

# POWERFUL PARTNERSHIP

HAMILTON COMMUNITY SCHOOLS TEAMS WITH  
MICHIGAN VIRTUAL TO MEET EVERY STUDENT'S NEEDS



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**W**hen Superintendent David Tebo arrived to lead Hamilton Community Schools in 2010, the West Michigan district's tagline was: "A personalized experience with exceptional results."

"I was in," Tebo said. Personalization has always been at the forefront of everything I've done for kids."

At the time, the district had been working to implement standards-based grading. The plan was to implement it by the 2016-17 school year. Teachers and administrators wanted a way to focus on individual students as they mastered – or struggled with – standards.



**Tebo**

"Our traditional system gives students education in a time-bound, lock-step process," Tebo said. "I've always felt we could do better than that. If we change the concept of time and how we work with our students and staff, we can meet that lofty goal of getting all kids to their potential."

As the district worked on standards-based grading training, Tebo and Mat Rehkopf, the district's director of teaching and learning, reached out to Michigan Virtual to explore the idea of personalizing learning for their students. The Hamilton administration saw blended learning strategies complementing their burgeoning work in standards-based and competency-based learning.

"It's difficult to individualize and personalize learning for kids when we batch them by date of birth," Tebo said. "I wanted to change how we did that and be a leader who allows for the flexibility of our students and our teachers."



**Teaching the teachers:** Val Capel (top, right), a third-grade teacher at Hamilton Elementary School, serves as a teacher leader in her district. "It's been phenomenal to work with teachers and focus in on success strategies for using technology in our learning spaces," she said. Jeff Gerlach (above), a Michigan Virtual instructional design coach, leads a professional development day before the new school year.

**On the cover:** Mat Rehkopf, director of teaching and learning for Hamilton Community Schools, talks with teachers during a Michigan Virtual training session.

## ***Introducing the project***

Hamilton invited staff from Michigan Virtual to present a professional development session on blended learning.

Some teachers were skeptical at first. But the opportunity to participate in blended learning training and lesson creation geared specifically for their students enticed the first cohort to come on board.

“Michigan Virtual explained to the teachers this was about meeting kids where they are, it was about taking what they knew about their students through our standards-based grading and building a lesson plan for them that met their individual needs,” Rehkopf said.

Gradually, teachers who had been skeptical got excited.

“When I walked in after day three of the initial training, teachers told me it was the best professional development they’d ever been a part of and they knew they would use it in their classrooms,” Rehkopf said.

Deanna Malloch was one of those teachers.

Growing up as the child of two tech-loving educators, she was surrounded by educational technology. As a student at Hope College, she was part of the first-ever educational technology committee.

“My teaching partners and I already were using technology in our classroom, so when we were offered the chance to be part of Michigan Virtual’s first cohort, we jumped right on board,” she said. “We wanted to learn what we could do better to meet the needs of our students.”

## ***Putting the tools to work***

Malloch teaches seventh-grade English and social studies at Hamilton Middle School. She and her partners created two blended units for Michigan Virtual as part of their training. One focused on reading “The Outsiders” by S.E. Hinton.

“I thought, what can I do to blend it and make it better?” she said. Instead of doing paper-and-pencil quizzes, she created reading checks in Google forms that were graded automatically. “And when I have struggling readers, I can post the audio links to the chapters in Google Classroom, and they can benefit from having it read to them.”

Malloch said by the end of the school year, her struggling readers bring their headphones to class, and when it’s time for quiet reading, they plug in.

“I’m meeting their needs, and I’m following their IEPs by having support in place for them.”

“We said to our first cohort, go talk to your colleagues, tell them it was a good use of your time, what you learned was applicable, and you’re rolling these things into your classroom,” Tebo said.

They did; teachers quickly signed up for cohorts two and three. Now, two-thirds of Hamilton’s teachers are trained, beginning to implement the district’s custom blended learning approach.

“Michigan Virtual has helped us flesh this out and create a blended environment in a very thoughtful way that doesn’t come from hardware or software or the bright-shiny-technological thing,” Tebo said. “It’s about the pedagogy around teaching kids in an environment that isn’t butts in seats for six and a half hours a day, five days a week. That’s not reality anymore.”

***Michigan Virtual has been working hard to provide a path to the future for students and educators since 1998.***

***As a nonprofit corporation focused on education, we believe brilliance resides in all of us, ready to change the world with next big idea. We’re dedicated to helping each student shine their brightest by enhancing their opportunities to learn and working to strengthen teachers who will show them the way.***

***By discovering new ways to grow, we’re taking K-12 education to the next level and working to leverage face-to-face, blended and online learning innovations that facilitate the advancement of education.***



## ***Benefiting every student***

Tebo is careful to point out he's not saying traditional classroom methods are bad. "I'm just saying if we continue to do it only that way, we'll never get all of our kids to their potential. We have 2,700 kids who walk through our doors every day, and to think one-size-fits-all education will meet 2,700 needs is pretty short-sighted."

Recognizing the diversity of needs reflected in the breadth of their student bodies, school districts such as Hamilton are turning to Michigan Virtual for professional development opportunities in blended learning to enhance teachers' abilities to meet each student's needs.

Sometimes, something as simple as automating quizzes or homework assignments can make a big difference in teachers' ability to offer individualized attention.

Rehkopf began his career teaching chemistry 15 years ago. "I can remember my class sizes were 16, 20 students. Today, you find very few classrooms that don't have 30 students in them. So, think about five periods a day, 30 students per period, now when you give an assignment, you have 150 assignments to grade, and everyone wants immediate feedback."

Working in the traditional classroom, it becomes nearly impossible to personalize student assessment.

"It's just not possible unless you do something blended, online to put them in their proper groups. I just don't see another way to personalize learning and meet kids where they are," Rehkopf said.

Tebo said partnering with Michigan Virtual was the only way Hamilton Community Schools could make this leap to blended learning.

"The partnership with Michigan Virtual was offered without expectation," Tebo said. "We all knew it might not work, but we all wanted to try. The ability to trust our teachers and staff to be trained to do things in a different way using new research and engagement strategies that are different than what they were trained to do is worth the time."