would have a very difficult time putting forth the program that we have today with the quality and variety of curriculum and the collaborative support we have. What's unique about this collaboration is the interdependence among all the entities. If we lost part of our lifeline

to certain resources, it would be a big shift in our program, and we'd probably not look the same. One of the reasons WEN, WVS, and DPI are doing these kinds of projects together is to show schools the various ways in which students and schools are being served through this collaboration.

There is value in WVS and WEN staying the way we operate today and working together with the department and maybe losing the whole WDLC concept. We can continue doing what we're doing and the good we're doing and fight the battle of misconceptions. But the future challenge for all of us working together in this collaborative is to solidify who we are and our role in the state. What is the next step? How do we ensure districts contact WDLC first and find out how we can support them? When all is said and done, I think that's what we want WDLC to be known for — the state organization that can support any public, private, or charter school through different digital learning initiative pathways.

## Appleton Area School District

*Erik Hanson, Dean of Digital Learning*



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## Why Online & Blended Learning

In 2001-02, Wisconsin offered opportunities for innovation through charter grants. We have two virtual charters currently — the Wisconsin Connections Academy that is dedicated to the full-time online experience and the Appleton eSchool where our main goal and purpose is to serve students as part of their experience in Appleton schools. The goal of eSchool and the reason why it was started is to provide the flexibility to address the specific student needs and circumstances that the typical experience does not address. Our primary objective is to serve students online and support with their post-high school readiness for the online environment. The reality is that when you go into the workforce or you go to college or university or to your trade school, you're going to be asked to be trained, to learn, online. This is a very important piece to the puzzle of preparing students for post-high school success. It's that simple. That's what I am passionate about and work on every day.

A secondary problem to solve is the blended class or the blended experience. Using Heather Staker's definitions, we are the ala-carte hub for our school district, and we are helping figure out what an actual blended course looks like and how to address the flexibility pieces of meeting face-to-face and doing work online.

## Program Description

This is my 10th year in this role. The eSchool started about seven years before I did. My understanding is that there were a combination of forces for the districts to be innovative and acquire some charter grant money to help fund different types of learning opportunities. They decided to start off in these spaces without affecting the district's main direction.

We serve 20 to 30 students a year in the full-time capacity. Our main mission and goal is serving students around our district who are taking an online class or two before they graduate high school. We

have coaches at each high school. West and North High School have a partial position as part of their teaching contracts to be the go-to person that facilitates the orientation at the high school. My office is at East High School so right now I technically absorb that position. I connect with kids, facilitate the orientation, and am the go-to person when I'm available. Our secretary and our full-time online coach are also available to help assist if I'm not. One of our core beliefs is that kids should come to school. We don't recommend students take all their courses online. We want kids to be part of the community, but we also want them to be successful online.

We don't have any mandates right now that require students to take a class before graduation, but we've created some goals with our governing board that were approved by the Appleton area school district school board. We believe that 80% to 90% of our high school students should have taken an eSchool class before they graduate to have that online experience. Five years ago, we were at 10% to 12% of our student population. Now we're at about 30%. We could have made more strides, but the reality is we're a larger district, and the ship doesn't always move very quickly. Tripling our amount is actually a good accomplishment in a period of time so that's good, too.

If you go back way to the beginning, you'd see a lot of at-risk students being served. The person that was put in charge came from an at-risk special education background, so that was one of the main areas to get off the ground at that time. We started as 9 through 12; as of 5 years ago, we serve 7 through 12. The core population for us to serve is high school students and a smaller population of middle school, because you gain high school credit for taking classes with us as a high schooler, but as a middle schooler you don't currently receive high school credit for completing our online courses.

Currently online learning is still outside the box. I'm working really hard to help make it part of the box. Our goal for the last 10 years at least has been to help people view online learning as part of what they do. It's not just for one demographic or population of student. It's not only for the kids that don't make it in regular school. It's not only for the kids that are not being successful in a "traditional" school. This is part of what you do today, and online learning isn't going away.

Think about the reality of what is online versus what's face-to-face. Online is infinite and face-to-face is finite. As we think about that, learning online has infinite opportunities where learning face-to-face is limited to what's physical — unless you include the online component. That doesn't mean we're not capable of thinking infinitely when we're face-to-face. It just means that access is different, and what's in front of you physically is much different than what's in front of you electronically.

