

Anywhere, Anytime Learning

Prince William County Schools' Virtual High School program offers students the flexibility needed to achieve their individual goals

Overview

Although virtual schools still account for a relatively small portion of the educational options available in the US, they're now one of the fastest-growing forms of school choice.²

An early pioneer in the virtual high school movement, Prince William County Schools' (PWCS) Virtual High School (VHS)—established in 2000—began with just three courses and one teacher. Today, the program offers 22 courses and enjoyed a record enrollment of 760 students this past summer, giving even more individual learners the opportunity to achieve their educational goals, graduate on time, and gain invaluable experience with 21st century technologies.

In June 2013, PWCS's Virtual High School program (VHS@PWCS) was presented with a Digital Content and Curriculum Achievement Award at the International Society for Technology in Education conference, recognizing its innovation and hard work to implement digital content and curriculum.

AT A GLANCE

Client	Prince William County Schools
Staff	30
Students	1,200 annual enrollments from 11 high schools
Level	High School
Solutions	Desire2Learn Learning Environment + SoftChalk Cloud

CHALLENGE:

- Provide students with more freedom in course selection
- Improve consistency and control over master course creation
- Alleviate overcrowding at high schools within the District

SOLUTION:

- Anytime, anywhere learning to facilitate greater flexibility for students
- Centralize content and align curriculum with learning objectives

RESULT

- Record enrollment of 760 students (20% increase) for summer 2013 term
- Average course pass rate of 90%
- Average standards of learning (SOL) pass rate of 91%
- 180 additional students now participating in blended expansion program, alleviating overcrowding¹



Challenge

STUDENT SCHEDULES, OVERCROWDING, AND NEW REGULATIONS DRIVE A DEMAND FOR ONLINE COURSE DELIVERY

For many students, high school can seem like an overwhelming and complicated time in their lives. Some may experience personal circumstances that prevent them from completing courses in the traditional classroom. Others simply need more flexibility in their course scheduling options to create room for extracurricular activities like athletics, band practice, or student government.

To accommodate the rising student demand for more flexible programming, PWCS decided to explore new and creative options for course delivery. These options included online delivery through VHS@PWCS. At the same time, a number of traditional high schools were experiencing overcrowding, further driving the need for PWCS to seek out newer and more scalable options for course delivery.

The State of Virginia had also recently passed a new graduation requirement demanding that all students take at least one online class, putting further impetus on PWCS to broaden its VHS@PWCS program.



Solution

A LEARNING EXPERIENCE THAT NEVER STOPS

To address the surge in demand for online courses delivered through VHS@PWCS, respond to overcrowding challenges, and ensure students comply with new state regulations for a compulsory online course credit, PWCS has initiated a blended learning expansion to share VHS@PWCS content with teachers in traditional classrooms across the division. This has not only alleviated stress on the system itself, but also enabled students by improving access to the courses they need to successfully graduate. The Desire2Learn platform and content authoring solution SoftChalk Cloud form the backbone that has facilitated this expansion.

“We’ve been using Desire2Learn technology for several years. The platform is robust and a perfect fit for us, allowing us to take our online courses to the next level in terms of student/teacher contact,” says Gina Jones, Administrative Coordinator, VHS@PWCS.

LEARNING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM, ANYTIME, ANYWHERE

PWCS now has the ability to let students take high school courses wherever and whenever they can, work at their own pace, and even work ahead of schedule to earn full credit in up to three sessions per year: fall, spring, and summer.

“The vast majority of students enrolled in our VHS program are looking for scheduling flexibility,” explains Gina Jones, administrative coordinator of VHS@PWCS. “Thanks to the Desire2Learn platform, students can take courses from any internet-enabled location, keep up with their school work, and graduate on time.”



“Thanks to technology advancement from companies such as Desire2Learn and SoftChalk, we’ve experienced dramatic change over the last thirteen years and an acceleration in our team’s level of sophistication with online learning.”

Gina Jones, Administrative Coordinator, VHS@PWCS

Solution continued

Jones explains that VHS@PWCS is indispensable to students who, for a variety of reasons, may need more flexibility to acquire the necessary courses to graduate. “Given our proximity to Washington D.C., many of our families are in the military and often face relocation. Students may be shy of a few credits at the time of the move, and this program allows them to graduate and earn their diploma. Or, as in another case last year, one of our students was selected to the US Olympic ski team. She was a senior and wanted to finish up her credits to graduate. Thanks to the VHS@PWCS program powered by Desire2Learn technology, she was able to take her course online from her training camp in Utah,” says Jones.

Jones also loves the Desire2Learn platform’s highly personalized approach, which gives instructors the flexibility to target learning strategies while also allowing students to make their own choices. This helps create a far more engaging learning experience for everyone involved.

“The Desire2Learn platform layers allow our teachers to have several points of contact with students and personalize every student’s learning experience using tools such as the Desire2Learn Dropbox to provide direct feedback. We also leverage the platform’s parent auditor role, allowing parents to monitor progress from home, which is a critical aspect of ensuring student success.”

