

MSOC LEA Member Profile
Part III: Full Narrative -- Washington County Public Schools:
An Early Leader in Using Online Learning for Creative Educational Alternatives

Washington County was one of the first MSOC members to offer online courses during the first year of the project and remains one of the project leaders in terms of the variety of online course offerings. The primary reason that students are taking online courses in Washington County is to resolve scheduling issues with courses that cannot be scheduled in the classroom. Student interest in particular subject areas and using online courses to satisfy graduation requirements (e.g., health, early graduation) are other important reasons. This ability to address scheduling conflicts and meet student needs is the biggest benefit or impact on Washington County's participation in MSOC; they are "extremely grateful" for the project because without it, they wouldn't be able to offer these opportunities to students.

However, online learning has not yet "taken off" in Washington County, in large part due to the lack of a central person to spearhead online courses and to communicate info with other schools. Washington County administrators involved in MSOC regularly field calls from other principals and guidance counselors in the county and are "doing the best we can to get people on board", including meeting with counselors and other key stakeholders. However, "everyone's plate is so loaded" that they don't have time to facilitate the necessary process and make sure everything happens in the absence of a designated contact in the administrative central office to "carry the ball". This is the biggest obstacle to both implementing and expanding online learning in Washington County

The most important lessons Washington County has learned as a result of participating in this project is that even though there are scheduling needs and student requests, not all students can handle online classes. Students themselves say that it is necessary to be self-motivated and an independent thinker, and that online learning is different from what they have experienced before in these respects. It takes time to analyze whether students can or cannot handle it; someone has to take the time and responsibility for doing that. Informal feedback from students suggests that getting responses back from one online course vendor (Apex) is still an issue. Since immediate feedback is critical to supporting student motivation, another issue is monitoring instructors to ensure that they provide adequate interaction and responsiveness to students; one student indicated that in her particular course, the instructor was slow to respond and basically non-responsive. As a result, there have been some students who have dropped courses this year. One student withdrew from a course because the student ran away from home; other students who are seniors have decided that they just don't want to take the course after figuring out that they don't need the course credit.

At present, Washington County does not have an orientation for students in online classes; having a person from the central office handle orientation would help with the success rate. Despite these incidents, the majority of students who have taken online courses in Washington County have completed them successfully; student survey results from SY 2003-04 were positive overall for the Entrepreneurship course in particular. The majority of students surveyed were satisfied with the level of interaction they had with their instructors and with other students; almost all of them felt that their mentors made them feel more comfortable with their online courses; and most students felt that the Entrepreneurship course was as good or better quality than a regular high school class in the same subject area.

Washington County received very positive feedback from the professional development activities conducted in the first two years of the MSOC collaboration. This school year, Washington County is trying to populate the Desire2Learn (D2L) learning management system with courses for teachers to get them prepared for online classes. They currently have Media Specialists and several other teacher groups enrolled online in eLearning communities, but teachers are so overwhelmed with their other duties that it is a difficult process.

Washington County Public School administrators involved in MSOC believe that the ability to offer an alternative means of education to students is critical. The MSOC project has helped Washington County to get access to quality courses, and MSDE is to be commended to maintaining high quality in its courses. There is tremendous potential for online learning in Washington County if the right courses, instructors, and students are involved. WCPS is proceeding down the path of providing online learning with caution, using online courses to provide creative educational alternatives for students as opportunities arise, while searching for ways to enable online learning to reach its potential to serve students in the county.