



Military K-12 Partners

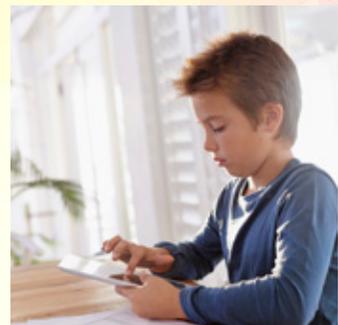
Evaluation Technical Assistance Center (ETAC)

a *dodea* Educational Partnership Program



DODEA EDUCATIONAL
PARTNERSHIP GRANTS SUPPORT

PROMISING PRACTICES IN VIRTUAL LEARNING



dodea

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE EDUCATION ACTIVITY



DODEA EDUCATIONAL
PARTNERSHIP
GRANTS SUPPORT

PROMISING PRACTICES IN VIRTUAL LEARNING

UPDATED JULY, 2015

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INTRODUCTION

The Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) supports research-based programs that aim to increase student achievement in military-connected local education agencies (LEAs) and ease the challenges and transitions that students face due to their parents' military service. Through the DODEA Educational Partnership Grant Program (Educational Partnership Program), school districts develop and implement grant projects designed to meet such goals as improving academic performance, supporting the social and emotional needs of military connected students, enhancing and integrating technology, and promoting advanced placement and virtual learning opportunities. This report focuses on promising practices in virtual learning.

VIRTUAL LEARNING

Virtual learning is a type of distance education in which teachers use the internet and computer-based technology to deliver instruction. Delivery options range from a single class or extra-curricular supplement to a fully online school program in which students never attend a physical classroom. Combinations of virtual and face-to-face learning opportunities are called *blended learning*. Blended learning takes a variety of forms, depending on student need and available resources. An individual subject or course may be blended, for instance, if a teacher delivers instruction face-to-face but students participate in group activities, reflections, and project work virtually. Schools may also choose to offer some courses online and some courses face-to-face. At a district level, administrators may decide that they would like to offer advanced or specialized courses online so that one instructor can reach students throughout the district. Blending individual classrooms or subjects is something that is more typical in an elementary classroom, whereas offering a menu of fully virtual classes is more typical in the upper grades. In any virtual learning model, teachers must receive additional professional development about delivering instruction via online platforms.

Virtual learning opportunities are of particular importance to military-connected students who may attend multiple schools over the course of their school career. Different states have different graduation requirements, for instance, thus a student may discover they need to make up several credits when attending school in a new state. Virtual credit recovery opportunities allow students to do this without interrupting their regular school program.

PROFILES IN PRACTICE: HIGHLIGHTS OF DODEA GRANT SUPPORT FOR VIRTUAL LEARNING

In 2011, DoDEA awarded grants to develop and/or expand virtual learning (VL) programs that provide online curricular options to address the needs of transitioning and military dependent students. These VL programs prepare K-12 students for college through a variety of methods such as offering AP classes, supplementing existing curricula, providing continuity of instruction between grade levels, or promoting credit recovery for transitioning students. Through the VL programs alone the Educational Partnership Program has reached more than 15,000 military-connected students.

This brief is one in a series of reports documenting a range of effective educational strategies for military-connected public schools and districts supported by DoDEA Educational Partnership Program grant funds. The following profiles each highlight a strategy that proved particularly effective in practice

during the development and implementation of an Educational Partnership Program grant project. As promising practices, the strategies fall into two broad categories: 1) the provision of dedicated virtual learning counselors/coaches to provide student support, and 2) building systemic capacity through district and program systems.

SCHOOL DISTRICT	PROMISING PRACTICES	
	DEDICATED VIRTUAL LEARNING SUPPORT	BUILDING SYSTEMIC CAPACITY
Alamogordo Public Schools, NM	X	
Travis Unified School District, CA	X	
San Diego Unified School District, CA (CTE)		X
San Diego Unified School District, CA (OSVL)		X
Hawaii Department of Education, HI		X
Anchorage School District, AK		X

All project profiles include lessons learned during the project implementation and recommendations for schools and districts that may want to adopt similar virtual learning strategies. A short set of reflective questions at the end of each profile are designed to help professional development and planning teams consider the effective strategies in the context of their own schools and districts.

