Distance Learning: Paradise Valley Unified School District

An Examination of an Online Secondary Education Program

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Abstract:

Distance learning is changing the face of education at a rapid pace and like anything new and different, it is subject to widespread scrutiny, evaluation, and debate. As educators, this analysis and the conclusions we draw from it are absolutely imperative to our understanding moving forward as we strive to navigate and master the changing landscape of our profession. There are many questions to be addressed.

Are these new technologies innovative teaching platforms that more effectively and efficiently facilitate learning? What techniques and applications work online and what does not? Who should utilize the virtual classroom and why? What are the guiding principles of effective distance teaching and learning? Is online learning the just-in-time remedy for an archaic, ineffective American educational system that has failed to keep up with the times, or is it a false panacea with sometimes misplaced motives that simply moves bodies through the educational system more conveniently and quickly?

To help me gain a better understanding of the real-life application of distance learning, I recently ventured beyond the realm of academic theory to interview a high school teacher currently employed as an online instructor in a fairly new program. This report summarizes the results of that discussion addressing the basic background of the program, her perspectives of its pros and cons, some of the technologies and teaching techniques being utilized and her thoughts on its viability and potential as a learning platform, both now and in the future.

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An Examination of an Online Secondary Education Program

Jamie Collins is a high school teacher employed by the Paradise Valley Unified School District (PVUSD) in Phoenix, Arizona. She will be entering her fifth year as a teacher in the fall, and for the last two years has been instructing English on line as one of five teachers in a new program offering students the option of taking both required core classes and some electives as distance learners. I recently met with her and conducted an interview addressing this program. She provided me with the basic details of the program, offered her perspectives of its pros and cons, addressed the teaching techniques and technologies being utilized, and offered her personal insights as to its viability and potential as a learning platform, both now and in the future.

**Program Profile**

Basic background and demographic information related to the program is as follows:

**Student Participation**

**Total Enrollment -** Currently 900-1000 students participate in the program at PVUSD. The program is open to any student who wishes to participate free of charge. Some students are assigned to the program based on past unsatisfactory performance in conventional classes. The school district does not limit enrollment to those students living within any specified geographical boundary and seeks out new students from other areas of the region and state to enroll. Enrollment = funding, which is undeniably one consideration of having the program.

The program services students from five high schools in the district.

**Teacher-Student Ratio -** Collins is responsible for approximately 180 students at any one time. She teaches Freshmen, Sophomore, and Junior English. She feels this number is too high and unmanageable, citing 120 as a more realistic figure.

**Student Profile –** The program was originally created for and primarily caters to students seeking “Credit Recovery,” either because they failed the course originally in a conventional classroom or never took the course. However, the typical student profile is changing:

* An increasingly significant number of other students are entering the program for a variety of reasons including special circumstances such as participation in sports, Olympic tryouts, travel abroad for family reasons and religious missions, incarceration, and pregnancy.
* College-bound students are entering the program to retake classes in order to improve previous grades and their chances of obtaining scholarships. For example, a student who got a B in the course originally in the classroom can retake the course to try and earn an A. If they do so successfully, the new grade overrides their previous one.
* For many students, the program provides a means of obtaining needed credits more quickly to graduate for they can work at their own pace.

**Technologies and Techniques Utilized**

**Moodle.org** - The program is delivered primarily utilizing Moodle, a free Learning Management System (LMS) available to any educators to use as an instruction based website. Moodle is found at <http://moodle.org>. Each student has an assigned web page within the system and accesses curriculum, assignments, exercises, and tests through the site. The site offers communication capability through chat room, discussion board, and email. The program utilizes the chat and discussion boards, although the current guidelines place little requirement on the students to utilize them. Also, the District is not allowing the utilization of the e-mail feature. Thus far, most of the curriculum employed in the program is conventional classroom materials downloaded onto the site including whole books, handouts, exercises and other learning materials. Various media are employed including video from YouTube and other sites, other teacher’s learning materials, etc. Overall, Collins thinks it’s an effective platform.

**E-Mail -** Google is used for email. According to Collins, this is one current drawback of the system by not having one central site for students to utilize for everything. It creates inefficiency for students and teachers and provides students with an excuse for not receiving a communication sent out to them by the teacher. She would greatly prefer to utilize the email capability on the Moodle site.

**Telepresence -** “Telepresence” is utilized occasionally by appointment enabling the teacher to communicate with one student or a group of students remotely utilizing real time video and audio equipment. Each feeder school has a room set up for this purpose. Some teachers utilize this technology to conduct tutorial webinars.

