

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: April 23, 2010

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E-LEARNING 2010 Assessing the Agenda for Change

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Educators say 'hybrid' approach is taking off because it offers academic classes no

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Rural districts, urban districts, and those in between are starting to embrace online classes—and not just as curricular supplements, electives, and advanced courses. School officials are now viewing such classes as an integral part of their offerings, to be factored into daily schedules as much as traditional face-to-face classes.

This blended or hybrid approach is a tactic that experts say is one of the fastest-growing areas of online coursetaking.

The growth of online coursetaking in places like Notus, Idaho, mirrors the national trend. A 2009 report from the Sloan Consortium, a Newburyport, Mass.-based advocacy group for online education, found that the number of K-12 students using online courses rose to more than a million public school students during the 2007-08 school year. That was a 47 percent increase from 2005-06.

"The whole notion of schools going blended is something that is going to get more national attention," said Richard E. Ferdig, a research professor at the [Research Center for Educational Technology](#) at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio. "There are so many technology resources out

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One critical element is providing an in-school mentor—not necessarily a subject-matter expert can walk students through any basic academic or technical problems with an online course.

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The courses have also saved money. Mr. Merrill is a Spanish teacher, for example, and the IDLA course is a Spanish course.

Online in L.A.

But it's not only rural districts seeking out online courses.

Themistocles Sparangis, the chief technology director for the 680,000-student Los Angeles district, says that some of the most popular options in his district are online courses.

The courses are often programmed into school schedules, much as they are in the Notus district. Some students take them in the library or with a computer teacher during their free time.

Mr. Sparangis said the Los Angeles district, too, has had the most success with online classes when schools provide a facilitating teacher for students in real time as a support, even though the instructor is online.

That facilitating teacher does everything from coordinating lab activities in science courses and helping students get online to overseeing work that's printed out and done on paper, Mr. Sparangis said.

He said the district taps a wide variety of online providers for its courses, including for-profit companies, colleges, and nonprofit organizations.

Students often choose to take online courses during the school day because of a scheduling conflict; because they have a specific interest in a subject not offered at their schools; or for credit recovery, one of the fastest-growing areas of online course offerings, in which students who have not passed a class can go back and earn credit for it.

"On the credit-recovery side, it adds another dimension to give them the opportunity to learn the content in a different way, which can be more differentiated for their learning style," Mr. Sparangis said.

The seven school districts within the St. Clair County Regional Educational Service Agency, offer courses in a variety of innovative ways, said Joanne E. Hopper, the agency's director of education.

The agency first began using credit-recovery classes in 2008 purchased through an online course provider in Scottsdale, Ariz. Now, high schools served by the agency are also using the courses for regular classes.

For example, if students struggle on a particular math unit in a face-to-face classroom, they can go back on their own time as review.

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Other schools served by the regional agency are considering the use of online courses as a way to assign students who are struggling to do a second hour of the same coursework online. In some cases, a student can take two hours of online coursework per day; students can schedule it whenever convenient, Ms. Hopper said.

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E-LEARNING 2010 Assessing the Agenda for Change

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Educators say 'hybrid' approach is taking off because it offers academic classes no

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That's because Principal Benjamin M. Merrill has created "Pirate Academy," a roster of online courses that students can take as part of their regular school day.

"My kids are so limited in terms of where they live, I thought it was unfair that their course should be limited," said Mr. Merrill, who was also recently named the superintendent of the 330-student Notus School District #135 and serves as the high school football coach. "Now they get to have the same quality of education because of online learning."

Rural districts, urban districts, and those in between are starting to embrace online classes—and not just as curricular supplements, electives, and advanced courses. School officials are now viewing such classes as an integral part of their offerings, to be factored into daily schedules as much as traditional face-to-face classes.

This blended or hybrid approach is a tactic that experts say is one of the fastest-growing areas of online coursetaking.

The growth of online coursetaking in places like Notus, Idaho, mirrors the national trend. A 2009 report from the Sloan Consortium, a Newburyport, Mass.-based advocacy group for online education, found that the number of K-12 students using online courses rose to more than a million public school students during the 2007-08 school year. That was a 47 percent increase from 2005-06.

"The whole notion of schools going blended is something that is going to get more national attention," said Richard E. Ferdig, a research professor at the **Research Center for Educational Technology** at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio. "There are so many technology resources out

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there, why wouldn't you want your students to gain access to them?"

Virtual Lessons Learned

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One critical element is providing an in-school mentor—not necessarily a subject-matter expert can walk students through any basic academic or technical problems with an online course.

"We've shown time and time again," Mr. Ferdig said, "that the extent to which the face-to-face correlated to how successful the students are."

At Notus Jr. Sr. High, where all students take at least one online course during the school day, Notus uses online courses provided by the state-sponsored Idaho Digital Learning Academy. Superintendents who believed that cooperatively they could generate high-quality online courses have their own online teaching staff.



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—Joe Jaszewski for Education Week

The Notus school building has a room equipped with computers for students to take online classes during the regular school day. Since many students do not have a computer at home or don't have high-speed Internet, the school provides high-quality computers at school.

During each period of the school day, the classroom is filled with a variety of different courses. It's staffed by an adult teacher who helps students in their online work.

"The teacher of the online math course might live in another state, but they can probably answer about 80 percent of the questions. It has changed how we do scheduling and how we manage our time."

The courses have also saved money. Mr. Merrill is a Spanish teacher, for example, and the IDLA course is a Spanish course.

Online in L.A.

But it's not only rural districts seeking out online courses.

Themistocles Sparangis, the chief technology director for the 680,000-student Los Angeles district, says that some of the most popular options in his district are online courses.

The courses are often programmed into school schedules, much as they are in the Notus district. Some students take them in the library or with a computer teacher during their free time.

Mr. Sparangis said the Los Angeles district, too, has had the most success with online classes when schools provide a facilitating teacher for students in real time as a support, even though the instructor is online.

That facilitating teacher does everything from coordinating lab activities in science courses and helping students get online to overseeing work that's printed out and done on paper, Mr. Sparangis said.

He said the district taps a wide variety of online providers for its courses, including for-profit companies, colleges, and nonprofit organizations.

Students often choose to take online courses during the school day because of a scheduling conflict; because they have a specific interest in a subject not offered at their schools; or for credit recovery, one of the fastest-growing areas of online course offerings, in which students who have not passed a class can go back and earn credit for it.

"On the credit-recovery side, it adds another dimension to give them the opportunity to learn the content in a different way, which can be more differentiated for their learning style," Mr. Sparangis said.

The seven school districts within the St. Clair County Regional Educational Service Agency, offer courses in a variety of innovative ways, said Joanne E. Hopper, the agency's director of education.

The agency first began using credit-recovery classes in 2008 purchased through an online course provider in Scottsdale, Ariz. Now, high schools served by the agency are also using the courses for regular classes.

For example, if students struggle on a particular math unit in a face-to-face classroom, they can go back on their own time as review.

Other schools served by the regional agency are considering the use of online courses as a way to assign students who are struggling to do a second hour of the same coursework online. For example, a student can take two hours of online coursework per day; students can schedule it whenever convenient outside of school, Ms. Hopper said.

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