A Tale of Two K-12 Online Models

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Introduction

With more than 42 states in the US providing either "significant supplemental online learning programs" or "significant online full-time programs" in K-12 (Watson, 2007), there is no doubt that online learning is a powerful and growing educational phenomenon that promises individualized "any time, any place" education. The overall number of K-12 students engaged in online courses in 2005-2006, is estimated at 700,000. "Online education is one of the fastest growing phenomena's in K-12 education today" (Rose, 2007). Additionally, important research now also shows that virtual learning produces promising student academic results. A Synthesis of New Research on K–12 Online Learning (Smith, 2005) concluded that eight recent empirical studies prove "the potential of online learning as a promising instructional intervention that, when implemented judiciously and with attention to 'evidence-based' practices, apparently can improve student academic performance." Meeting the diverse needs of students is an essential challenge for K-12 education today. That makes the great promise of virtual learning – the ability to individualize instruction and tailor the school to the child rather than the reverse – all the more compelling in elementary and secondary education.

In the fall of 2002 both Wisconsin Connections Academy (K-8) and Appleton eSchool (9-12) officially opened their virtual doors leading the advancement of distance education and online learning for K-12 students in Wisconsin. Both are instrumentality charter schools of the Appleton Area School District, providing two very distinct models.

Six Years of Growth and Development

In 2001, the company that operated the Sylvan Learning Centers took note of two trends: the growing acceptance for distance education and the popularity of public school choice. Combining these trends led to the development of Connections Academy as a provider of virtual public school curriculum, technology and services. (Connections Academy is now a freestanding company.) Dr. Thomas Scullen, then-superintendent of the Appleton Area School District, was known to be open to charter schools and the potentials of technology in education. Dr. Scullen viewed virtual schools as an opportunity to bring local home school students back into the district and reach other students whose needs were not being fully met in the traditional setting. On March 25, 2002, the Appleton Area School District Board of Education unanimously accepted the proposal and entered into a contract with Connections Academy. By mid-August the school district had hired six experienced classroom teachers and an administrator for the school. In September of 2002, Wisconsin Connections Academy (WCA) officially became the first K-8 virtual charter school in the state and Connections Academy’s first school providing a viable alternative to the brick-and-mortar classroom within the public school system.

In the fall of 2001, the Board of Education requested that Dr. Scullen explore the possibilities of developing an online charter high school with a primary focus to meet the needs of local students particularly those whose needs were not currently being met in part or on the whole through existing traditional school choices. On April 22, 2002, the Appleton Area School District unanimously approved
the charter agreement to establish Appleton eSchool. A structure was developed that allowed for both full-time and part-time enrollment opportunities. Four content specialist teachers and a Program Leader were hired. Beginning with the summer of 2003, Appleton eSchool, in partnership with the Fox Valley Summer Consortium of 11 area school districts, also provides a 7-week summer session where students typically complete a one-semester course. This initiative changed the previous vision of summer school programs from only credit recovery or enrichment to credit accrual.

In spring of 2003 the Governance Board developed the following “Belief Statements” which have guided all of the decisions regarding Appleton eSchool since that time.

1. Appleton eSchool should offer a wide variety of course options for high school credit as generated by student needs and interests.
2. Appleton Area School District students should be encouraged to complete at least one online course as preparation for an increasingly technological world.
3. In general, it is not recommended that students take all of their high school courses through online learning.
4. The future success of Appleton eSchool is contingent upon exploring and engaging in partnerships that maximize resources to benefit students.

By the fall of 2005, curriculum options had been expanded to the point that it was viable for students to earn any/all high school graduation credits online.

Appleton eSchool has grown these past six years from 77 students the first year to more than 1,000 local semester enrollments this year and 2,400 enrollments within the Wisconsin eSchool Network.

**One Size Does Not Fit All—Two Distinct Models**

WCA provides textbooks and other curriculum materials, a laptop, printer and subsidy toward their Internet access for student enrolled in full-time learning from their home. Wisconsin certified teachers work very closely with the parents to plan for individual student instruction, diagnose learning needs, prescribe content deliver, assess learning, report outcomes to administrators and parents and evaluate the effects of instruction. WCA requires parents to be actively involved with facilitating their student’s education. Parents play a key role in developing study skills and affecting the learning in early years. No one would question that students whose parents are involved are more likely to perform better academically.

