

MSOC LEA Member Profile
Part III: Full Narrative -- Anne Arundel County Public Schools:
Hard-Earned Success; Questions about Long-Term Sustainability

Anne Arundel County Public Schools has been involved with online learning since before the MSOC was formed in 2002. According to Instructional Technology Specialist Sally Regnier, “we have been pushing online student courses for years,” during which time “it has been a struggle to try to convince the higher ups that this is important” because there is no sufficient testing data available to support the implementation of online learning. However, after three years of “pushing uphill”, she sees that way of thinking changing as more people now understand that online learning “really can be used to support student achievement.” In particular, AACPS’s pilot program at South River H.S. is providing proof that online learning can be successful. AACPS had seven students enrolled in an MVLO-approved online AP macroeconomics course during the first semester (10 registered and three dropped out before the start date) and only one dropped out, with the remaining six earning either an A or B. Currently there are five students enrolled in the second offering of AP macroeconomics. Overall student feedback from MSOC mid- and end-of-course surveys has also been positive to date, revealing that students have been satisfied and willing to take more courses even though they are considered more difficult than face-to-face courses.

AACPS has also offered an English 12 course for two students, one of whom moved and the other who went to Uganda with her family for several months. Both students requested to continue with their course work online, the first in order to graduate. According to Regnier, “both instances proved the efficacy for having online student courses.” However, the principal at the pilot school where the course was offered said English 12 online would no longer be provided because, in some cases, it can be the last and only course a student needs to graduate, resulting in senior students not having to physically attend school.

AACPS also reviewed a Career Skills course that was offered in the summer of 2004. “It did fine,” said Regnier. This course was a regular Education course that was put online. About 15 students (mostly 11th graders) finished the course, and 20 students were expected to enroll in a second offering. However, “that did not happen. The enrollment turned out to be much less than 20.” She added that she was not really sure why the course never started except to say that “it goes through business ed and they have different priorities.” Nonetheless, “the students liked it, even though most of them thought that it was more difficult than meeting face-to-face.”

Regnier explained that “it has been very helpful to be a member of the consortium. We would not have gone anywhere without them. We learn a lot when we go to these meetings; they are run well and organized. It has really been a very effective collaborative process.” This has helped AACPS in dealing with some of the obstacles it has encountered along the way. For instance, although a 2004 survey of curriculum coordinators and instructional directors concluded that SAT Prep and Algebra I would be high priority courses, neither have happened at AACPS. These were “not a high priority for the superintendent,” said Regnier. After content coordinators reviewed the SAT Prep course, and several teachers took the course and evaluated it, the end result was that “the teachers didn’t like it. They did not think it was well done; they found errors in it, so no one was interested.”

AACPS is also interested in the Algebra I course being developed through MSOC, but AACPS staff who went to the training session did not like the course, an opinion shared by the other “big systems” that were there. Regnier believes that the Algebra I Baltimore County pilot will result in an improved course, but AACPS sees a longer-term issue: sustainability. “Perhaps we will have some students in it this summer, but I’m not sure. Part of the problem, when I talk to people in our county is they say ‘what about the funding’? Because this is all grant funded, they are kind of reluctant to do something only to have it end in six months.”

Regarding lessons learned, Regnier explained that “there has to be a process. There has to be buy-in from above, but it’s hard because they are looking in the other direction.” While AACPS has developed guidelines and procedures, there have been some schools taking a different route. For example, an assistant superintendent purchased text-based distance courses from class.com for implementation with its alternative education students - something that Regnier considers ineffective when compared to technology oriented options.

Professional development activities since May 2004 were characterized as both successful and unsuccessful. About 20 people per year take an online “infusion” course where teachers are taught how to use Blackboard. “We brought in AP teachers and taught them how to use Blackboard to support what they were doing in their face-to-face classes, and that was very successful. Spreading that to regular education teachers has been less successful.” Regnier said she convinced three home health teachers to take the infusion course because she felt that adding online course elements could be ideal for these home-based students who typically “don’t get much education.” The home health teachers could learn by collaborating with the other teachers, who typically taught advanced students, who were also taking the infusion course. However, the three home health teachers “never did anything with it following the course, and the coordinator of the home health people was not real interested.”

Regnier explained that she believes this general lack of interest in professional development activities “has to do with workload issues, but the main thing is these people don’t use technology except for e-mail, so they don’t quite understand what it can do. They really don’t know what it means to be in an online community, and it is a lot of work for them to be active in such a community.” She added that often she will see teachers in the infusion course who say that they like the course but don’t have the time to devote to implementing technology in their classrooms. “If the home health coordinator had used the online community to communicate with her home health teachers, then they would have already participated in one. But for them to go from not having participated in an online community to running one was too big of a jump.” To help alleviate such problems in the future, AACPS - through “a lot of pushing and shoving” - now has all content coordinators participating with teachers in Blackboard communities as part of their professional development.

She said that the future of online learning at AACPS depends on funding, explaining that “our county has other priorities, and if I can’t purchase student seats with grant funding, I’m not sure it would go anywhere. We have some high schools with students who are very competitive, and I think they would jump at the chance to take online courses, and they probably have parents who would be happy to pay for them.” However, the district follows a block scheduling, with a four-period day, which limits the number of courses students can take within a typical schedule. “If

they could take something online, they could have an extra class. It's a possibility, but the school system [also] has other priorities."