PROFILES

A DESIGNATED VIRTUAL LEARNING LAB AND LIAISON

District: **Alamogordo Public Schools, New Mexico**

Project Title: **Connections! APS**

Military Installations Served: **Holloman Air Force Base**

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Connections! APS project at Alamogordo Public Schools (APS) is designed to increase access to online courses offered through Advanced Academics¹ and the statewide e-learning network, IDEAL, New Mexico². New Mexico's current graduation requirements specify that all high school students must complete one course unit of an honors, Advanced Placement (AP), dual

credit, or distance learning course prior to graduation. By expanding the virtual learning program, APS allows students to enroll in online AP classes, dual credit, and specialized coursework not otherwise available on-site. These options are particularly beneficial for the district's numerous military students who face changing credit requirements and course completion challenges when transitioning in or out of the district during the school year.

PROMISING PRACTICE

APS attributes the current success of the program to the creation of a full-time virtual learning liaison (VLL) and coordinator who monitors student enrollment, tracks student progress, and maintains regular face-to-face contact with students in the VL blended-learning computer lab.

IMPLEMENTATION

Initially, the grantee did not consider a dedicated support coordinator in the project plan but after a recommendation from DoDEA, the project was revised to include a VLL. As the project was implemented, the VLL quickly became integral to coordinating support for students, families, and district staff.

In the early days of the program, students and families were given a choice between a full-time online program and a blended learning program with regular weekly support time scheduled in the blended learning lab with the VLL. However, Alamogordo learned that distance virtual learning students needed more support to successfully complete the virtual courses so the program began to require the majority of students to report into the lab once a week.

As awareness of and interest in the Connections! APS program grew, Alamogordo recognized the importance of setting clear criteria for student enrollment. The blended learning program required

¹For more information on Advanced Academics see <http://www.advancedacademics.com/>.

²For more information on IDEAL, New Mexico, see <http://idealnewmexico.org>.



that both parents and students were aware of and able to meet the demands of the program's high expectations for self-directed learning. The application process developed into an important component of the student's and family's understanding of the program requirements. Once a student was identified for possible enrollment, the VLL contacted the student's parents to communicate the expectations of virtual learning classes and determine the level of parental commitment to providing computer time at home. Students were also required to attend an orientation and take an early assessment to determine their ability to succeed in a virtual environment.

LESSONS LEARNED

Based on the project's experience with setting expectations and criteria for incoming students, schools and districts interested in developing virtual learning programs are encouraged to carefully communicate the expectations of their programs to students, families, and district staff.

The Alamogordo Connections! APS team members believe the program is successful due to the amount of research and ground work they did before and during the program's implementation. They recommend devoting a great deal of time to studying the available research on virtual learning models and programs. Connections! APS also recommends building in continuous and systematic reviews of virtual learning programs, processes, and curriculum.

PROJECT IMPACT

The Connection! APS project has become an important resource for military students and families transferring in and out of the Alamogordo Public Schools district. Of the 128 students enrolled in the program in the 2014-15 school year, 90 students (70%) are from military-connected families.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the roles served by the virtual learning liaison in the Alamogordo's Connections! APS program? How might your district add to or revise those roles to better fit your district's needs?
2. What criteria might you set for students and families in your district's potential virtual learning program?
3. What technological and physical resources are necessary to establish a blended learning lab in schools in your district? What technological and physical resources are currently available to establish a blended learning lab in your district?

ONE CLASS AT A TIME/ IN-PLACE LEARNING COACH

District: **Travis Unified School District, California**

Project Title: **Virtual Learning Grant**

Military Installations Served:
Travis Air Force Base

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Travis Unified School District was awarded an Educational Partnership Program grant to expand its online curriculum and provide continuity of instruction for military-connected students. At Vanden High School, DoDEA grant funds were used to create and equip a blended learning lab, secure the support of a designated learning coach, and purchase online curricula from Plato Learning³.

