

MSOC LEA Member Profile Part III: Full Narrative

Somerset County Public Schools: Big Success on a Small Scale

According to Nancy Smoker, technology and media supervisor, Somerset County Public Schools's goal for the MSOC project is "to provide courses for our students that we cannot provide locally." For example, "we normally have one student taking AP Art History or two students taking AP Statistics." For these types of courses, where SCPS does not have enough students to justify paying for a teacher, SCPS has been going through MVLO.

Although "nothing happened" during SCPS's first year in the project, the push from a new superintendent who came in two years ago was what got SCPS going with the MSOC project. Although the total number of student enrollments has not been large, SCPS has offered a greater variety of online courses than most other MSOC members, and the percentage of students enrolled is fairly significant considering that SCPS has only 800 high school students in the whole county.

SCPS has not yet developed an awareness program for online courses. "It's one of the things that we keep talking about here at the central office - that we need to do more of that both with our teachers and with the students - but we have not done any of that yet. Nonetheless, Smoker said she feels their participation in MSOC has been "very successful because we have been able to get students in courses like AP Art History, which we can't do by ourselves."

The biggest obstacle to the implementation of online learning at SCPS has been "the people who are in charge - myself and the instructional supervisor - are spread so thin that it's not always the priority it should be. That's why the planning has been put off."

The biggest lesson learned thus far is the need for better communication between the guidance & administration throughout the enrollment process. Smoker notes that "we need the cooperation of the people at the school level. We need those guidance counselors out there recruiting students, and we need those principals making sure that the procedures are followed." Also, "a week or two before the deadline is when we are we are out there looking for students as opposed to advertising the courses (ahead of time). It seems that we are always registering students at the last minute."

Smoker said the students who have taken online courses liked them, but they also had time management issues that the mentors helped them to overcome. Also, as the number of students taking online courses increased, new teachers have come on board to learn how to mentor students from those teachers who took the mentor training. However, no teachers have gone through the how to teach online course because "we have not found an interest yet, or created an interest yet, in our teachers to teach online courses," said Smoker, who noted that this is "our biggest issue...For example, one of the courses we are interested in is the SAT Prep course, but the MVLO does not provide teachers for that, and we don't have any teachers locally that are interested in teaching it." She added that their impression of the SAT Prep course is that it's very dependent on the instructor's ability, which is one of the reasons why they have hesitated to get involved with this course.

Another issued was related to budget concerns. “There is always the issue of what happens when the grant ends and there is not any money to pay for students to take these courses. We got a commitment - a verbal commitment from the superintendent - that there will be funds included in the budget at that time.”

While the superintendent supports increasing the availability of online learning, the infrastructure is not conducive to making that happen because of staffing levels. The MSOC project is currently “a very minute part of the master plan,” but it may be moved up, albeit at a slow pace. “This whole project is a really small part of what I do. It would be nice if it were more,” Smoker explained, adding that she has a long list of responsibilities, including implementing any program in the school system that is related to technology, meeting the state technology student standards through purchasing computers, evaluating software, and more.

SCPS thus far has had a relatively large amount of success with online learning. Taking online learning to the next level will require someone to take charge of coming up with a solid plan to make it happen.