

Online Learning in Council Rock

Online learning has become a staple in colleges, graduate schools, careers, and now in high schools across the country. Council Rock joined those ranks, offering online courses starting in the 2012-13 school year. A committee consisting of administrators, teachers and curriculum coordinators was formed to develop the courses. The School Board approved piloting this program based on the assurance that it would not result in additional staffing costs.

The first year, Council Rock joined a consortium called "Bridges Virtual" that included the Penndel and Quakertown school districts in Bucks County. Students were able to take Council Rock courses as well as other district's courses. Analyzing how this program ran, CR found that other district's students were taking Council Rock courses but no CR students were interested in other district's courses. This, among other factors, led to the district decision to create its own independent online classes.

CR investigated many platforms offering online education, and found a PA based provider called "Blended Schools." This option is based on the PA state standards and also allows CR to personalize each course by uploading their own curricular material. Through "Blended Schools" the district purchases one seat license for each student taking an online course, even if the student is in more than one course. The district bought 100 seat licenses for less than \$10,000.

Council Rock is moving slowly with this initiative to ensure there is no compromise to the quality of education the students receive. To start, the high schools had to find a teacher who was willing to run an online section of a class. This option was open to any secondary teacher in the district. This year, there are five courses being offered in the high schools: Spanish 2 (9th grade), Algebra 2B (11th/12th grade), Accelerated Composition (alternate day – 10th-12th grade), Accelerated Psychology (10th-12th grade) and Honors Anatomy and Physiology (12th grade). There are also two students taking Honors Spanish 2 in the middle school. Everyone is a high school teacher except Jeremy Potoka, a teacher at Holland Middle School, who teaches the Spanish classes.

All courses began with an orientation module to educate students on how the process works. In some courses, students at North and South are in the same class. At the high schools, the population of students in the classes range from 6 (Spanish 2) to 16 (Accelerated Composition). At both high schools, regular classroom teachers are supporting the students, especially when the online teacher is based at the other high school.

The Honors Anatomy course also has a lab component and because it is an honors level course needs additional resources to meet CR standards. To that end, a supplement, primalonlinelearning.com was purchased. This resource was developed by a London based company and is used by over 700 colleges including the University of Pennsylvania, Drexel and Penn State. Council Rock is the first high school internationally to use it. The total cost for this added resource was \$900, but it's important to note that the license is being shared by both online and regular classroom students, giving access to this enriching tool to all students enrolled in the class, virtual or otherwise.

All of the online classes also have sections in a physical classroom, but the structure of the course is what provides flexibility in a students' schedule or learning style. Teachers are designated a block of time which counts as a regular class, but students take the class whenever it fits into their schedule, instead of facing conflicts with other courses. Some students who take the class first or last period are able to come to school late or leave early. This is

especially advantageous for student athletes, who may have to miss a portion of their last class on a regular basis. Others who take the class during the school day sign in at the library during the period assigned to them. They can work on their online course, or, if they have other studying to do, can elect to concentrate on a different subject and do their online work at home.

Students meet in person with their teacher as necessary, either individually or as a group. They have some flexibility to schedule when they will take tests, alleviating the problem of having many tests on the same day. Currently, all Honors Anatomy and Physiology students take their tests in person. Students in other disciplines will be required to complete their district assessments in person, while teacher specific tests/quizzes could be taken on-line. It varies with the course, teacher and material. Students communicate with the teacher and each other through email and through "Blackboard Collaborate," an online program that allows for clinic time, posting of assignments, asking questions and videoconferencing.

Students who participate in online learning are chosen based on a number of factors, especially their desire to take this type of course, being good communicators, being self-motivated and having the ability to work independently. These courses are not listed in the program planning book, but are recommended to students by their counselors. If the student realizes early in the process that they will not learn effectively through the online class, they have the option to go back into a regular classroom setting.

There are pros, cons and some interesting potential to these types of courses.

- Pros include flexibility, scheduling of tests to allow for self-pacing, preparing students for college by learning time management skills, yet still having oversight of a teacher. There is also potential for offering these classes to other students who may not fit into the traditional school environment.
- There are concerns, however, that if the numbers grow it will be necessary to find another space for students, as the libraries are active places during the school day. Also, there is a challenge in letting students know these courses exist. At this time, it remains necessary to have some sort of gate keeper to be sure students signing up can be successful in this type of class structure.
- There are conversations about whether it would make sense, in the future, to require each student to take at least one online class, as it prepares students for college work where occasionally classes are conducted online. This concept is not an issue at this time, as the online program is in its infancy.

To assess the effectiveness of the online courses, the district will be looking at the performance of students in the online class vs. those in a physical classroom and making adjustments as needed.

Citizens For Education thanks Barry Desko (Director of Secondary Education), Jason Traczykiewicz (Asst. Principal and class scheduler at North) and Renee Devlin (Science Curriculum Coordinator, and online teacher) for educating us on this program and process. CFE is very interested in how this program evolves and will keep our membership informed of changes as they occur.