**Telephone** - Teachers sometimes communicate with the students by telephone. Monitors, who are part- time, qualified teachers are employed at each of the feeder sites and can track down students for phone conversations with the online instructor when needed. This happens rarely.

* In addition to student communication, parents are notified by email as to student progress on a regular basis.

**Class Structure**

**Employs Same Standards as Traditional Classroom –** The online program adheres to all the same state and district standards that the conventional classroom program follow. All the curriculum is in line with military and college requirements. From this standpoint, the two systems are identical.

**Open Enrollment** - Classes are open enrollment, students work at their own pace, and can choose the order in which they complete assignments. This is the area where the program needs to implement change according to Collins. Each student is covering different material at different paces, making it very hard for teachers to teach. This policy also places a higher than necessary administrative burden on teachers. Rosters change daily as new students enter and existing students leave the program.

**Totally Individualized, No Collaborative Learning** – This is another feature of the program that Collins feels should be changed. Since open enrollment creates a situation where each student is operating on their own, there is no opportunity for any collaborative work, which is a detriment. Next year, they will be restructuring classes into two groups – Credit Recovery Path and Standard Path. This will facilitate greater collaborative learning and make the system much more manageable for teachers.

**Non-Linear Instruction** – As mentioned previously, students can choose what assignments to work on and in what order. While this gives them flexibility, it creates a very difficult situation for teachers who essentially are using “one on one” methods for each student in the program. This will change somewhat next year with the reorganization and implementation of the two learning paths mentioned above.

**Lack of Guidelines –** The program has thus far operated with very little guidelines. There has not been any Guidance Counselors specific to the program, and the Counselors at the feeder schools are not well educated as to which students should and shouldn’t participate or provide student or teacher direction. It has been run as a “one size fits all” program which it really is not. Next year they are adding a full time counselor dedicated exclusively to this program. This will relieve teachers of many administrative and advisory responsibilities that they have had to assume in the past, taking away from teaching time.

**The Pros of the System**

Although the start-up of the system has had some logistical issues, Collins is encouraged overall by the impact of the program and believes it is already a success and will get even better as time goes on. She cites several examples how it benefits everyone involved – students, teachers, PVUSD, and even the parents. Here are some of the pros she cites:

**Student Benefits**

**Student Retention -** For many, but certainly not all of the students who are there for credit recovery, it’s the difference between staying in school and graduating, and dropping out all-together. “We can separate those kids, give them a shorter, easier pathway to credit recovery” (J. Collins, personal communication, June 23, 2011). This single reason alone makes the program a success already, according to Collins. In addition, students with unusual life circumstances such as those mentioned previously can stay in school and graduate as well.

**Motivation –** For some students, the online format increases their motivation. By removing elements of classroom instruction that can both cause them distractions and provide them with the means of distracting others, many students are forced to focus more on their studies. It is just them and their schoolwork. She says English as a Second Language (ESL) students are especially in tune with and motivated using the online format. They are not concerned with making mistakes with their English which may cause them embarrassment or the teasing of other kids, and are some of her most motivated students. As we have discussed extensively in class, motivation is perhaps the biggest key to succeeding in a distance learning program.

**Enhanced Communication –** While online instruction lacks elements of communication that can only be achieved with face to face contact, Collins finds that many students open up more in their online communication, especially about family issues at home and other personal challenges that they face. As we have discussed previously in class, the “un-personal” nature of the online forum tends to reduce our inhibitions to express our thoughts and the same holds true for many of Collins’ students. In this sense, her students are more communicative online then they would be in person.

**Teacher Benefits**

**Less Stressful Work Environment** – According to Collins, she greatly prefers teaching online. “It’s more like an office environment. It’s quiet. There’s no noise or chaos. I can get up and go to the bathroom any time I want. You can’t do that in a classroom situation” (J. Collins, personal communication, June 23, 2011). Beginning in the next school year, teachers in the program will be able to work almost exclusively from their homes.

**Contributing to the Future of Education –** Collins also expressed a unique sense of satisfaction having the opportunity to contribute to and help shape a program that promises to be the future of education. Her overall sense of job satisfaction is much stronger since taking on her current role. “I feel like I’m helping pioneer new territory. I love it” (J. Collins, personal communication, June 23, 2011).

**PVUSD Benefits**

**Student Retention/Increased Funding** - These are difficult economic times for schools in Arizona. State budgetary restrictions cut deeper each year into an educational system that ranks near the bottom of the United States in many categories. Enrollment numbers are directly link to funding.