PROMISING PRACTICE

A high school strategy that proved successful in practice for the Travis Virtual Learning Grant project was to utilize an existing high school math teacher as a designated part-time learning coach to support students in the new blended learning coursework. The designated learning coach monitored and supported student progress and course completion.

IMPLEMENTATION

The Vanden High School blended learning program was initiated through its high school math department. The first group of students was identified and recruited by a high school counselor who contacted military-connected students in all levels of high school math. The responsibility for student recruitment was later expanded from one counselor to all of the counselors. A classroom was outfitted with the necessary software and configured laptops to create a physical environment appropriate for blended learning.

The part-time learning coach directly supported online learning one period a day. The part-time position was deemed sufficient and cost effective for the number of students in the program. In the beginning of the year, the learning coach created student accounts and set up assignments in the PLATO Learning Environment. In the blended learning environment, the learning coach assisted students with assignments from their math class and provided extra practice in preparation for



³For more information on Plato Learning Courseware see <http://www.edmentum.com/products-services/plato-courseware>.

exams. He also provided direct instruction to small groups of students and assigned tutorials through the PLATO Learning Environment. The learning coach communicated regularly with the students' online instructors to monitor the course schedules and track course topics, assignments, and upcoming assessments.

The learning coach made it a priority to develop positive, nurturing relationships with the students in the program. Most of the students in the program were taking advanced math coursework such as Algebra 2, Trigonometry, and Pre-Calculus. The positive relationships and regular face-to-face contact helped to allay student anxiety that occurred when faced with intimidating coursework.

LESSONS LEARNED

The combination of online learning and direct support from the learning coach has been a successful approach for the Travis program implementation. The project team recommends setting aside an appropriate amount of time for the learning coach's initial professional development in student online learning and collaboration with online teachers.

PROJECT IMPACT

The support of the learning coach and blended learning lab has been vital for students in advanced online mathematics courses. The success of the program encouraged growth and now additional support classes are provided to Vanden High School students who struggle in Algebra 1 and Geometry.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. What factors played a part in the successful implementation of a learning coach in the Vanden High School blended learning program? What factors would be necessary for a learning coach to be successful if your district implemented a blended learning program?
2. What instructional supports did the learning coach provide to students in the blended learning lab? What instructional supports would be valuable for a blended learning lab in your district?
3. Why might it be important for the Travis learning coach to build positive relationships and rapport with military-connected students in particular? How could your district build in social and emotional supports to military-connected students in a blended learning program?

INCREMENTAL ROLLOUT OF 15 NEW VIRTUAL CAREER & TECHNICAL EDUCATION COURSES

District: **San Diego Unified School District, California**

Project Title: **Operation Student Virtual Learning: Career & Technical Education Program**

Military Installations Served: **Naval Air Station San Diego; Marine Corps Air Station Miramar**

PROJECT OVERVIEW

In 2011, the San Diego Unified School District needed to realign their Career and Technical Education (CTE) to meet the University of California and California State University's curriculum requirements. Additionally, the district initiated a plan to change the district's high school graduation requirements to include increasing CTE course requirements. Educational Partnership Program grant support allowed the San Diego CTE program to develop and implement 15 new online CTE courses aligned to California's university system requirements. The new online CTE courses afforded military students who transferred into San Diego high

schools increased opportunities to meet the district's proposed graduation requirement and meet the state's university system requirements.

PROMISING PRACTICE

While many education initiatives are subject to insufficient planning and time constraints, the San Diego CTE program utilized a targeted, incremental rollout to design and establish their district-wide blended learning program. The project's timeline called for the development of five new virtual CTE courses per year over a three-year project period. The incremental rollout gave the CTE project team enough time to undertake a comprehensive needs assessment, attend to course development feedback, and provide curriculum and technology design training to district staff.