So much has changed in the last 10 years. How we keep track of student records has gone from paper-based to completely electronic, and we have web-based management of everything. The Wisconsin eSchool Network (WEN) has evolved from a two-district collaboration into a formal 501(c)(3). We've seen some partnerships blossom and grow around the state, including the Department of Public Instruction, Wisconsin Virtual School, and virtual charters that are full-time programs. We're all collaborating together. That's a big change.

We're really working towards mainstream. We want kids to have access to this opportunity across the board; we want to match our district demographic. We have a summer session when we provide a lot of incoming freshmen their health class over the summer. We serve middle school students who want to make their entrance to high school at a certain math level to help them traverse different math pathways. We serve students who want to graduate on time and can't fit things in their schedule. We serve students who are taking courses in special programs or schools like our Tesla Engineering Charter School when those blocks of time limit their ability to take courses in the other part of the high school.

## Preparation, Support, & Acknowledgment

We have built-in support in our high schools. We have coaches for kids to check in with if they need help. We have access to the eSchool network to get professional learning resources and stay current. We do a good job of training teachers and staff and making sure that they have the right skillset. People continue to grow. You have to believe in our mission and core beliefs and what we're doing; otherwise, I don't know if you'd be a successful coach for us. We offer a required, robust orientation course that prepares students well to be successful before they're enrolled in their courses. We offer a six-week summer session every summer with really high success rates. Last summer it was 99%. During the school year, we generally have around 90% success rate which is really high for a course completion.

As part of our registration process, students need to go on our system and request the course. Then they are sent a contract, they sign the contract, they send it back, and, no matter when this process takes place, they are then enrolled to the orientation with their coach. The coach from the home school facilitates the orientation right then. It's a mini-course online, designed to take about two hours. Once they complete the course, the students are enrolled directly in their class. The skills and familiarity are built just in time. This means that when they're launching their course, they're not asking their teacher questions about how to navigate, how to do this, where to find that. They dive right in and get going, and it's off to the races.

Last year, we created and launched the Online Course Ready for Post High School badge that goes on students' high school transcript to identify students who have the core attributes of a learner – self-advocate, good communicator, and good at self-discipline for time and task management. These attributes are important for any learner, but they are really important in an online learner. We decided to create this badging because we discovered U.W. Milwaukee wasn't letting freshmen take their online courses because they were not being successful and the university was having to put too many resources into supporting the struggling students. We agreed that, to be in compliance with the academic honor, each student would earn at least a B or better and they would not cheat or have any plagiarism incidents. The badge draws attention to the fact that these students have been successful online, held themselves to the academic honor, and not cheated. It was not as easy to cheat 20 years ago. You had to actually get someone's paper, pass it to somebody, and then rewrite it. Today cheating is simply three clicks, drag, click, done. We want to recognize students and let them know that we value them for not cheating because it's important. We value your thoughts, and opinions, and your work. Your work is important. Having that credential on their transcript is a direct value add for our graduates. It also gives us something to talk about with people in the community to help them understand what the eSchool is and what it does for their students.

## Unique Challenges

We have to work hard to help people understand what the culture of online learning is and is not and what it will continue to be for students and adults and to address the misconceptions and the myths about what eSchool is and who takes eSchool and why. That's a challenge ever since the beginning.

One of our biggest challenges is collaborating within our own district because it's a big district, and we have technology-rich classrooms and traditional instructional technology. It can be confusing. What's digital learning? What's online learning? What's technology-rich? What's Google classroom? How does that all fit and plug in together? That's a tremendous challenge that is probably not unique to Appleton.

## **In Hindsight**

We need to learn to go through the challenges to help us appreciate what's been accomplished. If I had a magic wand, I'd go for utopian solutions that work, systems that talk to each other, and teachers who all understand and use the same language. Without that magic wand, things will not always be how you want them to be. We're human. We need to go through it all to appreciate the big picture. The challenges and the stumbles are part of who we are. I'm a strong leader today because of what I've experienced.

## **In the Future**

We're trying to figure out if online learning is part of what we do or if it is still considered an island that's isolated from mainstream. What is the right strategy to deploy online learning district-wide? We're figuring that out so we can help serve as many students as possible to be successful online.

## **Local Value**

We have a chance to serve students with courses that may not run at the other high schools, and that's a huge value for our district. We have access to a tremendous catalog that you typically wouldn't have access to in a single building. We have expertise and access to the eSchool network through our collaboration. We understand the tools and the technology, and the online landscape, and how we all have to work together to help build this experience for kids.