WCA is not a school that will meet the needs of every child, but it is of great benefit for those who may thrive in an environment other than that of a traditional brick and mortar building. Students come to WCA for a variety of reasons, such as health issues, a special talent, or are just are able to succeed in a more traditional academic setting. For example, for one family WCA provides the flexibility that they need to be able to provide their children with a solid education while also meeting their unique special needs. WCA allows them to shuffle their daily schedule so that the children can receive therapy and also participate fully in their classes. Mary needed a quicker pace than the traditional classroom was able to offer. Through the virtual school, she is able to move through the subject matter and dig deeper into things that intrigue her. Mary is also able to dedicate more time to practicing and competing in tennis and music. Prior to WCA, John tried several different means of education, none of which worked for his distinct learning style. He was bullied, picked on and even physically assaulted. His confidence level was near zero. After a very short time in a virtual school-, John discovered that learning didn't have to mean tears and frustration. Throughout the years, there has been continuous development in all program areas to best meet individual student needs with a high level of accountability.
Appleton eSchool curriculum offerings currently include thirty-two courses purchased from Florida Virtual School and three locally developed courses all taught by Wisconsin certified local teachers. These courses are provided on a continuous enrollment basis so when students complete one of their courses they immediately move on to the next. A partnership with VHS, Inc provides Advanced Placement course options and a wide variety of elective choices to meet the skill level and interests of individual students. The VHS courses are structured in a cohort model where all students are working on the same lessons during the same week. The advantage of this format is that students have lots of opportunities to interact with their global peers. Three local teachers are provided for VHS courses and that provides 150 course enrollments for our students in any of the 200+ courses provided by VHS. The students and their online teachers communicate directly as they work through any of their online courses. The role of the parent is that of a mentor/coach to support student efforts and be a liaison with the online teachers. Parents have their own accounts that provide them with progress information at any time. Full-time students are expected to spend approximately 25 hours per week on their coursework. Those hours can be scheduled in any way that fits their needs. Students have sought full-time eSchool options for a variety of reasons. Traveling athletes, models and temporarily relocated families have continued their Appleton eSchool coursework from such locations as Spain, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Indonesia, Canada and California. Students undergoing cancer treatments, physical, mental and emotional health issues, teen parents and returning dropouts have found online options fit their needs where traditional schools could not. Others seek part-time online courses because of schedule conflicts, special interests, or personal choice in which case, online courses may complement/supplement their brick and mortar schedule. Part-time students may do their coursework entirely from home or have a study hall built into their schedule to work on their online course while on campus.

Using Technology to Manage and Provide Individualized Learning

Connections Academy believes that elementary students do best working with both online and offline materials, organized by a Learning Management System (LMS) that provides tools for scheduling, taking attendance, tracking student progress, managing grades, facilitating communication between the home and school. While some of the newer textbooks used by WCA offer the use of an itext (online textbook), the school continues to provide physical textbooks to the students. In 2006-07, the concept of a “live” online classroom began and LiveLesson™ was introduced. Teachers invite both parents and students to come in during office hours and have synchronous discussions while interacting on a "live" whiteboard. The use of LiveLesson™ will continue to grow as teachers and students will be required attended classes in the 2008-09 school year.

The curriculum provided through Appleton eSchool is primarily web-based which means that students have access to their coursework 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The internet access allows for a very flexible learning environment. Supplemental resources may need to be mailed to the students or provided electronically depending on the course requirements. Many courses utilize interactive tools and media rich content including video clips and carefully pre-selected websites that support the learning objectives. To ensure accountability for content mastery, teachers have a virtual office on Elluminate (web conference tool) that can be used for individual tutoring, oral assessments and project presentations. Some teachers schedule regular office hours each week, others schedule by individual appointment.