CLOUD-BASED CONTENT CREATION AND EXPEDIENT DELIVERY ENSURES CONSISTENCY AND ALIGNMENT

VHS@PWCS teachers have relied on Desire2Learn partner SoftChalk’s desktop-based content authoring platform for the past four years to create and curate their own



master content. The blended learning expansion, however, introduced a new requirement to centralize control over the authorship function in order to ensure continued alignment among the participating schools. To satisfy this requirement, PWCS appointed a learning content author (LCA) for each of its twenty-two courses who would be responsible for creating and maintaining course content.

At the same time, PWCS introduced SoftChalk Cloud. This would allow LCAs to create, update and store their master courses in the Cloud so they can easily and efficiently upload lessons into the Desire2Learn platform for dissemination out to participating schools.

“I don’t know how we would have achieved our blended learning expansion goals without SoftChalk Cloud. It’s introduction to market and integration with the Desire2Learn platform was a perfect storm for us,” says Gina.

The blended learning expansion has also provided an answer to the overcrowding challenges facing several district high schools.

“VHS@PWCS’s blended learning expansion has given schools a way to deal with their overcrowding issues,” says Jones. “This past year, we’ve had an additional 180 students from the blended program involved in VHS@PWCS,” she adds. “Students have been able to participate in a school-funded summer jump start program where they work ahead taking courses through VHS@PWCS and then choose a period next term where they stay home or

Solution continued

use the time to enhance their extracurricular lives. Fewer students in the classroom mean less crowding in the hallways and parking lots. Participating schools are also saving costs by not having to hire additional teachers.”

BENEFITS FOR BOTH TEACHERS AND LEARNERS

One of the objections to online learning programs is that they can be impersonal and distant. For the teachers involved in the VHS@PWCS program, the experience is entirely the opposite thanks to some of the tools in the Desire2Learn platform—for example, online discussions, blogs, and chats. The VHS expects teachers to teach live lessons each week, which are recorded and archived for students who cannot participate in real time inside the virtual classroom. One-third of the VHS teachers are working exclusively online, and the district experiences very low turnover.

“I simply love teaching online. Through the Desire2Learn platform, I actually feel I am building stronger relationships with the students because the system provides ample opportunity for one-to-one, personalized instruction and communication. It also gives me more flexibility as a teacher to optimize lessons for the way my students learn and allow them to set their own pace,” says Beth Miller, English 12 Teacher, (Blended Expansion Program & Traditional Classroom).



For VHS students, course curriculum delivered through the program is rigorous, adhering to the same schedule set out in a traditional classroom. This format has earned the program approval by the NCAA as an accepted nontraditional course provider for college-bound student-athletes. Students working online must be highly motivated with a strong desire to learn and achieve. However, the majority of students engaged in the program find VHS has enriched their high school learning experience and provided them with important new skills in digital literacy, outside the box thinking, and time management.

“What I like most about the VHS is that it has never been a waste of my time. I never get cut off before I have finished something, and I never have to sit around and wait for a bell long after I have been done with an assignment. Using the Desire2Learn platform, I can connect online, do my work when I want to, and keep in constant touch with my teacher. I find his emails no less informative than a face-to-face explanation and our pager conversations are no different than sitting in a class asking questions, except this way I don’t have to raise my hand and wait to be called on. The freedom of the classes is their appeal. If I could have been a full time VHS student, I would have. These classes don’t waste a single moment of my time, they don’t waste the instructor’s time, they are convenient and easy to use,” says Brandon Pfof, Junior at Patriot High School (with supplemental VHS courses and blended courses embedded in his school).



Since 2000, over 10,000 students have completed online courses through the VHS@PWCS program with an average pass rate of 90% and a standards of learning (SOL) exam pass rate of 91%. Thanks to the use of the Desire2Learn platform and SoftChalk's content authoring solution, what began as a pioneering virtual high school program in the State of Virginia has now realized its goal of providing students with greater flexibility to learn anytime and anywhere. It's also provided teachers and schools with the ability to offer students a personalized and highly engaging learning experience.

The seamless integration between SoftChalk Cloud and the Desire2Learn platform has been instrumental in helping PWCS institute a blended learning expansion that broadens student access to online courses and provides an answer to school overcrowding issues.

"When we first began VHS@PWCS, there was not a lot of precedent out there for programs of this nature," says Jones. "Putting a course online meant uploading a few worksheets and doing PowerPoint presentations. Thanks to technology advancement from companies such as Desire2Learn and SoftChalk, we've experienced dramatic change over the last 13 years and an acceleration in our team's level of sophistication with online learning."

AWARDS AND MILESTONES

- VHS@PWCS was recently awarded a Digital Content and Curriculum Achievement Award at the International Society for Technology in Education conference, 2013.
- VHS@PWCS was asked to lead a webinar showcasing content creation and delivery by SoftChalk in summer 2013.

To find out more about the advantages of the Desire2Learn Platform, visit www.Desire2Learn.com

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SoftChalk, LLC is an award-winning provider of e-learning software for worldwide education and business institutions. Specializing in the development of intuitive, easy-to-use tools, SoftChalk products allow instructors to create powerful and professional-looking content for e-learning and smart classrooms in K-12, higher education and corporate training.

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