Since I started in this role, our enrollments have nearly doubled during both summer session and the school year. But the key question is still "What is the strategy to deploy this to as many students as possible to have this experience before they graduate high school?"

## **Valued Partnerships**

WEN resources are part of what I do. I don't see them as a vendor or a separate organization. Being integrated with WEN is how we successfully leverage our resources and assets and our sharing network and collaboration. The more you can make the relationship seamless and part of how you think about managing your local program or school, the more success you're going to have, because we have so much opportunity to learn and grow from each other. Take advantage of the scaling ability that we've been able to figure out at the statewide level and bring that back into what you do locally. Some of the heavy lifting, we figure out together. And then we can just kind of layer it back on locally. I view what we do at the statewide level as an extension of what I do locally, and I see the success we have as related to that.

If you look at successful organizations and groups, working in isolation is not recommended anymore. The value of collaboration, the value of other people's opinions, thoughts, and ideas and working in a culture together is the norm and priority. Look at all of these amazing advances — whether it's smartphones, or computer chips, or rockets. People don't figure these complex things out by themselves. Asking questions, listening, challenging each other respectfully and working through ideas

together is crucial. I don't know how you do it without connection to a professional learning community or a professional group like we have. Just look at the growth of what we've accomplished at our Wisconsin eSchool Network over the past 5 to 10 years. These are things we've done together. Without our group, I don't know how successful we would have been as quickly as we've been. Collaborating, and sharing, and helping move online learning together towards quality and success cannot be ignored.

Our culture is special. We've worked hard at developing culture around trust and collaboration versus competition and isolationism. We've made good strides in that area over time to get where we are today. We can't all be doing everything. We have to be able to trust each other and that isn't always easy. We've grown together as a group to get better at that, and it shows in terms of the work we're doing and the work we'll continue to do because our relationships have continued to grow together. We're still trying to figure it all out. I think everybody is. WEN is a place for us to ask those questions and figure out how this all plays out together.

The price point to provide online learning is extremely competitive in the vendor world or even trying to do it yourself locally. Again, you can't do that without a group sharing resources and working together towards the same goal. We have nearly \$2 million worth of content that we perpetually own. That's something we worked hard on.

We've been purposeful about our face-to-face interactions and make sure we have face-to-face board meetings, a board dinner, and our executive committee meeting in person, as well. Companies still spend millions of dollars flying employees all over the world when there's telepresence or remote meeting software. Clearly, we still place a tremendous value on face-to-face interaction. When you're not together all the time, it's easier to appreciate the preciousness of that time together.

## Franklin Public Schools

*Chad Kafka, Technology Specialist*



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## Why Online & Blended Learning

A cohort of our teachers met a few times during the 2016-17 school year to answer the question, "What problems are we trying to solve?" and learn more about online and blended learning. Some of them attended professional development about what blended learning is, learning more about station rotation model, flex model, and aspects they could build into their physical face-to-face courses. But then we also started experimenting with, "How can we do this better online?" starting with "How can we free up some teacher time so that they can meet more individually with students? How can we use an online platform to help manage a classroom differently or better?"

Underneath questions about how to use online and blended, we're always working on how we can engage students better and how to diversify our teaching practices to meet and personalize needs. We've seen some research that shows online and blended learning can build student agency and give students more ownership through that agency. It also gives them more ownership in their learning if they

have multiple pathways. That is a lot of work on the teacher if they're trying to create different pathways for different levels of learning. The hard part of learning new techniques and developing new strategies is finding the time to go further than just good enough.

## **Program Description**

We're not very far along yet. We're still learning the flow, and teachers are still learning how to build a quality online course or online blended course of quality. We're focusing on blending in grades 9 through 12. We have some middle school teachers who are starting to dabble with it to see if they want to build some online classes or blended classes. Right now, it's more about exposure and experience. What do we want to offer our students? Do we want them all to have an online experience before they graduate?

We have three support groups: teaching and learning directors, learning specialists, and district liaison. We have two teaching and learning directors in the district. One of them took the lead looking at blended learning and where it fits. Our three personalized learning specialists work with the teachers to build understanding about how to use some of those blended models in the classroom. We have a teacher who's also the tech coach for the high school, and she helps and supports teachers. Tech specialists also help build blended models into an online environment like Buzz. We have seven or eight high school teachers using Buzz in their classroom. We're revisiting this right now to answer the question, "Are we doing blended learning or are we just using a tech tool?"