IMPLEMENTATION

San Diego began its project with a needs assessment of existing CTE online courses provided by publishers. However, San Diego found the content and pedagogy of commercially-available online coursework insufficient for their needs. In addition, the CTE project team conducted surveys and focus groups with counselors, students, and parents, and informal conversations with administrators, about CTE needs and online learning experiences. The CTE project team also catalogued existing district technology systems and resources such as an online credit recovery program and a Learning Management System in place to support blended learning. Through the comprehensive needs assessment, the CTE project staff determined the additional features they needed to build a robust online learning system.

The San Diego CTE project started with a leadership team of six curriculum developers distributed among 15 career and technology sectors. Two of the curriculum developers were experts in e-learning and assisted the team in technology training and implementation. The CTE leadership team worked

with a group of five San Diego CTE teachers to develop the first five online courses. Once the courses were developed, the team invited students to explore the online course modules and complete surveys based on their experiences. Feedback from the surveys indicated that the students were very engaged and enjoyed the process. Student surveys revealed that more face-to-face interaction with teachers was necessary so the project added site liaisons to make sure the students received the support they needed. Establishing site liaisons also helped mitigate online teacher turnover so the students had someone they would see in person regularly for assistance.

Technology training for CTE teachers proved to be an important component and was expanded over the time period of the implementation. The technology training provided ideas for online curriculum materials and more assistance in using online instructional tools.

The CTE project experienced its greatest challenge when the district reversed its decision to require CTE courses for graduation and the need for the courses decreased dramatically. However, the continued national focus on virtual learning for college and career readiness inspired the CTE department to continue their commitment to designing new and relevant online CTE coursework.



LESSONS LEARNED

Because San Diego planned the project to be phased in slowly over time, the CTE project leadership team had the time and resources to respond to needs as they arose. During the course of the project, the professional development training indicated a wide range of teacher interest and technological aptitude. Some teachers required more focus on curriculum design training while others needed more training in technology. Schools and districts that are interested in training teachers to design and teach online courses might consider the differing levels of professional development training needed to provide ongoing support for different staff members.

The CTE leadership team benefited from a team of instructional designers that were in place when beginning the project. They advise that if the staff expertise is already in place, a school or district can immediately move forward with the project. In addition, the adaptation of existing courses requires a commitment by a dedicated group of curriculum developers with a clear understanding of quality. Once the practice or process is in place, a minimal staff of trainers can continue to train and support teachers to adapt their courses.

PROJECT IMPACT

Despite the changes to district graduation requirements, the CTE department is continuing the process to build online and blended learning modules for all of the CTE courses (more than 70). They hope to have all the courses completed by February 2016. The targeted, incremental process the CTE department used to develop and implement the 15 new online courses will serve as their model.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the activities the San Diego CTE project used to conduct their needs assessment? What kinds of needs assessment activities would be beneficial for online course development in your district?
2. How many courses did San Diego CTE phase in each year? What criteria would you use to determine phases of implementation for online learning in your district?
3. How did district policy changes affect the development and implementation of the San Diego CTE project? What policies are in place in your district that influence potential virtual learning programs and how can you remain flexible enough to respond to the changing demands?

ONGOING AND UPDATED COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS

District: **San Diego Unified School District, California**

Project Title: **Operation Student Virtual Learning (OSVL)**

Military Installations Served:
**Naval Air Station San Diego;
Marine Corps Air Station
Miramar**

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The San Diego Unified School District project, Operation Student Virtual Learning (OSVL), is committed to expanding online course offerings to support the needs of incoming military students. The Educational Partnership Program grant has allowed San Diego's online independent study high school, iHigh Virtual Academy (iHigh)⁴ to assist military students in the district's traditional high schools through simultaneous enrollment in part-time Apex Learning⁵ and iHigh online courses. The project has supported a full-time dual enrollment coordinator, the purchase

of additional Apex AP and World Language online course enrollments, resources for AP materials, and scholarships to cover the cost of AP exam fees for military students. San Diego has increased the capacity of iHigh with two additional full time instructors and expanded summer school offerings to include courses in English, Social Sciences, Science, and World Languages.

PROMISING PRACTICE

A successful strategy of the OSVL project has been the development and maintenance of ongoing and updated communication systems for prospective dual enrollment students, military families, and district staff. The iHigh principal and dual enrollment coordinator created responsive new websites for the dual enrollment and summer school programs, implemented regular systematic trainings with district staff, and utilized district information systems to enroll and monitor student progress.

