



# Archbishop Williams High School

Catholic high school leverages online learning to expand course offerings, accommodate high-fliers, and get students ready for future success

Being able to offer an array of elective courses, training students to be independent learners, and allowing them to pursue in-depth specific topics of interest are all important goals for Archbishop Williams High School (AWHS) in Braintree, MA. Serving about 620 students in grades 7-12, the private school offers The Virtual High School's online learning platform to 10th, 11th, and 12th graders who want to experience Advanced Placement (AP®) and other college-level courses.

"The more we can do to expose students to technology and advanced education in high school, the better," says Mike Volonnino, Ph.D., principal. And while some educators may be under the assumption that today's digital natives will somehow absorb tech skills "naturally," Volonnino says getting students to use technology productively in the classroom requires a concentrated effort.

"Youngsters are good at using iPads (AWHS is a 1:1 iPad school) and tapping buttons, and they have excellent hand-eye coordination when it comes to gaming or using social media," Volonnino explains. "But using technology with a certain level of seriousness—and maintaining focus and attention without distraction—requires a completely separate skill set."

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*Mike Volonnino, Ph.D.  
Principal, Archbishop Williams High School*

## 18 Years of Online Learning Success

In place since 2000, the AWHS partnership with VHS has expanded over the last 18 years to include a wide array of elective, AP®, and other advanced classes. "We hope that offering this program makes us more competitive with other schools in our area," says Joanna Sands, AWHS' librarian. "The most important criteria for our continued usage of VHS is course selection, quality of instruction, cost, and of course enrollment."

All students who participate in the VHS program graduate on time and go on to attend a college or university. Volonnino says the online platform allows AWHS to cultivate a population of self-directed learners who have the discipline it takes to complete the coursework with very little handholding.

"They set their own paces, take responsibility for their own learning, and then carry those skills right out into their life after high school," says Volonnino. "With VHS, we're getting them trained in an environment where the stakes aren't as high as they would be out in the workforce or in college."

At AWHS, 10th and 11th graders who participate in the virtual schooling are given dedicated time to do so, and



use their devices and/or their own laptops in the library during those periods. And if a student has a particularly difficult exam coming up, he can adjust his online work schedule and get in some extra studying instead.

“Our high-fliers, in particular, like having the flexibility to be able to pace themselves like that,” Volonnino says, “and our VHS monitor makes sure they’re staying on task and meeting their deadlines.”

### **Providing a Wider and Deeper Educational Core**

Without the staff needed to cover an expanded catalog of course offerings, AWHs relies on VHS to fill in those gaps and offer AP® Computer Science, AP® Calculus BC, computer programming, and other advanced courses—something it wouldn’t be able to do in-house. “We just don’t have the capacity,” says Volonnino, “and the online learning platform lets us provide a wider and deeper core offering for students.”

The VHS platform also gives AWHs’ teachers scheduling flexibility that wouldn’t be feasible for a small, private high school. For example, the student who wants to take a third-level Spanish class can do so online, and at her own pace. “VHS lets us fill those gaps in a realistic, supportive learning environment online,” says Volonnino, whose team of educators enjoys being able to offer non-traditional coursework to students.

Last year, for example, a student who was struggling with physics—and who had a deep interest in art—was able to drop the former course and pick up a semester of art history instead. “Our students like having that power,” Volonnino says, “especially as their senior-level workloads begin to pile up.”

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### **Enhanced Academic Programs**

To other schools considering an online learning platform, Volonnino says it’s a great way for institutions of all sizes to expand their course catalogues and get students hands-on with the technology they’ll be using in college and in the workforce.

“Unless your educational model explicitly removes the technology piece, you really need to get onboard with online learning,” says Volonnino. “It will completely enhance your total academic program.”

Sands adds that the AWHs-VHS partnership has exceeded the school’s expectations because of “good support from our guidance department, academic dean, the VHS staff, and—more importantly—the quality of the online instructors.”