



Worcester Public Schools

Large urban school district uses VHS to help provide access and equity for low-income population

Walk into the city of Worcester, Massachusetts and you may feel as if you're in the United Nations. The city's successive wave of immigrants over the past 340 years has resulted in residents hailing from every country imaginable—from Albania to Vietnam. The third largest school district in the Bay State and one of the more underprivileged, Worcester Public Schools, is as varied as its surroundings with 80 languages spoken throughout the district. Finding commonality may seem impossible when faced with such a diverse population, but there exists a collective language of achievement.

Despite a firm focus on ensuring that all students achieve high levels as they prepare to become productive citizens, the Worcester Public School District has continually been challenged with providing educational access and equality given the predominately low-income and non-English speaking population. In 2003, the organization identified a lack of Advanced Placement® (AP®) courses at their high schools as a hindrance to student achievement and sought to narrow the gap.

They did this by partnering with The Virtual High School (VHS), the non-profit pioneer of K-12 online learning. A

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*Lisa Dyer, Manager of Staff Development
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collaborative of worldwide schools, VHS offers much of the same diversity as the Worcester Public School District with the potential to have students from different countries participating in each class together with a teacher that is often located in another state or country. For every teacher the district provides that is trained to teach a VHS online course, the school receives 25 student seats per semester.

Initially Worcester participated in the organization's Online AP® Academy grant, which afforded 52 low-income middle and high schools worldwide the opportunity to partake in VHS' wide range of AP® classes in exchange for providing a teacher. The initial grant made it possible to offer the VHS courses at three of their high schools and the success of this program led to an additional grant. Shortly thereafter, Worcester Public Schools was able to allocate and reserve city funds to pay for the VHS offering on a continual basis for all of the district's participating high schools.

Today, Worcester Public Schools participates in VHS with four teachers who each receive a reduced workload for teaching a VHS course, has 100 student seats that are

SCHOOL SUCCESS



The Virtual High School

shared amongst the high schools, and often purchases additional seats as needed to accommodate demand.

"We want every student who desires to take an online course, the opportunity to do so," said Lisa Dyer, Manager of Staff Development. "Even when we don't know if the student will be successful, we need to try. We've even had a number of special education students with learning disabilities on IEP's take classes and I know of one, in particular, who had great results and is planning on taking college online because of it.

Stephanie Stockwell is a math teacher at Worcester Technical High School and began teaching online a year ago in addition to her role as VHS site coordinator for her school. "Our school culture is very much about things like doing well on standardized tests so, in general, our students are on a very clear track and go above and beyond what's expected of them," said Stockwell. "VHS fits in nicely with that, not only for AP®, but also for providing electives since we have a very minimal offering."

Worcester's investment in VHS over the years has paid off. Enrollment in AP® courses in the district has nearly doubled, so much so that the school has begun offering

"I didn't realize that psychology was so much work until I took VHS' Psychology Honors class. I like the fact that it is more like a college class. . . This assignment made me realize there is a lot of work that has to be put into being in any area of Psychology."

*William Sanchez
Junior, Worcester Technical High School*

more face-to-face AP® classes. "By offering VHS AP® classes, we've been able to promote AP® and garner more interest in it overall, which has helped us to identify classes that we could successfully offer in-person," said Dyer.

Of all of Worcester's high schools, South High has been particularly noteworthy in producing the most qualifying AP® scores. The school's AP® enrollment has increased so much that the district has recently added a number of new math and science AP® courses.

"As an urban district I feel that VHS is particularly a good fit for us because of the flexibility it offers," said Dyer. Most of our students have a lot of family, work and other responsibilities that they are juggling. Without VHS, many of these kids wouldn't be able to take an advanced class because they just don't have time in their schedule during the day."

The Virtual High School (VHS, Inc.), a non-profit leader in blended and online learning, offers a variety of programs and curriculum to meet the needs of schools, students, and families. To learn more visit www.VHSLearning.org.

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