IMPLEMENTATION

In the beginning phases of the OSVL dual enrollment program, the OSVL team learned that ongoing communication and training for site counselors and teachers (mentors, grad coaches) at iHigh's partner schools were essential to the success of the program. As district staff began to understand the benefits available to their military-connected students, they became actively involved in providing online options for these students and in promoting the OSVL summer program.

The iHigh principal and dual enrollment coordinator communicated through their regular online presence to be able to field questions from both school staff and military family members. They also created a dual enrollment website and an iHigh summer program website that included detailed information about each program, as well as all related registration forms. Enrolling military-connected students in online courses, as well as getting answers about questions related to the courses, became systematic when it was easy for the adults and students involved to get program information quickly and easily.

⁴For more information on iHigh Virtual Academy see <http://www.sandi.net/ihigh>.

⁵Apex Learning is an online provider of standards-based curriculum for blended and virtual learning. For more information see <http://www.apexlearning.com>.

In addition, the dual enrollment coordinator developed a continuously monitoring system to look for students not logged in often enough or who may be falling behind in their online course assignments. This monitoring system led to regular contact with counselors, mentors, and iHigh teachers in order to initiate interventions and provide support to students.

LESSONS LEARNED

San Diego OSVL team members recommend that schools and districts that wish to start a dual enrollment program maintain ongoing and updated communications (e.g., flyers, emails, websites, brochures, etc.) for prospective students, military families, and district staff in order to systematize information sharing. They also recommend building relationships with site counselors and teachers, as well as with the local military school liaison officers (MSLOs), for recruitment and support of military-connected students in need of credit recovery or accelerated learning opportunities.

Another important communication lesson the OSVL project incorporated into their program was the need to stay apprised of ongoing changes and anticipate the impact to the program, in order to communicate about the changes before a problem arises. They recommend that schools and districts implementing virtual learning programs sign up for state and national virtual learning listservs and ongoing legislative updates, and attend online and blended learning conferences in order to share successful practices and network with online educators.

PROJECT IMPACT

Since 2011, San Diego's overall dual enrollments have increased from 200 students per semester to 1000 students per semester, which includes an increase in military-connected students taking online courses. Most of the OSVL students are dual enrollment students able to commit to a least one full-year online course. The 2013 data showed that approximately 40 percent of online students enroll in at least one more online course.

The iHigh dual enrollment program won the Classroom of the Future Foundation's Achieve Award in May 2014 based on data for its positive impact on the district's graduation rates.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. What forms of systematic communication did San Diego OSVL implement to support the dual enrollment program? What systems of communication are in place to support a virtual learning program in your district?
2. How did San Diego OSVL utilize regular professional development trainings with district staff as a successful strategy for ongoing communication? What kinds of professional development trainings are needed to communicate a virtual learning program in your district?
3. How might you stay up to date on changes in virtual learning in your district and state? What resources for information on virtual learning are available in your district? How will you communicate about resources within your virtual learning team and to the stakeholders?



BUILDING A MULTILAYERED VIRTUAL LEARNING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND FEEDBACK SYSTEM

District: **Hawaii Department of Education, Hawaii**

Project Title: **Expanding Virtual Learning Options via Hawaii Virtual Learning Network (HVLN)**

Military Installations Served: **Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam**

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Hawaii Department of Education (Hawaii) wanted to support their large population of transitional students by expanding the capacity of its Hawaii Virtual Learning Network E-School (HVLN E-School)⁶. With Educational Partnership Program grant funds, Hawaii was able to secure high quality digital content with a focus on AP and World Languages; personnel to teach and facilitate courses; and an online learning support (OLS) coordinator to provide additional assistance to support the instructors and students in the E-School program.

