

CASE STUDY

Small District Provides More Opportunities to More Students with Virtual School Program

Big Rapids Public Schools, Michigan

Challenge

Big Rapids Public School district currently has a highly regarded virtual school that serves students from both their own district and surrounding districts. However, with a previous digital curriculum provider, they found that the quality and support — for both students and teachers — was inadequate.

Goal

- Provide support to help students master rigorous content, and personalized learning to keep students engaged and motivated
- Give teachers the ability to track progress and provide remediation when needed, not after the course is over

Solution

Apex Learning provided a solution that helped the district meet several criteria:

- Flexibility to modify the curriculum to best meet student needs
- Supports and scaffolds to help students master more challenging material
- Foundational courses to get students back up to grade level
- Ongoing professional services and support to ensure that educators got the answers they needed

Results

Teachers report that students are better prepared for the next course. They don't just pass the class — they master the content. Students are less likely to get frustrated because they get immediate support.

District Profile 2016–17

- Member District in Mecosta-Osceola ISD
- 1,950 Students
- Grades PreK–12
- Rural District
- Economically Disadvantaged: 46.7%
- Students with Disabilities: 12.3%

Alternative Learning Program

- 110 Students
- Grades 9–12

District Demographics

- White: 87%
- Black: 6%
- Hispanic: 2%
- Two or more races: 3%
- Asian: 1%
- American Indian: <1%
- Hawaiian: <1%

Solution

- Comprehensive Courses
- Tutorials

Implementation

- Blended Learning
- Virtual Learning



Virtual Learning Provides Options to Meet Diverse Student Needs

Big Rapids Virtual School's reputation and accessibility draws students from all over the surrounding districts, some from as far as 50 miles away. Approximately half come from Big Rapids High School and the other half from other districts. The school serves students with diverse needs, including those who are homebound, have disciplinary suspensions, or whose life situations preclude a traditional classroom environment.

As a seat-time waiver program, Big Rapids Virtual School allows students to work remotely, with the only on-site requirement being when they take tests. The school computer labs are open until 5:00 p.m. two days a week, which supports those students who have jobs or other obligations that prevent them from attending school during regular school hours. Students can also visit during lab hours and have 1:1 time with staff.

Early Success Keeps Students Motivated

Students taking courses with the previous digital curriculum provider were frustrated by the lack of immediate support when they were stuck. Those coming in with sixth- or seventh-grade reading levels weren't getting the remediation they needed to build their skills and content mastery up to grade level, or to prepare them for more advanced courses. However, Apex Learning provides an active learning environment with engaging content that keeps students motivated. Foundations Courses give students the scaffolds and supports they need to help them ramp up and experience early success. Once the material in the Foundations Courses has been mastered, teachers then let students advance to core courses. In addition, teachers have the flexibility to personalize learning for all their students, which is especially helpful for their special education students.

Rigor Combined with Scaffolds Leads to Content Mastery

Teachers report that students who pass Algebra 1 with Apex Learning are better prepared for Geometry than students who took Algebra 1 with the previous digital curriculum provider. Scaffolds and supports enable all students to build their skills and content mastery — whether learning academic vocabulary or reinforcing concepts — without having a watered-down curriculum.

Contact

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For districts looking to start their own virtual learning programs, Tim Buckingham, Mentor at Big Rapids Virtual School, gives this advice: in addition to having high-quality digital curriculum, schools need to build relationships with their students — they want to be supported. Great staff is critical. "Ensure that your digital curriculum lets educators focus on their teaching and enables them to personalize learning for all their students."

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Mentor

Big Rapids Virtual School