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WY: One small school making big dreams come true



WeAVING a Way to the Future: Students Crystal Washington and Allison Quiver work on a project underneath a traditional Native American eagle staff. The eagle staff is reminder to students that their education is vital to the future of their culture and their people.

Summary: This public online high school has taken students' dreams of graduating and turned them into reality. The school, run by a Native American school district, was born out of necessity—unreasonable distances to school, highly inconsistent attendance, and a sixty to seventy percent drop-out rate. The school, accredited and embraced by the state board of education and the Wyoming Department of Education, offers expanded curriculum with subjects not normally available in Wyoming high schools (with science curriculum such as oceanography). The result? Students' mastery of core subjects and their standardized test scores are on the rise, students are staying in school, and they're graduating.

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The dream catcher, a woven symbol of the Native American portal to the dream world, is a fitting logo for Ft. Washakie Charter High School. The school's Wyoming E-Academy of Virtual Education (WeAVE) catches its students' dreams of graduating from high school and turns them into reality.

One of only three charter high schools in Wyoming, Ft. Washakie Charter High School (FWCHS), located in Fremont County School District #21 (FCSD #21), is the only public online high school in the state, and the only one in the country operated by a Native American school district. FWCHS students hail from the Wind River Indian Reservation (which is jointly owned by the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapahoe nations), neighboring communities, and across the state.

Analyzing the options

An online high school was born as an innovative matter of necessity for this district. Says Gene Meier, director of the virtual high school and assistant district superintendent, "With no reservation high school, students had to endure a long commute to high schools located in border towns or to the Wyoming Indian High School. This makes consistent attendance difficult. Others attend out-of-state boarding schools, but many simply do not fare well educationally or socially in these schools. With a 60–70 percent drop-out rate, we had to do something dramatic to improve our students' chances of success. Our own high school seemed like the answer."

A charter school that did not require state legislative approval or use of state funds allowed the district to establish a high school quickly. Richard Ferris, president of the FWCHS board of education and tribal court judge, observes, "A school board starting and funding this type of school is unusual. We didn't create it because we were dissatisfied with an existing high school. Rather, we didn't have one and felt we needed it to help our kids."

Thinking creatively

After learning about online high schools at the 2001 National School Boards Association Annual Conference, district staff explored a virtual education

program. "So many features of online learning—round-the-clock accessibility from any location, visual and hands-on learning, non-competitive learning environment, self-paced coursework—seemed to fit well with our students' learning styles and need for scheduling flexibility," explains Meier. "We did our homework, including a visit to IBM headquarters, and drew up a schematic of how virtual education would work in our district."

The community reacted with understandable skepticism to this entirely new form of education. FWCHS board co-chair Carla Mann says,

| District characteristics |
|--|
| Name: Ft. Washakie Charter High School |
| State: WY |
| Type: Rural |
| Grades: 9–12 |
| Enrollment: 30–50 Full time; 50–60 Part time |
| Students per teacher: 20 |

“Through a series of meetings, we demonstrated how virtual education works. The community’s greatest concern focused on the legitimacy and validity of a high school diploma earned online. Once people understood that the school would be accredited by the state and would meet the same state and national educational standards as a traditional high school, they became more comfortable with the idea.” The State Board of Education and Wyoming Department of Education also liked the online charter high school idea. Jim McBride, former state education director of technology and now state superintendent of public instruction, worked closely with the district to resolve critical technology issues.

| Enrollment characteristics |
|---|
| Economically disadvantaged: n.a. |
| English language learners: 0% |
| Students with disabilities: All students have an individual learning plan |
| White: 50% Part time out of district |
| Black: 0% |
| Hispanic: 0% |
| Asian/Pacific Islander: 0% |
| American Indian/Alaska Native: 100% Full time |
| Other: 0% |
| Source: FWCHS |

In spring 2004, the Ft. Washakie Charter High School with WeAVE was born as a school district within a school district with its own board of education. Classes began in fall 2004. School facilities include two modular buildings, one with 35 computer work stations and another for administrative offices. It shares a campus with the K–8 school, the FCSD #21 school and community library, the Eastern Shoshone Culture Center, and a community technology learning center.