One of our key student populations is the students that are in a course of ours here in Franklin and using Buzz to do some online work and some face-to-face work with the teacher. Then we have students who have need for a class that Franklin can't offer. For example, a student came from another school and wanted to take French 3. We don't have a French program so we signed her up for a course through WEN. We're doing some work through Saber Academy which is the credit recovery program at our high school. We look through the statewide sections WEN offers; and if there's a course that matches what we're looking for, we're able to give our credit recovery teacher that course and she can teach those students. We have a few students taking their credit recovery courses online; they meet with the teacher daily in the classroom for help or any kind of intervention that they might need.

## **One Teacher, One Course at a Time**

We're not forcing teachers to participate or change what they do. We're not saying that everyone in a department has to go blended or has to use Buzz. Our approach is to educate the teachers about what blended is, some of the benefits and opportunities of having a blended classroom, and some tools that can help better facilitate and manage that. We're always here to help. The teachers that have chosen to do this, have chosen to do it, and we're very conscious of that. In the past when we have taken on something new, the approach has been 'everybody's going to do this because it's the greatest thing ever.' But it might not be for that teacher; it might not be for the students in that class. This time we're trying to get buy-in through the teachers' interest and their wanting to explore this further.

We have some different paths to getting to use the technology like Buzz and the blended learning pedagogy. Our high school tech coach and I meet with interested teachers and help launch them

successfully. We enroll them in our online intro to Buzz course and have periodic meetings or check-ins. We're building in our blended resources now, too, so they can get a better understanding of what blended learning is as they do the course that will introduce them to the bells and whistles of what this tool can offer. As more teachers come to us saying, "Hey, I want to use this next year. I want to look into this. Where do I start?" we want to give them support and resources that will help get them going the right way, talk about building a course and what time is needed for that, and maybe map out a plan from now till the end of the school year or from the end of the school year till the start of next school year and figure out what that looks like.

The value is we're looking at getting some time back for more personal interactions. For example, one teacher in our business department used some more blended type models in her classroom and saw her students were more engaged. Her take away was, "This opened me up to be able to go do some other things." She also saw value in shaking things up a little bit and doing things differently. We have another teacher teaching a medical terminology course that's mostly online. She's comparing grades from the students who are doing this mostly online this year to her all face-to-face students last year. She's seen that those students are either at or above where grades were at this time last year.

There's always the fear of trying something new and what's going to happen if it goes south. There's still a feeling that whenever I come around, I'm asking about how things are going and they feel pressure. But I'm curious and we want to see what's working and make it better. We try to keep it very organic. Now we're talking about what makes a quality course and what we are holding ourselves accountable to. How can we make sure that this is quality going forward and what does that mean?

We are making a conscious effort to show people how everything connects and how they're not just doing personalized learning, they're not just doing blended learning; these are components or instructional practices that meet the same goal, which is to better engage the students and see better outcomes for them.

## Unique Challenges

Time is always going to be a challenge. What we're finding right now is the seven to eight teachers that we have in this pilot group are also those teachers that are in every other group, so it's a lot on them. But how can we still hold ourselves accountable and create things of quality within the time that we have?

We're also trying to figure out how to measure the impact of new techniques on students who always took the brick-and-mortar option: going to class and meeting with the teacher in a normal classroom. Now, we're offering an enriched virtual offering. I think they appreciate the flexibility and the ownership, but some students in the courses have really fallen behind. How do we measure the impact of what's better, what's different and what's worse? This might not be a good solution for every single student. If it isn't, how do we still offer those students something?

## In Hindsight

As the district liaison, I get all the communications directly from WEN and help to manage and oversee what we're doing. As I get those communications, I have to figure out who best needs to know that in the district, whether it's an upcoming learning opportunity for the teachers or it's something that has to go to

the district office. But I'm still a tech integration specialist, too. I wish I would have known earlier how to categorize these support roles and interface with them. Am I here to support Buzz and those teachers using Buzz, or am I also helping teach the pedagogy of what blending learning is, like my personalized learning specialist counterparts? Should both be doing both? That makes us a stronger team.

