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The Texas Virtual School Network

An innovative model gives districts access to—and funding for—online courses to meet the challenge of rigorous state graduation requirements.

By Barbara Smith

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For several years, the Texas Legislature wrestled with finding a way to deliver a statewide virtual school in a sustainable, economical, and efficient manner. An obvious challenge to funding a virtual school in a large state is the sheer number of students. The Texas public school system has more than 4.7 million students—with more than 1.4 million students in high school alone. The need to keep a level budget while providing online options for its 1,235 school districts and open-enrollment charter schools was the driving force for an innovative virtual school model.

The legislature created the Texas Virtual School Network (TxVSN) to provide supplemental online courses for students. Instead of purchasing online courses or developing them from scratch, the Texas Education Agency set out to find Texas school districts, open-enrollment charter schools, education service centers, and higher education institutions that were already offering online courses. The idea was to enable students in districts that did not have access to online courses to enroll in existing courses hosted outside their own districts. The legislation that was passed also required the Texas Education Agency to contract with an education service center to review courses and verify alignment with the Texas curriculum and with the iNACOL national standards of quality for online courses as well as to operate all other aspects of the state virtual school.

The TxVSN became available in January 2009 with a modest catalog of high school courses and a modest number of student enrollments. Superintendents and campus administrators wanted to take advantage of the TxVSN to provide scheduling

flexibility, credit advancement, and expanded course offerings for their students; tight local budgets made it a challenge to fund TxVSN courses on a large scale, however. The promise was clear to all, but the funding was a stumbling block for both rural and urban districts.

The next year, the legislature created a state virtual school allotment. The allotment funds courses that are graduation requirements for high school students, but only if the student successfully completes the online course. When a student passes, the district providing the online course receives \$400 and the student's district receives \$80. This "no pass, no pay" approach gives an incentive to both the providing and the receiving districts to work together to ensure that each student succeeds.

With the funding barrier removed, TxVSN enrollment rapidly grew from 103 students in January 2009 to 1,200 students a year later. Most important, Texas superintendents and campus principals now see the TxVSN as way to address other high school challenges: the completion rate, teacher shortages, and access to college courses.

Completion Rate

School staff members spend hours trying to track down students who have left school before graduating. After making phone calls, knocking on doors at students' homes, and visiting parents' and students' workplaces, they convince only a few students to return to school. Many students say that they would stay in school if they could have a flexible learning environment and customized options. The TxVSN provides such flexibility; through it, students are completing high school at a rate never before witnessed in

Texas. For Jody Flowers, the academic supervisor of TxVSN and a former principal, this is no surprise: “By getting students enrolled in online classes offered through the TxVSN, you are proactively affecting your completion rate by doing the right thing for your students. Consider for a moment what reaching 7 to 10 or more students through online courses could mean to your campus and district completion rate.”

Teacher Shortage in Rural Areas

Research has proven time and time again that teacher effectiveness is a key factor in student achievement. But almost all of the high schools in Texas are challenged to find and retain highly skilled teachers. Rural high schools in particular report that finding teachers qualified to teach the higher-level math and science courses that are required by the Texas Recommended Graduation Plan is becoming more challenging every year. As the rural school funding shrinks along with rural population, those districts must provide a variety of courses to keep from losing students to schools with more options.

The TxVSN enrollment currently reflects that 67% of the districts it serves have only one high school. So foreign language, AP, and dual-credit courses offered through the TxVSN can help rural high schools offer a variety of courses.

The counselor for the TxVSN, Laura Hodges, often shares a story from Mineral Wells Independent School District, a rural district in north Texas. “MWISD had a student move into the district from New York,” she says. The student had completed German I and was eager to

continue with the course, but German was not offered by the district. The high school principal and counselor soon had this student working on the second year of German through a TxVSN course provider. Parent and student [were] both pleased!”

Access to Courses for College Credit

The Texas Distinguished Graduation Plan requires that a student complete four advanced measures that demonstrate performance at the college or professional level. Although Texas districts have a history of working closely with junior colleges or local universities in their attendance zone to provide dual or concurrent credit courses, higher education institutions can find it challenging to meet the diverse course, scheduling, and instructor needs that each high school requests. The TxVSN offers AP courses and, through a small pilot program, dual-credit courses as well.

The popularity of dual credit is demonstrated by growing enrollment—slightly more than half of the TxVSN enrollments are for dual-credit courses—as well as by TxVSN needs-assessment data. The distinguished graduation plan had not been considered in some districts simply because there was no local option to fulfill advanced graduation requirements, but those districts are now encouraging students to rise to the challenge of this more-rigorous graduation plan.

Research and Evaluation

Although still in its infancy, the TxVSN is growing rapidly. It began with four course-provider districts, 810 seats, and 12 course titles and has expanded to eight high school course



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provider districts and six higher-education institutions that are providing dual-credit courses for a total of close to 10,000 seats and more than 40 course titles—and it's still growing.

Now that the TxVSN has been in place for a year, the state will begin looking at student and school results longitudinally to determine the effects of online courses. This will provide the Texas Education Agency, the legislature, and the TxVSN with the data that they need to expand online learning in Texas.

Watching the excitement of principals and counselors as they learn what the TxVSN can do for students is the best part of my job. Although we don't have a perfect model, the team is confident that online learning will continue to evolve in our state. The TxVSN Team looks forward to being a part of that evolution. **PL**

***Author's note:** To learn more about the TxVSN, visit www.txvsn.org.*