Making the connection

Initial concerns about enrollment evaporated as 10–15 students rapidly grew to over 60 within several weeks. According to principal Shad Hamilton, an average of 30–40 full-time students now come to the school facilities each day; 10–20 full-time off-site district students are enrolled and come on site less frequently. Most FWCHS students have previously dropped out of high school at least once, transfer in from another high school, are below grade level in core skills, or are considered to be at-risk. The very point of the school seemed to be coming alive—to recapture students and help them succeed.

Fifty to sixty part-time students from other districts also take a course or two for credit recovery, to fill in their schedule, or to access a class that isn’t available at their schools. FWCHS also provides basic instructional courses for school districts that have difficulty recruiting certified teachers.

Setting the standard

Admission to the high school and the WeAVE program is not a snap. As Meier observes, “Online education isn’t right for every student. They have to be motivated and self-disciplined. We screen students carefully.” The process includes a student essay about their goals and why they want to attend the school, an essay by a sponsoring parent or guardian about why the student should be admitted, an interview with students and their sponsors, and an online learning style self-assessment. Applicants lacking the motivation and self-discipline to complete the process are not likely to do well in a virtual environment, and are not accepted to the school.

Students do not need prior computer experience to be admitted. Technology director Katie Logan observes, “Most students already know the basics of the Internet, email, and word processing. If they don’t have the skills, we don’t feel it’s right to penalize them because they weren’t lucky enough to own a computer or have access to one. Most students get up to speed quickly with orientation and practice.”

All students follow an Individual Education Plan that puts them in charge of their learning process. They take courses at their own pace (within specified time limits) and may study just one subject or several during the course of the term. Regular assessment occurs through assignments, projects, tests, and state standardized tests such as PAWS (Proficiency Assessments for Wyoming Students) and MAP (Measures of Academic Progress).



Making the experience personal

Although instruction occurs online, school staff found that students benefit from personal support and a physical place to come to during the day. “Our hybrid system combines the best of both types of education: Online learning with traditional face-to-face support,” says Hamilton. “Certified teachers teach every course and monitor and interact with students through email, chat rooms and discussions, and grade projects and tests. This isn’t a system where students just do a lesson by themselves and then take a test until they pass it.”

Full-time students can work with teachers individually or in small groups at the school facility. Off-site full-time students usually have strong parental or family support and a high level of communication with teachers. Out-of-district, part-time students have regular support services from their home schools. FWCHS also identifies a local teacher who can be added to the online system to review these students’ work and intervene as needed.

Stretching the curriculum

With four full-time on-site teachers, eight off-site teachers, and a good content provider—Class.com—the virtual academy offers a broad curriculum, including oceanography, a subject not normally available in Wyoming high schools. (FWCHS contracts with Class.com for its standards-based curriculum that also provides alternatives for students who need different ways to learn.) Teacher Melissa Sprain observes, “You can tailor the online curriculum to your students. With our community college partners, we offer courses to teach our students’ Native American heritage, such as Native American studies and the Shoshone and Arapahoe languages. We’re planning a course on tribal government. In my physical education course, we focus on community health concerns such as diabetes.” The curriculum now includes Advanced Placement coursework. Dual enrollment with a local community college is also an option.

The school offers some face-to-face coursework, such as the art of pipe making, and activities such as cross-country track and student government. Each spring, the district sponsors “Five Days of Buffalo” to celebrate the Plains Indian culture with neighboring schools and communities. Tribal elders teach students the traditional uses of all parts of a slaughtered buffalo for food, clothing, tools, weapons, and shelter. Drummers, dance troupes, and storytellers help celebrate and keep alive the Native American heritage.

