

MSOC LEA Member Profile Part III: Full Narrative

Frederick County Public Schools: Online Learning Evolves Slowly but Surely

Participating in the MSOC project has enhanced the evolutionary process thru which Frederick County Public Schools is implementing online learning. FCPS is different from most other MSOC members in that it has been involved in online learning since 1998, well before the MSOC grant started in 2002. FCPS has been working on getting its leadership on board with online learning throughout that period, according to Buddy Phillips, Teacher Specialist for Technology Media Services & Instructional Technology.

Because of its prior experience and preferences expressed by administrators, FCPS's pathway to implementing online learning has also been different from most other MSOC members. According to Phillips, principals and building-level administrators in the county want online material for students who are disruptive in class or who need remediation, for example online modules that students can take for remediation of biology and other HSA courses. As a result, FCPS has focused its implementation of online learning on its evening school and alternative education programs. Phillips notes that FCPS's evening school is "all about flexibility and staffing," including open-entry/open-exit courses and flexible payment structures which enable evening school instructors to serve as coordinators, mentors, or other roles as needed.

Using this structure for evening school has been working for ten years, thus FCPS did not feel the need to create another infrastructure to offer online courses. FCPS believes that "using our grant money to buy courses or seats in online courses is not sustainable," notes Phillips. There is no funding mechanism in place to buy courses; in fact, FCPS fiscal policies which required that course purchases come directly out of textbook fund allocations stopped any impetus to buy online course seats, according to Phillips. Instead, FCPS is "using our grant money as seed money to train teachers, buy course content outright, and develop courses over time."

Consequently, the main reason that students taking online courses in Frederick County is that the available online course curriculum is much better than that available in the evening high curriculum, although using online courses to resolve schedule conflicts is also sometimes a factor. Phillips notes that the Advanced Placement Prep curriculum in particular is much better than what's available in classroom courses. Among the benefits the curriculum provides are "wonderful resources and activities," the "ability to do online assessment," enabling students to work evenings and weekends, and also enabling FCPS to individualize the amount of required "face time" for students depending on the level of personal responsibility they demonstrate.

The biggest benefit from Frederick County's participation in MSOC is being able to fund resource material and support for building capacity in within the system. The grant has funded auxiliary resources to build capacity and facilitate course development, as well as opportunities to attend conferences and workshops to broaden understanding of online learning; Unlike most MSOC project members, FCPS has already committed both organizationally and financially to online learning; as Phillips notes, "if [the MSDE] grants went away tomorrow, we'd still have money for online courses." Nonetheless, Phillips appreciates the benefits of "having people that I know I can call in the consortium" thanks to FCPS's MSOC participation. Phillips also sees value in the leadership which the state has provided through the project: "Liz [Glowa] is providing lots of leadership in the whole area of online learning and provides us with lots of resources; there are certain aspects of her leadership and presence on things we didn't even think that we needed to know. Knowing that there's someone who knows it is helpful."

Frederick County has elected to use a very slow, evolutionary process for implementing online learning building from web-enhanced classroom courses to using online curriculum to supplement classroom

courses to offering blended/online courses in its Evening High program. Although Phillips might have preferred a more rapid and comprehensive online learning implementation approach, he recognizes the “need to meet the needs we are presented” and is confident that the current approach will “result in lots more buy-in”. He notes that curriculum specialists still are very cautious about online courses, and so are more comfortable with a “taking one step at a time” approach. Phillips sees the need for more capacity building and infrastructure -- having processes and people who know what to do – as the biggest obstacle to implementing online learning in Frederick County.

The biggest barrier to expanding implementation of online learning in FCPS is availability of quality courses. FCPS conducted an extensive needs survey in the early years of the project and has identified a large number of courses; the administration has stated the intention of offering a “fully array of online courses” eventually. FCPS has decided to go the course development route, in part because of an aversion on the part of curriculum specialists to “canned” vendor-supplied courses. Phillips notes that developing courses poses its own set of challenges: teachers are not curriculum experts, need training in online course development, and “the culture of sharing is foreign to K-12 teachers.” Having to rely on teachers to work on course development projects on top of their regular workload is another potential issue. Nevertheless, FCPS is making progress on course development; Environmental Science and American Studies II are currently under development, while Introduction to Business and Web design are other courses currently slated for development. Although Environmental Science and American Studies II are not scheduled to be ready until September 2006, pieces of these courses are being made available beforehand in keeping with FCPS ‘gradual phase-in’ strategy for online course material.

Frederick County’s approach to professional development vis-à-vis MSOC has been to take a synergistic rather than a “silo” approach. As a participant in several MSDE-funded grants, FCPS has been using funds from various grants to pay for the related part of a teacher’s entire professional development process. For example, FCPS has adopted three requirements for online teachers: 1) take a “How to teach online course”; 2) act as a “second-in-charge” to an experienced co-teacher and mentor in an online course; and 3) be a “highly qualified” teacher as stipulated by No Child Left Behind. FCPS has used MSOC funds to pay for teachers to meet the first requirement.

FCPS has adopted this approach in response to what it feels has been a duplication of effort required by participating in multiple state-funded grant programs. As Phillips noted with some frustration, “grants can be more trouble than it’s worth” and “we’ve spent three times as much on paperwork as we’ve gotten out of it.” Nevertheless, being a mid-sized county is apparently helpful in coping with the situation. FCPS has three persons in the same office who work collaboratively on administering various grant programs and communicate easily with one another, in contrast with some bigger LEAs where different grant liaisons are in different offices and thus don’t communicate with each other as regularly, or in smaller LEAs where one person is in charge of everything and is often thus overwhelmed with trying to keep up with all the demands.

FCPS is confident that its slow, evolutionary approach to online learning implementation is better in the long run and will ultimately result in a wide array of online courses available for students in the county.