Online learning program helps students recover credits and discover new interests

Overview

Options High School is a small, accredited school of choice in northwest Washington State. The alternative school serves students from Bellingham Public Schools and the county who are credit deficient, are looking for a fresh start, or would benefit from a small-school setting. The school uses an online learning program for credit recovery, credit ahead, and electives to help its students succeed.
Challenge

Jami Aeschliman, extended learning teacher, was looking for a new credit recovery program in 2012. She sought an online learning program that would enable students to work both at school and at home. She also wanted a program that allowed for continuous enrollment, so students could start a new course whenever they entered the school or completed another course rather than waiting for the beginning of a term.

Solution

Options chose GradPoint®, a set of online courses and services now part of the Pearson Connexus™ suite of offerings, as its online learning solution and implemented it at the start of the 2012–2013 academic year. Prior to implementation, Aeschliman took an online training course over the summer. She also attended a professional development course with colleagues from the district in the fall.

Options is currently using GradPoint for English, math, social science, science, and elective courses. It vets the courses to ensure they are aligned with district and state standards. Approximately 75 percent of students take a GradPoint course during their time at Options.

For the most part, students use the program independently at school or work in small groups. “I’ll have twenty kids in my room doing twenty different courses,” explained Aeschliman. “And I just go around to them, one-on-one or in small groups, and work with them on whatever they’re doing.” At times, teachers also project specific sections of a unit onto a screen to facilitate large-group discussions.

Because the program is online, students can access course work outside of school. Teachers encourage them to work on lessons and quizzes at home, but tests are reserved for classes. Byron Gerard, principal, explained that this procedure allows the teachers to “maintain the integrity of the testing process.”

One of the biggest benefits of the program is the continuous enrollment feature. Aeschliman explained, “It’s flexible, so kids are able to start a course whenever they have that time in their schedule. It’s very individualized. So our seniors, who are very motivated and need to get to graduation, don’t have to be stuck in a semester timeline. If they want to work extra hard and put in the effort, they can complete a course much more quickly.”
The online learning program also offers a variety of electives that would be difficult for Options to provide in a traditional classroom setting. “GradPoint really opens up some opportunities for kids to take courses that they’re interested in that they wouldn’t otherwise be able to take,” Aeschliman elaborated. “We are a very small school and can’t offer all the things that kids are interested in, like anthropology and forensics. There’s an Introduction to Culinary Arts course that’s really popular. So it definitely offers a variety for them.”

Results

Options is pleased with its online learning program, which it also uses in its afterschool program for credit recovery as well as in its special education program to focus on specific skills or content. During the 2013–2014 school year, a total of 144 students used GradPoint to earn 161 full credits and 63 partial credits (see Figure 1, page 4). Given these results, Options plans to continue using the online learning program for the foreseeable future.

Bellingham Public Schools is also using GradPoint in several other programs. The district customized a GradPoint math unit for its middle school bridge program, serving over three hundred students. In addition, when the district moved the growing summer school program to Options last year, it decided to switch to GradPoint for its summer school courses.

“GradPoint allows me to work at my own pace and gives me diverse elective options, which is nice because I can learn about something I can’t take in a traditional class.”

—12th-grade male student
“Previous summer school opportunities only allowed students to take one course in either math or English,” explained Gerard. “When making the switch to GradPoint last year, we opened up most of the GradPoint portfolio of course offerings. Students were then able to fill in any graduation gap no matter what their need.” Over two hundred students enrolled in the program, more than twice the number from the previous year.

GradPoint helps me get credits quickly because I can work on it from home.

—12th-grade female student

FIGURE 1

144 Students Earned Credits with GradPoint, 2013–2014

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