Fulfilling the dream

Access to year-round education 24 hours a day seven days a week and the ability to start a lesson or course where they left off enable students to juggle important responsibilities—anything from helping support their families by working, tending to the ranch, caring for elders, younger siblings, or their own children, to attending culturally important activities such as a funeral, which can last up to two weeks. “Family is everything in Native American culture so education or jobs are often put on hold in order to take care of family issues. Traditional schools’ rules for attendance and course requirements often cannot accommodate our students’ need for flexibility,” says Sprain. “It’s amazing to see how well students do when they can fulfill other responsibilities at the same time they’re going to school.”

Since its inception, students’ mastery of core subjects and their standardized test scores have improved. To date, five students have graduated from the Ft. Washakie Charter High School. “We’re very proud of them,” says Meier. “Five students may not seem like many, but it is five students who would not have earned a diploma without this opportunity.” While Meier admits that five may seem like a small number of graduates, he also points out that FWCHS does not yet have data for students who graduate after taking courses for credit recovery or for students from other districts who will graduate from their home districts with credits earned from FWCHS. Perfecting their system of data collection is another challenge that FWCHS is tackling.

“Setting up an online high school was a big risk,” says Meier, “but we knew we had to make it work. These five students are proof that it can.”

Lessons learned

- The growth of the program may be faster and more explosive than you imagined. The school anticipates serving 300–400 students in 2006–2007. Its sudden growth makes it necessary to expand the facilities. “Our plan called for serving students state-wide in Year 3, but we started serving students beyond the district and across the state in Year 1,” says principal Shad Hamilton.
- Enrollment that includes out-of-district students raises many logistical issues. Providing qualified on-site support and possible tuition for out-of-district students as well as methods to count students for state funding must be considered. Memoranda of understanding with other districts are a good way to address these issues.
- Research vendors and their products thoroughly. Deal with a reputable firm and select products that work well for your students and staff. Engage vendors as long-term partners. The original program selected by the district did not meet all requirements. After the first semester, a program was selected where certified instructors teach the courses and student-teacher interaction can occur. It also allows teachers to develop new online courses. “We asked our vendors to sign documents that go beyond the standard business contract. We want them to be as engaged in the school as we are,” says superintendent Gene Meier.
- State policies on virtual education may lag behind the implementation of your program. Meier says, “An unforeseen consequence of the program is that State education policy issues—such as methods for counting Carnegie units, accounting for student attendance, and funding—need to be reformulated or developed anew for virtual educational programs. Having reserve funds set aside is important because payment of the state’s student allotments can be delayed while policies are worked out at the state level.” Wyoming State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jim McBride says, “Like many states, we’re still operating in a brick-and-mortar environment. As virtual education becomes an integral part of the educational system, we need to work together to make reasonable and equitable policies.”
- Don’t overextend yourself on technology issues. Hire a well-qualified vendor instead. “Be smart enough to know what you don’t know about technology,” advises Katie Logan, district technology director. “Unless you have the technical expertise onsite to handle the ‘back-end business’ related to technology (such as servers) it is better to have highly qualified and competent vendors who provide this type of service.”
- A dedicated staff including teachers who are experienced online learners and educators is crucial to success. “Teachers who have earned a degree online or have taken online professional development courses well understand the process of virtual education,” says Meier. On-going professional development for teachers is a must. Funding is important, but should not be the only concern in developing a virtual education program; the needs of your students and community should come first. “Having available funds doesn’t mean that virtual education as the sole means of instruction or as an addition to the traditional face-to-face method is right for your district or students. You have to do your research and design a program that meets your particular needs,” observes Meier. “On the other hand, if you don’t have the funds, don’t make that an excuse not to look into virtual education. Your decision should be driven by what’s best for your students.”
- Strong and visionary leadership at the district level is necessary. Putting together a charter school and a new form of learning is not for the fainthearted. It requires time, energy, and devotion to do the necessary research, inform the community, hire a dedicated and experienced staff, and to work out the kinks in technology, especially in a rural area without an adequate communications infrastructure. All stakeholders must be onboard to make both the charter school and online education program a success.

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