

NEW JERSEY SCHOOL DISTRICT OVERCOMES CURRICULUM CUTS BY PARTNERING WITH THE VIRTUAL HIGH SCHOOL

SITUATION

Like many blue collar communities across the United States, Audubon, New Jersey has had its share of struggles in recent years. Hit hard by the economic downturn, the state's economy had devastating effects on its local school districts. In 2009, the Audubon Public School District was forced to reduce academic programming because of dramatically declining state aid and enrollment.

"We had to get rid of many of our non-required programs, several administrative positions and many high school electives," said Don Borden, Superintendent of Audubon Public School District. "We were doing the best we could to

cobble together AP® courses and provide kids with what they needed, but we were still falling short."

Despite its challenges, this middle income area with its 600 high school students was determined to ensure a more positive future for its young people. No one in the community was more motivated to see its young people succeed than Audubon High School's Assistant Principal, Bonnie Smeltzer. "It wasn't acceptable for us to look a parent or student in the face and say we weren't able to provide what they needed to get into college. Our first thought was that online learning could help us bridge the gap so we began investigating our options."

SOLUTION

Under Smeltzer's direction, the school's instructional counsel began researching what online learning programs were available for their needs and budget. The task force looked at several providers, but was unimpressed by the curriculum, course selection and membership options of all but one, The Virtual High School. VHS had been on Smeltzer's radar for a while, as a neighboring school, Collingswood High School, was a longtime member of VHS.

"We were able to get Collingswood to give us a few VHS seats so that our students could pilot the program under the supervision of our guidance department," said Smeltzer. "All of the students were impressed by how easy the platform was to use and how responsive their teachers were. One student, in particular, kept remarking how her teacher was really on her case about doing her work, which we were impressed with."

Following the pilot program in the spring of 2012, the School decided to move forward with a VHS limited seat membership, gaining access to 30 annual student seats and nearly 400 courses per semester. "We really liked that we could start with minimal risk, see what our student demand was for the program and fine tune it as time went on. That proved to be a very successful strategy."

In addition to the student seats, Audubon High also benefited from professional development training for a designated staff member to become a VHS site coordinator for the school. The site coordinator, whose role is vital to the success of the VHS program, managed all technical and administrative aspects of VHS related to the school, served as the primary contact between their students, their school, and VHS faculty and staff.



"We ended up having more than 30 kids that wanted to take classes, including a few students we didn't think would be interested...we were really excited to see them enrolled in courses like Pre-Veterinary Medicine, Introduction to Business, The Holocaust, Creative Writing and Video Game Design Using Game Maker"

Bonnie Smeltzer, Assistant Principal
- Discussing her reaction to the initial student interest in their VHS program



- ▶ Pilot through neighboring school
- ▶ Trained multiple site coordinators
- ▶ Dedicated period for VHS courses
- ▶ Has steadily increased partnership

continued

To make it easier and more effective to manage, Audubon decided to train three of their guidance counselors as coordinators with each one managing five students per semester.

Once the coordinators were trained, the school proceeded with promoting the program to their faculty, staff and students to enroll students for the 2012/2013 school year. The guidance counselors took charge of talking up the program as part of their discussions with students about their courses for the following year, and sent information home to parents. Administrators also encouraged teachers to talk about the program with students. The

school even added VHS courses to their curriculum guide and their web site.

Today, with the exception of a few students who take their course at home in the evening because they can't fit it in during their normal school day, most take their courses during the school's 45-minute third period with an additional trained site coordinator proctoring the room. If a student has a technical problem her job is to call the technology department and get someone to fix it right away. All students complete additional coursework at night along with the rest of their homework.



RESULTS

"In our first year, the program has been so successful and the demand so great that we have already signed up to become a full-fledged teaching member for the 2013/2014 school year," said Smeltzer.

Upon successful completion of the VHS graduate-level professional development program in the spring, Audubon High School's teacher will begin facilitating VHS AP® Environmental Science course. In exchange for the school providing the teacher, their number of seats will increase to 50 per year.

"We wanted more student seats and VHS needed an AP Environmental Science teacher," said Smeltzer. "We had a teacher who was well qualified for the job, and was interested in teaching online so it was the perfect fit."

Although the program has gone off without a hitch, Audubon High has learned a lot and intends to make a few minor adjustments

to their administration of the program.

Anticipating a waiting list, the school intends to have parents and students sign a contract that would require them to pay for their seat if they drop the course after the drop period. "We don't want a student to suffer because another one drops the ball," said Smeltzer. "We feel this will help kids stay motivated and do what's required of them."

To grow their overall enrollment and increase their budget, Audubon has recently become a New Jersey Public School Choice approved district and is on track to grow by about 40 students per year.

"Partnering with VHS is not only a service for our students, but it helps us to remain competitive. Having this program in a time when students can choose where they want to go makes us more appealing over other schools," said Borden.

"I want to be a pediatric nurse and was interested in taking VHS' Human Body course. The thing I liked most was the group projects...I was surprised at how much my group communicated, more so than in my in-person anatomy class at school. I've already been able to use things that I learned in the class to help with my in-person classes."

Suzie Schmidt, Senior
VHS Human Body Student

about the organization

Founded in 1996, The Virtual High School is the pioneer of K-12 online learning. This nonprofit organization has been setting the standard for quality online education - meeting the unique educational needs of schools and districts through custom course development, private course offerings, and support for blended learning initiatives.