Challenges and Opportunities

There were many bumps and curves on WCA’S path during the first year. The most prevalent was how great the real need was for a virtual school. WCA was fulfilling needs of students whose needs were not being met in the traditional setting. With that came the reality and understanding that much more needed be done to improve the program to meet the needs of this population. For example, Connections Academy
and the WCA have worked together to continually improve the curriculum and add new elements for our elementary population.

One of the challenges of providing online courses for high school students is verifying that the student has mastered the content. Appleton eSchool works to ensure that lessons submitted are authentic work of the individual student. Therefore the use of autograded quizzes is limited and mastery is demonstrated through various types of projects, oral assessments and proctored final exams. Teachers work with students to develop Pace Charts which identify the Due Dates for all assignments based on the individual completion goals for that student for that course. These benchmarks help guide the student progress and are provided to the parent as well as the student. Teachers provide formal progress reports at least monthly. Using their Guardian Account access and the student Pace Charts, parents can find out exactly how things are going with their student’s online course(s) at any time.

As public schools, meeting the needs of state mandated testing, maintaining immunization records, guidance and career counseling, assessing and providing for special education needs can mean working with local districts to contract for services, travels to various locations throughout the state and any other means needed to meet those individual needs.

Lawsuits and Wisconsin’s Virtual School Legislation

WCA did not begin without its legal issues. In July of 2002, Roger Palek, Margaret Kading, Stan Johnson, and the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC) filed charges against AASD, AASD Board of Education, and WCA for violating the open enrollment and charter school laws. They argued that the school allowed for unlawful expenditure of taxpayers’ money to plan, implement, and fund a school not authorized by the statutes. On May 14, 2003, Honorable Steward Schwartz ruled in favor of the defendants. The case was never formally heard. Honorable Schwartz dismissed the case based on its merits. The plaintiffs filed an appeal. The Appeals Court did not give a judgment, but instead forwarded the case to the Wisconsin Supreme Court. While the case was on the court’s docket, the plaintiffs asked to remove its appeal and the Wisconsin Supreme Court dismissed the case.

In January 2004, WEAC filed suit against Northern Ozaukee School District’s Wisconsin Virtual Academy (WIVA). The school district won in the district courts, but WEAC filed an appeal. At first, the Appeals Court did not provide a judgment, but forwarded the case to the Wisconsin Supreme Court. The Wisconsin Supreme Court returned the case to the Appeals Court for judgment. A decision was issued on Wednesday, December 5, 2007, that reversed the previous ruling and indicated that WIVA did violate state law on several points that included the location of the students and the teachers, as well as the role of the parent. WIVA filed an appeal to the Wisconsin Supreme Court, but legislators created a bi-partisan compromise that legalized virtual schools in the State of Wisconsin. On Monday, April 7, 2008, Governor Doyle signed the Senate’s Virtual Education Bill (SB396) into law. SB396 is now Act 222. It was published by the Secretary of State on April 21 and thus became effective law on April 22 (except for those provisions with a different specified effective date.) This means that WCA will continue to be a viable educational option to its families in the future.

Looking to the Future

It is hard to imagine what WCA will look like in five year since technology is constantly changes. As the technology continues to advance, schools will explore different options, resulting in increased communication between teachers and families. The school will also be able to offer families more choices when educating their children.
Online course developers carefully monitor the “typical” home computer capabilities to ensure viable access to course content. As the speed and bandwidth of Internet Service Providers and home computers continues to expand, more interactive technology continues to be incorporated into the online courses. Algebra courses are currently in development that would use a full gaming format. Individual lessons are being designed so they could be downloaded to handheld devices for portable learning options. Various community wireless Internet projects are expected to enhance capabilities, as are satellite options for those living in remote areas.

References

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About the Presenters

Connie Radtke was directly involved in the research, development and implementation of Appleton eSchool, an online charter high school opened in 2002. Holding an MSE from UW-Oshkosh, she has 30+ years of teaching experience preschool through graduate level. Over the past 10 years, Connie has worked extensively with online learning. She has been involved in research related to K12 Online learning, provided extensive professional development opportunities and developed several online courses. This past year she facilitated the formation of the Wisconsin eSchool Network, which currently includes eight school districts that share resources and experiences to provide high quality online learning opportunities for their students.

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