Virtual School Consultant Project

Joanne Deitsch

UMUC

Author Note

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Joanne Deitsch, 20 Vine Street, #1543, Lansdale, PA 19446. E-mail: joanne@joannedeitsch.com



*Virtual Schools: Recommendations*

*Prepared for* 

*Prepared by* JRMD Associates

Virtual Schools: Recommendations

**Introduction**

JRMD associates prepared this report for the Amythical School District (AMSD). Virtual schools are under consideration in order to accommodate students who struggle in a brick-and-mortar setting. AMSD engaged JRMD associates to:

* Provide a brief summary of the status of virtual schools in the United States,
* Make recommendations and rationale for a virtual school model for AMSD,
* Discuss addressing obstacles,
* Create a course design, and
* Develop an implementation plan.

AMSD serves students in Fantasyville, Upper Mythic, and Lower Mythic townships in Pennsylvania. AMSD has five elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. The 2016 enrollment in grades 9-12 were 1,358 students.

**Summary of Virtual School Status in the United States**

Since 1995, virtual schools have grown in popularity in the United States (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). Students who pursue programs in virtual schools include students wishing to accelerate academic progress (Watson, Gemin, Vashaw, & Pape, 2015). Students facing challenges can benefit from virtual schools (Watson, et al., 2015). Finally, virtual schools accommodate students who do not desire to or cannot attend traditional schools (Watson, et al., 2015).

How well do virtual schools deliver on the promise of educating high achieving and struggling student populations? The reviews are mixed. For-profit charters are not outlasting non-profit counterparts (Huseman, 2015). For-profit virtual schools sometimes use funds meant to educate students for personal purposes instead (Herold, 2016). On the other hand, there are for-profit charters schools such as Charter Schools USA and SABIS International Charter School that deliver excellent results (Lindquist, 2016).

**Virtual School Model Recommendations and Rationale**

AMSD virtual schooling will provide high school students in grades 9-12 with opportunities for credit recovery. AMSD has a long standing reputation for academic excellence in the Fantasyville area. The virtual school must meet the same standards of excellence.

Administrators are needed in virtual schools as much as in brick-and-mortar schools (Barbour, 2012). Leaders are needed to recruit, train, and evaluate teachers (Richardson, LaFrance, & Beck, 2015). For this program, JRMD Associates recommends that ASMD hire a principal to focus on daily operations and expansion efforts. An administrator dedicated to the virtual school can help ensure that teachers and students enjoy the same educational experience as other teachers and students in the school district.

AMSD can develop programs internally or use materials from a third party educational provider. For internally developed programs, AMSD would require the services of a course designer, instructor, and a program manager (iNACOL, 2015). K12 Inc. (http://www.K12.com) and Connections Academy (https://www.connectionsacademy.com/) offer services from fully staffed programs or individual curricula. If AMSD decides to purchase a program, JRMD Associates recommend a team of administrators and instructors evaluate the program to ensure that the program meets the school’s high standards and Pennsylvania’s educational requirements.

**Addressing Obstacles**

While some costs of the virtual program are covered by traditional funding, there are additional costs attendant with virtual schools (Barbour, 2012). AMSD must obtain additional funding to launch a successful virtual program (Richardson & et al., 2015). AMSD can consider partnering with other local school districts to spread out the cost and effort of the program. Pursing grants and adding additional line items to upcoming budgets are other avenues that AMSD can pursue to gain the funding needed for this program.

A focus on continuous improvement ensures the enduring success of virtual programs. JRMD Associates recommends the use of Quality Matters (2017) to evaluate course content and to the Southern Regional Education Board (2017) checklist to evaluate teacher performance. Finally, AMSD should gather end-of-quarter student feedback. Follow the same evaluation process, regardless if AMSD develops curriculums or purchases from a vendor.

**Course Delivery**

In order to ensure student success, JRMD Associates recommend the delivery schedule shown below. The plan allows students to move gradually from a blended environment to fully online. This schedule should allow teachers and students to acclimate over time in succeeding in an online environment.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | **Student Attendance** |
| **Grade** | **% In School** | **% Online** |
| **9th** | 60% | 40% |
| **10th** | 60% | 40% |
| **11th** | 40% | 60% |
| **12th** |  | 100% |

**Implementation Plan**

AMSD should “Begin with the End in Mind” (Covey, n.d., para. 2) when planning virtual school efforts. AMSD should implement a pilot for a small group of students in a single subject. Once becoming familiar with and addressing the challenges encountered, AMSD should pursue program improvements and then expand to other subjects and grades. Any teachers involved in the pilot will act as subject matter experts for other educators. Starting small and focusing on pedagogy will create a virtual school experience that will make AMSD proud and empower students to meet Pennsylvania’s educational standards (Huseman, 2015).

Teachers are critical for student success. Preparing teachers for teaching in a virtual environment sets the stage for a successful program. Regardless if AMSD decides to purchase a Learning Management System or use a third party solution, include professional development of all teachers involved in the program as part of planning. Once the program starts, allocating the proper amount of time for teachers to teach enables program success (Allen & Seaman, 2007).

High level milestones:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Timing** | **Milestone** |
| Pre-pilot activity | Make determination to internally develop or purchase pilot curriculum |
| Pre-pilot activity | Conduct Quality Matters evaluation |
| Pre-pilot activity | Prepare virtual classroom |
| Pre-pilot activity | Review assessments |
| Pre-pilot activity | Train teachers |
| Quarter One | Pilot for Single Course |
| Quarter One | Conduct Student Evaluations |
| Quarter One | Conduct Teacher Evaluations |
| After Quarter One | Review Student Evaluations and Apply Feedback to Coursework |
| After Quarter One | Discuss Teacher Evaluations with Teachers |
| After Quarter One | Consider which course to pursue next |

**Conclusion**

AMSD focuses on providing a high quality of education. The high school and the school district have set the bar high and the new virtual school must continue this tradition. JRMD Associate’s key recommendations include:

* Hire a full-time administrator for the virtual school
* Engage a designer, instructor, and a program manager if AMSD decides to develop courses internally
* AMSD administrators and instructors must thoroughly evaluate any programs purchased from a third party
* AMSD must explore options for obtaining additional funding to support the virtual school
* AMSD should conduct evaluations on course design and teacher performance as well as solicit feedback from students. AMSD uses evaluation data to improve the course and teacher performance.
* AMSD should start small and focus on pedagogy when developing the course pilot. Lessons learned from the pilot are applied to future development efforts.
* Professional development for teachers and allowing sufficient time for teaching in a virtual setting are important for school and student success

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