

Holly High School



Custom online courses help to define student success at small Michigan high school

Exceptions can often become the rule, and there is no place where this is truer than at Holly High School in Holly, Michigan, home to 1,200 students. In 2007, when an exceptional student decided she wanted to take an Advanced Placement® (AP®) course the high school didn't offer, it put into motion a program that soon had other students clamoring for access to more than just the five classroom AP® subjects offered by the school. Little did teachers or administrators know that it would spawn an educational revolution at Holly High that now has them earning high marks, including a silver medal award by U.S. News & World Report for "Best High School" and one of only 367 school districts nationwide to be recognized in the College Board's prestigious AP® Honor Roll.

Holly Area Schools is unique in that it spans hundreds of rural miles, making hour-long commutes to school down dirt roads, through farm land and postage stamp communities a common occurrence. With one-third of its population considered economically disadvantaged, a healthy number of sole proprietors (both white and blue collar), rising gas prices, and residents chasing jobs outside of the area, the district needed to compete with neighboring districts for students. One way that Holly has been able to survive and thrive is by offering students the courses they need and want online, as ushered in by one enthusiastic student, an entrepreneurial teacher, and a school philosophy that caters to student interests.

During the fall, 2008 semester, Charlie Gragg, an AP® teacher at Holly High and the school's resident AP® guru, found himself with an unusual project—researching online learning providers who could provide an



AP® European History course for one of his high achieving students. Soon thereafter, his other AP® students started coming forward in droves, and he began working with a number of these providers to offer more AP® courses to his students.

During the Recession of 2008-2012, Holly Area Schools, like many across the nation, explored ways to stretch the educational dollar in the face of budget reductions. They began to see supplemental online courses as a significant way to attract new students, to retain existing students, and to provide a Web 2.0 professional development path for interested teachers. Holly held on financially throughout the recession, while growing both the AP® face-to-face and the AP® online learning program. During this time, Holly students completed AP® exams in 23 different subjects (out of a possible 30 courses), despite offering only seven of these in a conventional, face-to-face classroom setting, and the number of AP® tests administered to students grew from 70 to nearly 300. By the end of the 2010/2011 school year, 36% of their graduating seniors had taken at least one AP® exam, far eclipsing the 25% Michigan state-wide average.

It wasn't until 2011 when Gragg happened upon The Virtual High School (VHS), the non-profit pioneer of K-12 online learning, that he knew he had struck gold. "One of my students was interested in taking AP® Music Theory, which led me to VHS because they were one of the only online learning providers that offered it." Soon thereafter, Gragg enrolled a number of his students in VHS AP® courses and was so impressed by the quality that he signed up for a VHS membership for the 2011/2012 school year so a broader range of AP® and elective

courses could be offered to their students. "My students were fairly unanimous in identifying the independent learning style and the students-from-around-the-world class sections as the two key benefits of the VHS program."

"The overall implementation was seamless because it was very much in line with what we were already doing. The primary area we had to really work on was scheduling because we run on a trimester schedule and VHS runs on a traditional semester schedule. By communicating appropriately and making students aware of what was expected of them, we were able to easily overcome that challenge."

Charlie Gragg

VHS AP® Teacher & Site Coordinator, Holly High School

The online learning program at Holly took another interesting turn when Gragg found out that, using VHS curriculum, Holly teachers could offer customized online classes or blended learning opportunities just for their students. Holly made modifications to suit local needs, and then provided enrollment to just their student population. Holly teachers, passionate about certain subject areas, are now able to offer VHS to students on their own time. The interested groups of students are able to do so through a VHS customized offering.

In December, 2011, Holly first piloted a customized offering of the VHS Young Adult Literature course, with three English teachers and 11 students. They first edited the course to bring it up to a grade 11/12 level, and each teacher was assigned a group of 3 or 4 students. "All the teachers told me the experience resulted in the unexpected benefit of making them better classroom teachers and students identified improved communication skills as their biggest gain. In fact, one of these pilot students, on a return visit from her first semester in college, told me the online class taught her the critical communication skills she uses in her face-to-face college classes," said Gragg.

Since then, the school has developed an individualized learning path and individualized teaching path approach to online education. Students are tested for subject-area and online comprehension and skills, and then encouraged to pursue online opportunities in selected subject areas. Similarly, teachers immerse themselves in VHS professional development classes to learn about online teaching, and then participate in a collaborative team to modify the customized offering curriculum. Students participating in these customized offerings are scheduled in the online media center, where groups of 10-12 are paired with the Holly online teacher. "This helps us focus curriculum on particular student needs, match teacher subject matter expertise with online teaching skills, lower overall class sizes, and maintain budget discipline. Everybody gains in this scenario-student, teacher, parent, and taxpayer."

Holly is entering its 5th year as a VHS member. The school has enrolled over 300 student seats in the 2015/2016 school year. During the current school year, Holly students are taking over 50 different VHS subjects. In addition, about 20% of the staff will be instructing online this year.

Due in large part to their expanded college prep and elective face-to-face and online courses over the last few years, the focus of conversations with students have shifted more predominantly to college and career readiness. Said Gragg, "I really believe that Holly High's success is due in large part to our longstanding philosophy of designing our master teacher schedule around student interests and needs. The VHS online springboard catapulted our students in directions neither we nor they imagined possible. One of our first and most prolific VHS students, for example, believes her VHS experience was pivotal in earning a full academic scholarship to a top Michigan university, and further, that her enrollment in the VHS Holocaust course nurtured a passion, which may lead to an eventual dissertation around socialization in the concentration camps. Another student, the daughter of a state police officer, had aspirations of serving in military intelligence. She enrolled in Criminology, and was recently accepted into the ROTC program. And one of our aspiring writers immersed himself in four writing courses his senior year (Poetry Writing, Screenwriting Fundamentals, Horror Writers, and Creative Writing). VHS is like a mini-college for many of our juniors and seniors."

Gragg feels the VHS program has also enabled the school to use their resources better by dynamically mixing online and face-to-face classes into the master schedule, following the ebb and flow of student interests. "For example, as our AP® offerings have ballooned, interest in one of those original five AP® classes from 2007, AP® English Literature, has declined. We've been able to put the handful of interested AP® English Literature kids into the VHS online equivalent, while we focus our classroom resources in other areas of higher student demand, such as the new AP® Biology and AP® Government classes we are kicking off this year. Conversely, the burgeoning interest in the VHS Psychology of Crime elective is leading us to consider a customized offering of that course."

"I tell schools, look at your own environment first - students, teachers, and administrators - and see what will work for you. There are many different online paths available. Each school has different needs and philosophies so it's about finding something that will work for your specific school culture."

Charlie Gragg

The Virtual High School (VHS, Inc.), a non-profit leader in blended and online learning, offers a variety of programs and curriculum to meet the needs of schools, students, and families. To learn more visit www.VHSLearning.org.