PROMISING PRACTICE

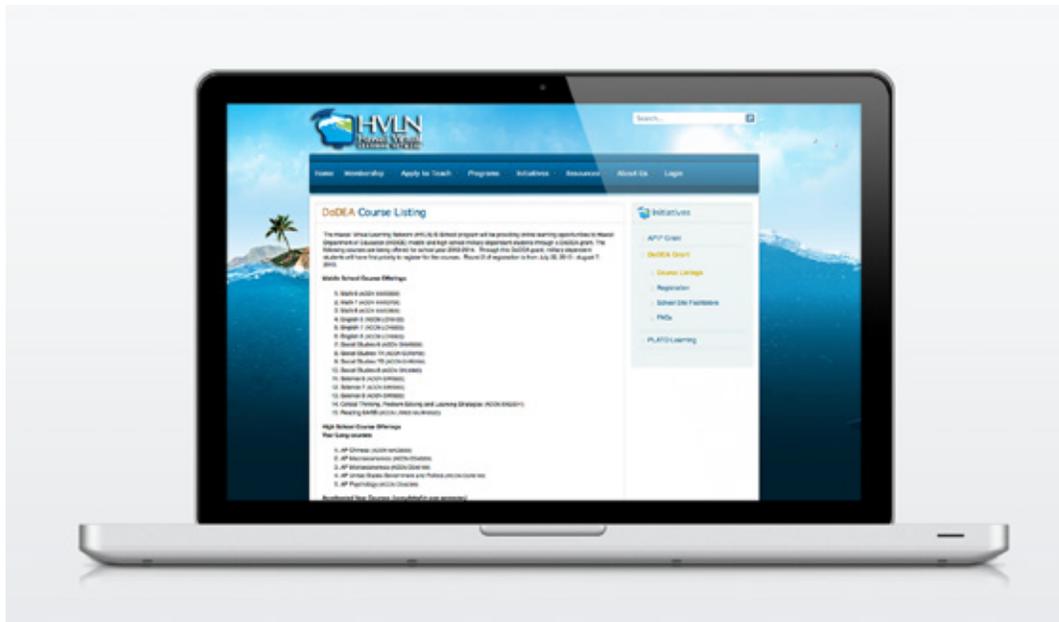
A fundamental aspect of the Hawaii project was to provide multi-layered and continual professional development and support for online teachers. In practice, this included the hiring of the OLS coordinator, systematic changes to the HVLN registration site, and the use of coaches to support instructors. The purpose of all the supports was to provide instructors with the tools, technology, and resources necessary for successful online course instruction.

IMPLEMENTATION

One of the grant initiatives launched the implementation of six accelerated courses (English Language Arts I, II, III, and IV, United States History and Government, and World History and Culture) in the Spring 2012 semester. In order to support the six new accelerated courses, E-School instructors needed to be hired and trained. When the OLS coordinator position was created, there was no consistent and streamlined method of having the E-School instructors contact the OLS coordinator to request additional assistance. Instructors would email the OLS coordinator, but this involved a lot of cumbersome dialogue between the OLS and instructor to figure out what student in what course needed support and what kind of intervention was needed for the situation. The OLS coordinator realized a systematic approach was necessary to support the online teachers.

The Hawaii Virtual Learning Network (HVLN) Registration system was initially put in place to provide instructors with access to basic student information. A communication design was configured and the system programmer implemented the changes on the HVLN registration system. Prior to launching the

⁶ For more information on the Hawaii Virtual Learning Network see <http://hawaiiivln.k12.hi.us/>.



new communication system, the OLS coordinator met with the content area mentors to get feedback on the process and use of the new communication and documentation features. After receiving feedback the OLS coordinator created video tutorials for the instructors on how to navigate and use the new features. These tutorials were also posted in the E-School PLC (an online platform for instructors to collaborate) for future reference. Instructors were always provided with training on new system changes using live virtual webinars, video tutorials, or written tutorials which all get posted in the E-School PLC for future reference. The OLS coordinator, along with the E-School registrar, worked closely with the school site facilitators and counselors to alert instructors of any new changes to the E-School program.

The OLS coordinator worked together with the curriculum coordinator and registrar to design a way for instructors to request OLS assistance through the HVLN registration system. When a request was made, an email was sent to the OLS coordinator stating what student in what course needed assistance. Instructors had the ability to indicate on this form the type of intervention needed and could provide details regarding the situation. This enabled the OLS coordinator to receive consistent communication from each instructor making it easier to follow up with each intervention case.

