

MSOC LEA District Profile Part III: Full Narrative

Montgomery County Public Schools: Cautious Enthusiasm for Online Learning

Montgomery County is moving forward cautiously to make sure that online course curricula are aligned with county curricula and state standards. *Cognitive Tutor* (a vendor-created program) is completely aligned with Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) curriculum and is being piloted for targeted intervention and as a credit recovery model in support of the High School Assessment (HSA) in algebra.

Students are currently taking *SAT Prep* and *Health* courses online in Montgomery County. Students like these online courses for a variety of reasons, including more flexible scheduling and greater opportunities for differentiated instruction than may be found in traditional classroom courses. MCPS offers the *Health* course only in the summer. This is a course that many students prefer to complete during the summer, enabling them to schedule full credit courses during the regular school year. Then, during the regular school year, student can schedule full credit courses which help them with fulfilling college preparation requirements. The *SAT Prep* course is offered both during the school year and during the summer.

In terms of sheer numbers, online learning is slated to take off in Montgomery County this summer when plans are implemented to offer up to 20 sections of the online *Health* course serving 200-400 students. However, despite these planned numbers, the growth in online learning has remained low in Montgomery County. Alignment of online courses with county curriculum and state curriculum will result in greater acceptance of online courses as a rigorous alternative to classroom instruction. Montgomery County plans to evaluate Maryland Virtual Learning Opportunities (MVLO) courses on a case-by-case basis, with a particular interest in Advanced Placement (AP) courses.

The biggest benefit from our participating in Maryland Schools Online Consortium (MSOC) has been sharing ideas on implementing online courses. In particular, being able to talk about models that work for others, sharing experiences across the state, sharing labor for developing courses such as *SAT Prep* development, and sharing professional development opportunities such as teacher training (for example, enabling Harford County teachers to shadow MCPS teachers while they were teaching an online course) are among the benefits we have experienced as a result of participating in this project.

Students provided valuable feedback on the *Health* course; the consensus being that the published expectations for student workload were not accurate in terms of number of assignments, redundancy between some assignments, and time required to complete them. Based on this feedback, MCPS is revising the *Health* course so that the workload is more comparable to that required in a classroom course. The course is also being revised to include curriculum changes in MCPS curriculum.

Montgomery County has several project-related professional development activities this school year. Overall feedback on an instructional design workshop offered in October 2004, was very positive, but only four or five of the 20+ participants had any intention of being involved in *SAT Prep* course development. Others interested in the topic did not follow up by applying what they learned to the redevelopment of the online *SAT Prep* course. Participant responses to training on how to use the online *Health* course to augment in-class instruction was also very positive, and participants gave very good critical feedback on the training. The *MVLO Algebra* course training/review session was also very worthwhile in understanding the content and design of the *MVLO Algebra* course.

The biggest obstacles to implementing online learning in Montgomery County are:

- 1) Money – every district is able to offer these courses only because of grant money; long-term sustainability is the biggest concern since grant funding, which currently finances online course offerings, is not guaranteed. In Montgomery County, the money issue is of special concern

because the MCPS pay scale is high and an MCPS certified teacher is required to teach an online course. As a result, for example, MCPS charges students \$345 to take the *SAT Prep* and *Health* courses; MCPS just barely breaks even at these rates, which would be prohibitively expensive for students in most school systems.

- 2) Course availability – Currently available courses do not necessarily align with MCPS curriculum, as noted previously.
- 3) Course Alignment Review – At this time, there is no process in place that will allow curriculum teams to review courses for alignment. Although the algebra review process seemed to work, a viable process has not yet been applied to the review of other online courses. Additionally, the review of the *MVLO Algebra* course indicated that the course is not aligned with either MCPS or the state voluntary curriculum. The process needs to go beyond just review at the end of development, to include all school systems at the beginning of the process, to ensure that the final course is aligned with curriculum.

Similarly, funding and curriculum alignment are the biggest issues related to expanding online learning in Montgomery County.

We view many of the lessons learned, as a result of participating in this project, as shared lessons. Learning from participating in MSOC has been a shared experience because this is all uncharted territory. In ten years almost all courses are likely to have an online component, but at present online learning is still in its infancy in Maryland. Even those members that are a year or two further down the road still have limited experience. The more upfront sharing we do between districts, and the more streamlined the process of course development and review, the more likely we are to succeed in being able to offer MCPS students high quality online learning opportunities. Additionally, we need to work together from the beginning of the development process. As an example, if the developer had included MCPS and other school systems at the beginning of the Algebra development process regarding course outcomes, they would have had fewer problems with acceptance in MCPS.

We recognize that online learning provides great opportunities for our students, but we want to make sure that courses are aligned and provide effective learning experiences which are equal or better than available in classroom-based learning opportunities. We are confident of finding additional MVLO and other online courses that meet our needs and believe that expanding the use of online courses in Montgomery County is a likely outcome if the financial and curricular issues can be resolved.