Necessary Innovation:
How Small Districts Are Using Virtual Learning to Master the Common Core, Improve Teacher Quality, and Re-engage Their Digital Natives

Dr. Rob Hudson, Superintendent
Alpaugh Unified School District
Alpaugh, California
Total student population: 350
Total schools: 1 K-12 school, 1 continuation high

Dr. Marjorie Miles, Superintendent
Somerset County Public Schools
Westover, Maryland
Total student population: 2,943
Total schools: 1 technology & career center; 2 high schools; 1 intermediate school; 5 elementary schools.

Uses of Virtual and Blended Learning
- Ensuring access to college-ready curriculum
- Compensating for teacher shortages in critical areas
- Covering Common Core curriculum (incl. sharing w/other districts)
- Stretching budget resources

Common Challenges and Barriers
- Insufficient broadband & computer access
- Readiness for Common Core assessments
- Staff skill gaps and/or resistance
- Lack of flexibility in use of resources
How Online Learning Is Saving and Improving Rural High Schools

January 26, 2013 - by Tom Vander Ark

Nearly 150,000 schools were closed in the U.S. in the last century in waves of consolidations owing to budgets, busing, algebra and football. Conventional wisdom was that bigger was better and cheaper. Well, that better thing didn't work out so well and it turns out that there are some diseconomies of scale as a result of increased non-instructional staff after about 600 students.

Rural schools face “shrinking local tax bases, federal and state education funding inequities, challenges in recruiting and retaining highly effective teachers and leaders, limited access to Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate courses, and the out-migration of young people and professionals,” according to a report on rural high schools from the Alliance for Excellent Education. Despite these trends, online learning is helping small rural schools that are flourishing.

“Online learning levels the playing field for students in rural areas,” said Susan Patrick, President & CEO of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning. “It helps principals in isolated areas find teachers in high-demand subjects including advanced math, physical sciences, foreign languages and computer science. Online and blended classrooms allow rural schools to expand their course offerings and bring in unprecedented exposure to rigorous, world-class content and resources.”
Rural Flex & Blends. The Getting Smart team and our friends at iNACOL are seeing rapid uptake of online and blended learning in rural America. The result is improved academic quality and financial sustainability for rural high schools.

Rural high schools are using more online content from vendors like Apex and Compass Learning, collaborating with statewide virtual schools, and working with national providers like K12 Inc. and Connections Education. We see three options emerging:

1. One-to-one access improves engagement and options. Oklahoma Chief Janet Barresi points to Howe High School in southeastern Oklahoma. Superintendent Scott Parks leads a 1:1 district that makes extensive use of online learning. “It is amazing what they are accomplishing,” said Barresi.

As a result of a small, but successful state grant program, about 40 percent of South Dakota high schools are 1:1. (See our feature of Spearfish High School.) More than a third of Iowa districts feature 1:1 laptop access.

2. Blended learning incorporates digital content into coursework and supports extended credit recovery and advanced course options. In central Michigan, Ovid-Elsie Area Schools opened a blended learning early college high school with Connections Learning and Baker College.

Online learning “enables teachers to have the most advanced learning technology tools to teach and communicate with students and other teachers and experts anywhere, any time,” said Patrick. “It provides students with flexibility to move at their own pace, while building a wide range of competencies, skills and technology literacies — arming them with the knowledge and experiences necessary to succeed in 21st century schools and work environments.”

3. Flex model schools feature an online curriculum that allows individual progress and onsite support. We think there are “10 Reasons Every District Should Open a Flex School.” For rural schools, add reason number 11: You can run a very good school for 50 or 100 students. There’s no reason to close a small school and put kids on a bus for an hour.

Digital Idaho. “We have many rural schools that are now actively using online learning,” said Idaho chief Tom Luna. Online opportunities have expanded for schools and students through the Idaho Education Network, which is “ensuring high-speed broadband access for all Idaho students.” Schools making good use of IEN include the following:

- Homedale High School is receiving Physics from Sandy Powell in Emmett, Calculus from Dave Gural out of IDLA, and hybrid speech from IDLA.
- Genesee High School is sending dual credit classes around the state.
- **Richfield High School** and **Clark Fork High School** are receiving classes from the highly rated Coeur d’Alene Charter School.

- **Cambridge High School** is participating in a project with other schools around the US.

- Prairie, Nez Perce, Kendrick districts have created an active consortium.

- **Cassia County** School District supports four small town high schools with an active in-district consortium.

In addition to these schools that are using the Idaho Education Network, schools are using the state’s virtual school **Idaho Digital Learning Academy** (IDLA) for asynchronous and blended learning models. **Sugar-Salem High School** embraced digital learning early on. They require students to complete an online course before graduation.

**Twin Falls High School** is implementing a blended learning approach. The science team “has really embraced this format and been working with other teachers across the state interested in duplicating it,” according to IDLA staff.

In addition to improved viability of small rural schools, rural families have expanding educational options. About 6,000 Idaho families have chosen **Idaho Virtual** and **Idaho Connections Academy**.

**Broadband.** School broadband access is improving but home access in rural areas can still be a challenge. In Ohio, “where almost 11 percent of rural residents cannot access home broadband service that is capable of streaming classroom lectures,” said a report from **Connect Ohio**. “Increasing broadband adoption and technology use for education could assist in providing rural students access to a wider variety of courses, virtual schools, and collaborative learning opportunities outside of their immediate communities.”

As recommended by **Digital Learning Now!**, states should support district efforts to provide access Internet access devices and strong broadband coverage. States should authorize multiple full- and part-time learning providers.

Online learning is helping rural schools survive financially and thrive academically.

*Digital Learning Now!, Connections Education, K-12 Inc. and Compass Learning are Getting Smart Advocacy Partners. This blog first appeared on EdWeek.*