The HVLN system also became a source of data as reports could be generated to show all of the documented instructor actions and all of the requests for OLS intervention in a session. Coaches were provided access to the HVLN system with a specially created “coach role” so that they could monitor the instructors they supported. With this access, they gathered data on how frequently instructors were logging their communication with students and parents and how often they requested additional support from the OLS coordinator. Coaches had access to each of the instructor’s courses to view the grade center and announcements being posted by the instructors. The coaches also gathered data on each instructor regarding their course facilitation. As instructors benefited from the increased support from coaches and the OLS coordinator (such as increased student participation, or the withdrawal of students who no longer needed the credit), using the HVLN system to record actions and requests for intervention became a part of their regular online teaching practices.

LESSONS LEARNED

To support an online program, Hawaii recommends that the following structures and systems need to be put into place:

- A database to track student enrollment, registration, progress, and intervention
- A platform to create a PLC to provide instructors with the opportunity to communicate with one another and share teaching practices
- A platform to house resources, tutorials, and program information (The team recommends using the PLC for this.)
- Coaches assigned to monitor instructor course facilitation and to keep each instructor accountable (These coaches should have a clear role and set of expectations when working with each instructor.)
- Professional development for staff members on how to operate and troubleshoot the technology being used

Hawaii also recommends that for any program wanting to implement supports, it is important that there is clear and frequent communication between all stakeholders. The supports should be put into place based on the needs of the program, the instructors, and students. There should be a common goal of all team members to support instructors with the intention of increasing student achievement. Administration, staff and anyone involved with the technical programming of the systems should be involved with the implementation and maintaining of supports.

PROJECT IMPACT

The use of the HVLN Registration site has grown considerably over the past two years. When the ability to document actions and request additional support and intervention from the OLS coordinator were built into the HVLN site, only a few instructors took the time to use the new features. After offering extensive training and just-in-time coaching support, now, almost all E-School instructors use the site to correspond with students, parents, and schools. Instructors document their intervention actions and they request for additional support from the OLS coordinator when students become unresponsive. Based on feedback the E-School program plans to continue with current course offerings and supports.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. Why did Hawaii decide to revise the HVLN system to include a communication component? What systems are in place to support communication with online teachers in your district?
2. How did Hawaii incorporate teacher feedback into the implementation of the HVLN system? What could your district do that would yield similar success?
3. What avenues of electronic communication were embedded into the HVLN system? What lines of communication would be helpful in your district to improve communication between stakeholders?
4. What types of data did Hawaii collect from the HVLN system? How could your district enable targeted, systematic instructional support for online teachers?

EXPANDED COURSE OFFERINGS AND IN-PERSON SUPPORT

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Anchorage School District (ASD) iSchool is a district-wide initiative to provide online learning opportunities to secondary students.

PROMISING PRACTICE

A unique component of ASD iSchool is involving two, full-time Student Support Specialists (SSS) who work one-on-one with students and teachers in the field to support the student online learning. They monitor students' success and interactions in a given course. If a student is identified as at-risk, they visit that student in person to provide additional interventions. The SSS act as liaisons between students and online teachers and provide continual communication with parents and school counselors.

District: **Anchorage School District, Alaska**

Project Title: **Anchorage School District iSchool**

Military Installation Served: **Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson**



IMPLEMENTATION

ASD buys most of its online courses from Florida Virtual School. Most of the courses are for original high school credit for core and elective classes. They include some credit recovery courses but staff found that those students often needed more support and were not as successful in a virtual learning model. Instead ASD iSchool began to review student applications more closely and accepted students needing credit recovery on an individual basis when it appeared they would be able to be successful. ASD teachers who have been through training in how to create and teach online courses teach the iSchool classes during non-contract hours. ASD offers its teachers professional development through the International Association for K-12 Online Learning¹.

