

BETTER TOGETHER

ST. CLAIR COUNTY'S SEVEN DISTRICTS TEAM UP WITH
MICHIGAN VIRTUAL TO OFFER LOCAL, ONLINE LEARNING



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Chances are you've seen ads on television. Or received big, glossy postcards in your mailbox. Or watched your inbox fill up with email solicitations.

Online schools are popping up everywhere, schools of choice are actively marketing themselves, and it seems everyone is vying for your district's students.

Schools in East Michigan's St. Clair County have come up with a way to combat the competition: They created their own online/school of choice hybrid.

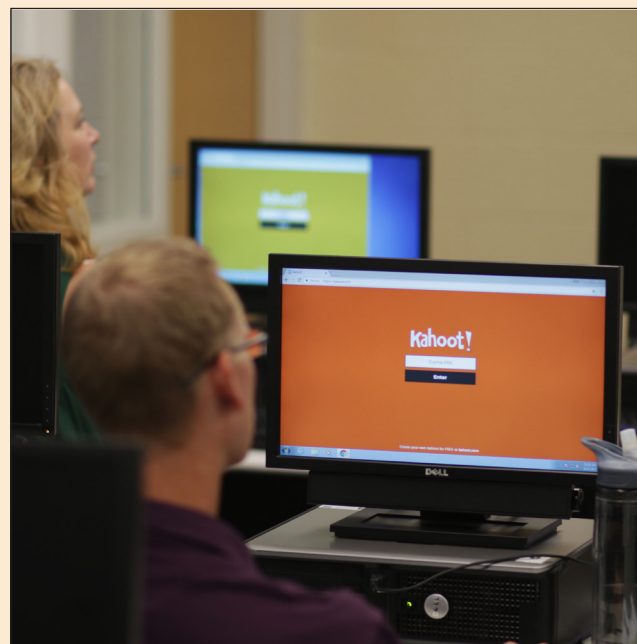


Miller

LearnON is a groundbreaking partnership, coordinated countywide through the St. Clair County Regional Education Service Agency (RESA). It connects the county's seven public school districts and is powered by Michigan Virtual.

"We've always been collaborative and cordial, not fighting over students across districts in our county," said Kevin Miller, superintendent for St. Clair County RESA. "But the elephant in the room always has been schools of choice. Do we really want seven different districts to have a separate online presence? Or do we want to collaborate for the benefit of all students in our county? That was the premise that launched the conversation about online learning."

Beginning in 2015, Michigan Virtual entered into collaborative partnerships with a select few Michigan school districts, all committing to intentionally focus on implementing a district-wide blended learning initiative. These partnerships spanned multiple school years, and while each district's strategies and objectives vary, all had the common goal of increasing student engagement and achievement through the implementation of personalized and blended learning strategies.



Teaching the teachers: Educator and author George Couros (top) spoke about leading innovative teaching and learning to teachers from across St. Clair County's seven school districts at a daylong learning symposium ahead of the 2017-18 school year. During the learning symposium (above), teachers tried out online tools such as Kahoot!, a game-based learning platform.

On the cover: Teachers from throughout St. Clair County's seven school districts came together for online and blended learning training in August.

Online and local

For St. Clair County, that meant building ways to deliver online learning from local sources. Rather than purchase complete courses from a vendor, including the teacher, school districts purchase the online course but pay local teachers to instruct and offer a wider variety of sections to students throughout the county.

A key component to this model is teacher professional development delivered face-to-face, online and in coaching professional learning teams throughout the year with other online Michigan Virtual instructors.

“The pedagogy of teaching online is an important component to all of our teacher training at Michigan Virtual,” said Kristin Flynn, Executive Director of Student Learning Services for Michigan Virtual. “We spend a great deal of time on how to engage, motivate, develop relationships, and provide effective feedback for students online while focusing on research and best practices.”

How it works

School districts are constantly faced with budget crunches, so they often set a minimum number of students who need to sign up for a section of a class before the district can offer it. In a traditional setting, schools pay the same amount to offer a class whether it has 15 students or 30. But in online education, schools only pay for the number of students in that virtual section.

“Say you have a World History class in Port Huron, and only 14 students sign up for it,” Miller said. “In today’s financial picture, you’re not going to offer that section. But if we take those 14 students from Port Huron, and we combine them with three students from East China and four students from Marysville and three students from Capac, suddenly we have a section with 24 students and it makes sense to run that class.”

Another benefit: The cost of that section has been spread over four districts rather than one. It gives students the opportunity to take the class they want without it being a drain on the district’s finances, running a local section with a low number of students.

“We’re paying the teacher per-student as well,” Miller continued. “If a teacher is willing to teach an extra section with even just eight students and make \$1,000 beyond their normal school day, then it works. When do teachers ever get to make extra money?”

All of this, ultimately, is being done to give students access to the best classes, regardless of the setting.

“Our students are getting high-quality courses offered by one of the premier institutions of online learning in our country,” Miller said of the Michigan Virtual partnership.

“All of St. Clair County’s school districts agree – relationships are the most important part of teaching, virtual or not,” said Theo Kerhoulas, Executive Director of Operations & Innovation for the Port Huron School District. “When we can have our own teachers teaching online to students across our seven districts, you have the best of both worlds. You have the flexibility for online learners, and you have the relationship piece with the teacher,” he said.

Dayna DesJardins teaches U.S. and World History at Port Huron Northern High School. She has taught online classes for students in her building for the past two years and was eager to be a part of this new county-wide project.

“I’m excited about getting the chance to teach students from different districts,” she said. “Michigan Virtual has done a nice job of communicating expectations to teachers and providing us with the resources to prepare.”

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.



DesJardins



DesJardins said she's been a fan of online teaching "from the beginning."

"The flexibility it offers students is huge," she said. "And it's a way to reach them in the modality they're used to. Students today are very tech-driven."

But even in the best circumstances, there are bound to be logistical challenges in cross-district collaboration.

"Within our seven districts, we have a wide range of learning platforms," said Kristin Day, Instructional Technology Consultant for St. Clair County RESA. "But working with Michigan Virtual has really helped with that. Everything Michigan Virtual does is already so standardized into what we do, so we don't have to make many adjustments."

Much of Day's role in this collaboration is helping teachers and administrators connect the dots with the technology. "What are the goals? What are the steps in between? How would this work with our system? Our end goal is always evolving, so I have to be very detail-oriented."



Day

Another problem, solved

An additional benefit to increasing access to online courses: Fewer tough decisions.

When courses are only offered in a traditional classroom setting, with limited sections, students often are faced with a decision: Do I take band or AP calculus? Creative writing or orchestra?

"Every single year, scheduling decisions are made that are not in a student's best interest just because that particular class is offered in the same hour as the other class," Miller said. "When band is offered first hour, and there are 150 kids in the marching band who take it, those kids can't take whatever else is only offered first hour."

"Kids benefit from more choice. Online learning gives that to them."

St. Clair County school districts launched this new approach in the fall of the 2017-18 school year. There are no guarantees they've found the magic bullet.

"We've said multiple times, 'Fail forward,'" Kerhoulas said. "It's definitely OK to take a risk with stuff like this, but if we fail, we have to fail forward and work toward what is best for our kids."

Day said the county partners are fortunate to work with Michigan Virtual.

"I feel like our rapport is great," she said. "We're asking a lot of questions. Nobody is acting like they have all the answers. Everybody is coming into it with the same understanding – this is going to be a journey."