

MSOC LEA Profile
Part III: Full Narrative -- Baltimore County Public Schools:
Rapid Growth Puts Online Learning in the Forefront

Participation in the Maryland Students Online Consortium (MSOC) has provided Baltimore County Public Schools (BCPS) with an opportunity to explore the options for online student learning for high school students.

Prior to the implementation of the MSOC grant, BCPS began the process of exploring online learning through the creation of an Online Learning Committee. The committee met with Liz Glowa from the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) who was in the process of planning the Maryland Virtual Learning Opportunities Program (MVLO).

Also, during the 2002-2003 school year, MSDE announced the Request for Proposals for Partnership grants under the federal Enhancing Education Through Technology funding program. BCPS took the lead in developing a grant proposal for online learning for high school students. The proposal was selected for implementation and the MSOC was started in the summer of 2003.

After the grant was awarded, the first activity in BCPS was to reconvene the Online Learning Committee and charge them with developing and seeking approval for a set of comprehensive guidelines that would outline the procedures for using online courses for students in BCPS high schools.

A concerted effort was made to involve all stakeholders in the development process. Curriculum offices, as well as representative from guidance, special education, the Department of Technology, library media, alternative education, gifted education, and school based personnel participated on the committee. The BCPS *Guidelines and Procedures for Online Student Courses* were approved by the Area Directors and the Superintendent's staff and implemented as a working document in January 2004. Since January 2004 online courses for high school students in BCPS has been on a steady rise, with increased enrollments as needs warrant.

The BCPS guidelines explicitly state that online courses are to be used to meet the following needs:

- expand the range of courses and opportunities offered to students;
- allow students to take a course when there are too few students who need a certain course to be able to assign a teacher to teach that course;
- provide courses for students who have schedules that prevent them from taking a course when it is offered; and
- provide equity for students who cannot access courses in their regular schedule.

During the 2003-2004 school year, (Year Two of the MSOC grant) several key events helped to propel online learning for students forward. First, meetings were held with each of the coordinators of the curriculum areas. These meetings helped to provide background, address concerns, and ensure that approval of content area departments heads would be necessary prior to offering any course online that dealt with their particular content area. Next, two meetings were held with high school principals and then with the high school guidance department chairs. An additional added benefit from these meetings and various individual meetings with school

administrators was the ability to build a knowledge base of people who came to understand what is meant by “online learning” or “e-Learning” and the dispelling of myths, e.g., differentiating online student courses from the *Verizon Distance Learning Labs* which had been available in some high schools.

At all of the various meetings, the Office of Instructional Technology had the opportunity to explain the *Guidelines and Procedures for Online Student Courses*, provided copies of the request forms, and shared a step-by-step checklist for schools to use if there were online courses that might be needed for student use.

A primary benefit of participating in the MSOC has been the opportunity to provide more course options to meet the needs of high school students. In many cases, BCPS can now offer an online learning option that otherwise could not have been offered because of issues such as not having a highly qualified teacher or not having an adequate number of students enrolled to offer a face-to-face class. Additional benefits from MSOC participation include the opportunity for teachers and administrators to participate in professional development opportunities that relate to e-Learning. This has resulted in an increased number of trained and knowledgeable educators who can provide online learning assistance in various forms. This is especially true in meeting the professional development needs of mentors who are a required online role in the BCPS guidelines.

BCPS has realized a number of key findings or lessons learned. They include:

- Mentors need to have content expertise in order to provide useful feedback.
- The mentor is an essential element in the process. Thus, it is important to attempt to build mentoring time into faculty’s schedule if possible.
- “Human interaction” is essential for providing needed support and nurturing. The teacher is not necessarily replaced in an online course.
- Upfront orientation to all stakeholders which specifies who is responsible to whom and what is critical. This is essential for making sure that everyone, including parents, understand the guidelines and procedures, etc.
- Student drop out of online courses and this costs the system money.
- There are numerous technical issues that must be checked and resolved prior to using an online course. Technical difficulties are inevitable, but should be limited as much as possible.

Thanks to the collaboration with fifteen other school systems in the Maryland Students Online Consortium, BCPS personnel talk on a consistent basis with others throughout the state who are also forging new ground in online learning with students. The shared lessons learned from other school systems help BCPS become more informed and make better decisions. In turn, the lessons BCPS has learned can inform other school systems thus improving online courses for students throughout the state of Maryland.

The Baltimore County Public School System is continuously improving services as a result of participating in the MSOC. BCPS has learned the importance of providing advanced professional development to school based mentors, continuous and timely support to mentors and site-coordinators, providing an orientation to students interested in an online course, and offering the opportunity for parents to participate in an orientation prior to deciding to enroll their student. As the school system continues to expand its support for online learning, we believe that we have a strong basis for having a very successful program for our high school students.

In conclusion, a recent newspaper article included a quote from one BCPS student who shared her experience.

"You have to be self-disciplined in order to sit down every day and say, this is what I'm going to do," said a BCPS student who is taking Advanced Placement (AP) Art History online. "It can be a little frustrating at first, just the whole process and not really having someone who knows the course to guide you...but once you get through that and the orientation, it's pretty much like a normal class." This student also likes being able to learn at her own pace: "If you're having a really off day, a bad day, you don't have to worry...the next night I'm feeling better, I can go home and have the teacher on the computer. And that way I'm not behind. If you miss a day of school, you can catch up easily."

(http://www.journalism.umd.edu/cns/wire/2004-editions/11-November-editions/041124-Wednesday/LearningOnline_CNS-UMCP.html)