## **In the Future**

We are not offering as many online course opportunities as some neighboring schools are, so we're trying to figure out just how to manage that and the what-ifs so that we can appropriately say we can offer these courses. We'll be offering more online courses at some point here in our own school, as well as maybe more access to state-wide sections. We just need to figure out what our model is for that direction and what that looks like. Word of mouth will help if teachers are learning more about what blended is and how they can free up their time to manage their content or display it differently. If they have something the kids have to read or watch or do, they can use technology to help with that so it frees them up to have the deeper conversations with students. I think that's a huge, attractive benefit because you can make relationships with students and reach more students if you're able to manage whatever content you have to teach them differently.

One of the recent mandates from our Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction was about seat time and kids physically being in the school buildings. So at a time where we're looking at doing more online enriched virtual, does that mean the kids have to physically walk into the school that day? Can they go to the library and just be on their online course, or do they have to be physically in the same room as their teachers? We're trying to figure out how to work within the parameters from DPI but also create some flexibility for kids.

We need to streamline our processes to support and train teachers and also to do our best to educate the students. We need to be able to explain to students, this is why we're doing this, and this is the direction this course is going and this is how you can work successfully in this course. We just need to get better at communicating on all fronts: the teacher to the student, us to the teachers, teachers to parents. I think we're going in the right direction for a sound program.

## **Local Value**

I don't know that we've done enough to really educate parents on what blended is. We feel like we need to better define what that looks like in our district before we can say this is what we're doing. If a teacher is truly doing blended learning, there's so much more going on that we would love to really share with the parents. We need to talk about how teachers of a blended or an online course can best communicate with parents; but we also need a consistent district message. We're still reviewing that and building what that looks like.

## **Valued Partnerships**

We have had students come into the district from another district who want an offering we don't have, so we started partnering with WEN to get access to statewide sections. WEN offered Buzz as a learning management system so we thought that was also a great time for us to try something new, because what we had been using wasn't working very well for us.

WEN has been great as a network, giving us support and helping train us in our own district, but also helping us tap into other resources around the state or outside of our district. A couple of years ago, one of our personalized learning specialists started attending some of the WEN one- and two-day seminars to learn more about what blended learning is and how can we infuse that into our classrooms. I took on the role of our district liaison for working with WEN in January 2017. I reach out to other districts through WEN to find out what some of the people in my role did there a year or two ago to see examples of what they've created or what we could do here for our teachers and students. They're very structured in what they offer us as leadership opportunities. They schedule leader programming four times a year where all leaders of this work in our district can get together. We do the monthly check-ins with them. We have a Google Plus community of about 100 of us online. Anytime I've had a question or gotten stuck on something, I throw it in there and somebody from another district usually gets back to me. They've had a lot of great ideas, and they have enough people in my role in a district who've been through it with to help think through what we're doing. WEN and WDLC just facilitating that network of connecting us has been instrumental. I don't know how successful we'd be on our own doing this.

## Collaborative Network and Professional Learning

The WDLC is not a vendor — one product, one solution — or a specific online tool. Educators do not have to know a lot about digital learning to tap into WDLC resources, because the WDLC's purpose is to help districts, programs, and educators navigate the online and blended learning space together. Districts' varying needs and objectives drive the initial solution to a problem they are trying to solve. Although varying audiences are being served, varying models are being implemented, varying strategies are being applied, varying policies are driving practice, and varying levels of support are needed, the WDLC is still about students and educators. In fact, collaborative partners continue to articulate that human capital is one of the greatest assets of the WDLC, attesting to the quality instructors and support staff that are essential components for enabling rich, authentic, personal, and life-long educational opportunities for all Wisconsin learners.

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## Invested Partners

- Appleton Area School District
- Baraboo School District
- Grantsburg School District
- Green Bay Area Public School District
- School District of Janesville
- Kenosha Unified School District
- Kiel Area School District
- Kimberly Area School District
- Madison Metropolitan School District
- Middleton-Cross Plains Area School District
- Oshkosh Area School District
- Racine Unified School District
- Sheboygan Area School District
- Wisconsin Virtual School (CESA 9)

## Affiliate Partners

- Cameron School District
- Chetek School District
- DeForest Area School District
- Franklin Public School District
- Kewaskum School District
- School District of LaCrosse
- Medford School District  
(Rural Virtual Academy)
- School District of Nekoosa
- River Valley School District
- School District of Superior
- Stevens Point Area School District
- Triton Network
- Watertown Unified School District
- Waunakee Community School District



# Wisconsin

Digital Learning Collaborative

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