

MSOC LEA Member Profile Part III: Full Narrative

Charles County Public Schools: Focusing on Students' AP Course Needs = Online Learning "Comfort Zone"

The Charles County Public School system is "very comfortable with what we're doing" with online courses, according to Wanda Sellers of CCPS' Instructional Technology Department. Charles County decided a few years ago to target Advanced Placement courses for online course offerings. Students are offered online AP courses if there is a scheduling conflict or if their school does not offer that particular course in a classroom setting. Charles County has offered AP Computer Science for the past two years, as well as a variety of AP courses available through Apex.

As a result of this targeted approach, Charles County is meeting the needs of its AP students while experiencing relatively minor obstacles. The most challenging issues encountered involved coordinating grading policies and assignment deadlines for vendor-supplied online courses. Differences in Florida Virtual School's grading and late work policies in its AP Computer Science required extensive coordination between the two systems. From this experience, Charles County has learned to discuss a variety of implementation issues before using new vendors. Charles County also encourages counseling of students and parents concerning the demands of online courses and time management requirements of students. Another minor problem Charles County has experienced is that their AP Psychology classroom offering is a yearlong course, while Apex's online version of the course is compressed into a single semester. This creates a scheduling issue of finding a suitable course for the student to take during the other semester. This is less of a problem now that AP Psychology is offered as a classroom course in all of Charles County's high schools, so demand for the online version of the course has decreased.

Charles County's participation in MSOC and MVLO has made the process of reviewing and offering online courses easier for their system. MSDE's purchase of AP Computer Science for the current (2004-05) school year, and in particular having an in-state teacher for the course, has addressed most of the issues Charles County had with the Florida Virtual School version of the course which they used last year. Having the course available 'in-state' made it possible to iron out issues beforehand. The assistance of Liz Glowa, MSDE's coordinator of MVLO courses, has been extremely valuable to Sellers with the implementation of AP Computer Science. In addition, MSOC has enabled Charles County to pay for their online classes with grant funds, allowing them to use their local funds for other needs.

Informal student feedback has been generally positive. Most students have seemed pleased with their online classes, although a few students had concerns about meeting deadlines for assignments. Students found the demands of AP Computer Science to be more challenging than they expected despite being told beforehand. Charles County made available a classroom teacher for in-person, after-school tutoring sessions once a week for students who needed additional assistance. Unfortunately, most students did not take advantage of this offer. Feedback from participants in project-related professional development activities has also been largely positive. The biggest issue cited by participants has been the lack of time to apply training after receiving it.

Charles County is not looking to expand its online learning offerings at present. While they still see classroom courses as "the best way to go" if available, they have found considerable value in targeting AP course offerings for students with scheduling or accessibility issues. In the process, Charles County has found a "comfort zone" with its current online learning program.