In an attempt to involve middle school students, ASD iSchool began to offer enrichment Pre-Algebra to accelerated 6th grade students. This enrichment opportunity allows successful students to enroll in Algebra I as 7th graders and will ultimately allow these students to access several AP math classes while in high school. ASD iSchool eventually offered the electives Gothic Literature, Criminology and Forensic Science II. ASD iSchool added these courses as good “online entry” courses so any level of student can excel in them and feel success in online learning. They anticipate that this will lead to students taking more online courses. These are also courses that ASD would not be able to offer otherwise because of the staffing challenge of finding local, qualified teachers.

¹ For more information about the International Association for K-12 Online Learning see <http://www.inacol.org>.

In the second year of the grant, ASD iSchool hired two Online Learning Coach (OLC) FTE positions to extend support beyond the original two target high schools. The OLCs visited the 10 Anchorage feeder high schools every week to work with teachers and counselors. However, over time ASD iSchool recognized that the OLC roles needed to change to meet student needs and this position was changed to Student Support Specialists (SSS). They meet with students to provide support, help and encouragement as students work on their online classes. The SSS still work with counselors and parents by providing reports of student progress and act as liaisons between students and their online instructors. The SSS visit counselors during curriculum staff meetings and provide them with iSchool informational posters and course lists counselors use when creating student schedules. The SSS also staff recruitment tables at schools during student lunchtime with display boards and flyers about the ASD iSchool program during open registration periods. They mail postcards to all ASD military families with ASD iSchool registration information and attend spring parent teacher conferences at the high schools serving the majority of their military families. Their weekly afterschool presence at all of the comprehensive high schools increases visibility for the program.

Each year of the grant the iSchool adapted the purchased courses to align them with Alaska standards and content needs. Some common adaptations involve animation software, Flash, multi-media, and interactive activities. In the last year of the grant there were 24 courses that were being adapted for a total of 60 courses by the grant's end.

LESSONS LEARNED

To support an online program, ASD recommends the following structures and systems need to be put into place:

- To recruit students to online courses, it is important to have a face-to-face person available who is familiar with the students. Using the counseling staff at the various high schools was the most valuable recruitment strategy. This was because counselors build student schedules and can enroll students in the iSchool program when they need a course the high school does not offer or when there is a scheduling conflict.
- Student success is the best advertisement for online programs because success is the goal for all stakeholders. Consequently, communicating with students, parents, teachers, and counselors has been the OLCs' increasing focus. The OLCs continue to be present at high schools once a week to follow up with students and communicate with counselors, lab teachers, and parents about student progress and needs.
- It is key to align the online platform with (or use the same platform as) the Learning Management System (LMS) of the purchased courses. ASD iSchool learned this lesson and shifted from the free Moodle² platform to BrainHoney³ which is a subscription service. After the switch, teachers reported a much better work-flow when evaluating student work, and students experienced much easier course navigation. A benefit from the vendor after switching LMS platforms is that courses now receive regular updates that address content and changing standards because the two systems can “talk” to each other easily.

²For more information about Moodle see www.moodle.org

³For more information about BrainHoney see www.brainhoney.montageeducation.com.

PROJECT IMPACT

The ASD iSchool grant project increased the number of students taking online courses as they added more offerings and helped increase the overall ASD graduation rate almost 4%. ASD iSchool was able to average an 11% military student population in its online programming despite its 25% transition rate. It is too early to see results from allowing accelerated 6th graders to take enrichment Pre-Algebra class so they can take advanced mathematics in high school, but ASD anticipates that successful students will be able to take advantage of this as their high school programming progresses. Over a two-year period, 78 students taking an online AP course scored a 3 or better on the final AP exam.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. Why does ASD iSchool offer online courses for credit recovery on an individual student basis? How would your district handle this issue?
2. What is the purpose of the Student Support Specialists? What roles and responsibilities would your district need to support students in online courses?
3. Why does ASD iSchool modify the courses it purchases? Does your district have the capacity to modify courses and offer professional development to online instructors in creating and teaching online courses?
4. What is the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (<http://www.inacol.org>)? Would this, or a similar organization, be useful to your district as it considers online programming?