“They (PVHUSD) originally did it to move forward into future, and it was a way for them to capture and keep kids that they were losing, and that’s definitely a motivation because there is money involved. Also, it reaches out beyond the district to other students because they are offering a product that other school systems do not have. It is financially driven” (J. Collins, personal communication, June 23, 2011).

The more students that a district enrolls, the more funding it receives. While not a priority in times gone by, the economic reality of today’s educational system requires more of a business-like approach to public education. This program is in line with that philosophy.

**Parental Benefits**

**More Active Involvement** – Just as the online platform typically produces positive effects on student communication, Collins says the same hold true for the parents. Through regular emailing and parental reporting, the system has also gotten parents more proactive in their communication and level of involvement, apparently for the same reasons that it works for students. “I talk to parents much more through e-mail with distance learning than I ever communicated with parents in the traditional classroom situation” (J. Collins, June 23, 2011). This elevated level of parent involvement ultimately benefits the students as well because their parents are engaged in their learning, ask more questions, and keep closer tabs.

Clearly Collins feels that online learning is beneficial on many levels, and as the program evolves, it will be even more so. Like the traditional classroom setting however, it does have some cons as well. We discussed what doesn’t work about the current system at great length.

**The Cons of the System**

**Cons for the Student**

**Lack of Evaluation Prior to Placement –** Although the situation is being remedied for the next school year, the lack of any standards related to student evaluation prior to placement and the lack of trained guidance counselors educated to the program has misplaced some students into the program. PVUSD has a special school set up for students with unique remedial needs, and some who have participated in online learning should have been placed there instead.

**Lack of Opportunities for Collaborative Education –** As stated previously, Collins feels strongly that students would benefit from collaborative learning. Interaction with others on some level facilitates the learning process, and thus far students in this program have not had that opportunity due to the structure. Although chat rooms and discussion boards are integrated into the program, the guidelines for use fail to make them effective. Consequently, there is a sense of disconnect from the other students in the program.

**Lack of Motivation** – While many students participating seem to be more motivated in the online learning environment, others are not and student motivation continues to be an issue within the program – according to Collins, one of the biggest issues. However, these same students suffer motivational issues in the classroom as well, and inevitably some do end up dropping out of school. There’s no real solution other than constant positive feedback to help combat this problem, and that’s shown limited effectiveness for some students.

**More Structure is Needed** – While the system is being is being restructured into two learning paths, up until now the lack of structure has made it more challenging for many students who have traditionally struggled in school. Having a separate Credit Recovery and Standard path is a step in the right direction, but Collins advocates taking it further by also creating separate paths for ESL and Advanced Placement (AP) as well.

**Cheating and Plagiarism** – In the online platform, Collins says that cheating and plagiarism is rampant, and the system does not discourage it because action is not taken even when the students are caught. In addition, there’s a big problem with parents doing their kids work for them. There is even a market to buy test results and the selling of test answers is commonplace. When graduation, not necessarily learning is the motivating factors, these issues arise.

**Cons for the Teacher**

**Administrative Burden –** According to Collins, teachers must spend too much time performing administrative functions, largely due to the lack of structure. Consequently, they spend too little time developing curriculum and teaching. According to Collins, “In the traditional classroom, you are driving the students. In this program, the students are driving you”(J. Collins, personal communication, June 23, 2011). A serious re-evaluation of the current policies and procedures is needed.

**Unrealistic Teacher/Student Ratios** – The teachers in the program feel that they are stretched too thin, especially given the administrative burden they carry. According to Collins, “Not all the students work. If they did, the teachers would really be in trouble” (J. Collins, personal communication, June 23, 2011). The overall effectiveness of the program is limited greatly by this problem, but given the budgetary limitations that PVUSD faces, it is not likely to improve in the near future.

**Conclusion**

PVUSD’s online program has evolved using a trial and error methodology. In an ideal world, the logistical challenges mentioned in our interview would have been addressed prior to launching the effort, but these are desperate economic times for Arizona’s schools and the District felt compelled to launch the program without the benefits of a pilot program to study its policies and procedures. Various elements need to be fine-tuned, and various policies need to be rethought. The lack of structure in the present version of the program needs to be addressed for the full potential to be realized.

The online program is not perfect. It is not for all students. It probably will never totally replace conventional learning. However, it does provide an alternative learning mode that fits the needs of many students and thus far seems to very successful overall, in spite of its flaws. Collins embraces it and sees it as the future of learning. The results have been successful enough that PVUSD plans to expand their online offerings to include K-8 in the next few years. If PVUSD makes the needed adjustments, it will continue to help itself and its students by providing an innovative alternative to traditional education that works, and works effectively.