

eSchool of the month

Open High School of Utah shares its ed-tech success with others

The winner of our June “eSchool of the Month” honor is the Open High School of Utah, a full-service virtual high school that serves students throughout Utah. Open High School of Utah serves 250 ninth and 10th grade students, and in the 2011-12 school year it will expand to include 11th and 12th grade students.

In this feature, Sarah Weston, the school’s curriculum director and technology coordinator, describes some of the initiatives that have helped the school serve its students effectively. (To nominate your own school or district for this award, go to <http://www.eschoolnews.com/eschool-of-the-month>.)

How does your school use technology to advance student learning?

Open High School of Utah (OHSU) is a public online charter high school. We are fully online, offering all high school courses in an LMS environment (a hosted version of Moodle, from Moodlerooms).

OHSU has implemented the use of multiple technology tools, all chosen for their ability to bring collaboration to the online environment. Tools such as Google Apps, Slidrocket, Skype, Voicethread, Oneeko, Glogster, Wallwisher, Scribblar, and Grockit are each web-based, collaborative tools. We give students accounts to use these tools, allowing students and teachers to work together from any computer, in real time, in a multitude of methods. Book clubs, study groups, peer editing, video discussion boards, and group presentations are all possible in the online environment. OHSU uses these cutting-edge tech tools to create interactive and collaborative online classrooms.

Has your school noticed an increase in student performance and/or motivation as a result of this technology use? If so, how?

At the end of our first year of operation, our state criterion-reference test scores were more than 10 points above the state average in English and science. Our average pass/completion rate was 76.3 percent—more than 40 percentage points higher than the biggest public online provider in the state of Utah. In addition, parent surveys revealed between 92.5 and 97.5 percent satisfaction ratings for curriculum, teacher responsiveness, and overall satisfaction. Parents and students [said] the characteristics they liked the best about OHSU are [its] flexibility, technology, and teacher interaction.

This [information] supports the focus we have at Open High School: using technology tools to create and provide an online classroom experience that is collaborative, interactive, and flexible.

How does your school use technology to streamline school administration and aid in decision-making?

We use 37signals Highrise as a CRM tool. Each teacher, staff member, and counselor has an account. All information from students’ contacts [is] recorded in Highrise, allowing teachers to easily have a holistic view of a student’s progress [or] concerns in school. We have found that this method of tracking and monitoring students gives faculty access to information that they would never have in a brick-and-mortar teaching environment. It assists with RTI [Response to Intervention] and helps us craft students’ educational plans that take into account their experiences in all their classes.



We use Genius SIS as our school information system. It integrates flawlessly with our Moodle site and keeps us from unneeded duplication in data entry. Student information, grades, attendance, activity logs, grade books—all sync between our LMS and SIS. In addition, the high level of activity tracking gives administrators, parents, and students access to the amount of minutes spent in each course in a day, updated grades and assignment feedback, transcript and credit tracking, and auto-reports on student progress that can be eMailed to staff/parents/

trators the birds-eye view that they need to respond quickly to data on student performance. It takes the guesswork out of administrative decisions. We no longer have to make gut administrative decisions on where to focus funds for RTI, teacher professional development, and at-risk students. Genius SIS makes it very clear where we need to focus our time and resources.

Has your school realized an increase in efficiency, a savings in administrative costs, a boost in staff or student performance, or some other tangible benefits as a result of this technology use? If so, how?

Effectively using the tools (reporting and otherwise) in Moodle, Genius SIS, and Highrise has allowed us to funnel school funds into teacher salaries and tech tools, as opposed to having to hire additional administrators and office overhead. Obviously, administration is a needed area of K-12 education, but often it is an area that is wrought with bloat, redundancy, and ineffective prac-



Open High School’s data systems help administrators target resources.

tices. When workflows are put into place that give administrators the drilled-down information they need, it simply takes less staff to manage a school. The traditional multi-layered management in schools puts only a small picture of the school in the hands of each staff member. The collaborative online tools that OHSU uses literally allow all administration, staff, and faculty to be on the same page.

How has your school financed its technology initiatives—through grants? e-Rate funds? Local funds? Corporate partnerships? Or some combination of these techniques?

For funding, we have used state and federal grants and also our WPU (Utah’s state per-student funding).

What initiative or project are you most proud of, and why?

OHSU has released 10 OER (open education resource) courses that are Creative Commons-licensed and openly available to instructors and schools worldwide to use as a



Sarah Weston

curriculum building block. An additional set of 20 courses will be released this fall, with subsequent course releases in following years.

OHSU has joined with TwHistory and the Utah Education Network (UEN) to develop a series of lesson plans and content targeted at Utah social studies standards using TwHistory. TwHistory is a historical-based platform that uses excerpts from journals, letters, records, and other primary-source documentation to literally broadcast (via Twitter) a stream of history in real time. OHSU is currently working on a Twitter reenactment—Freedom Riders—that will be released to correspond with a PBS special. It will be promoted at the state and national level by UEN and PBS. Four additional reenactments will be completed, accompanied by informational videos and teacher in-service workshops available to all Utah teachers.

What have been your biggest challenges in integrating technology into instruction and school processes, and why? How have you overcome those challenges?

One of the biggest challenges is training teachers. Even teachers who come to us with a Masters in Instructional and Technical Design have little experience with the cutting-edge tools being used in eLearning in the K-12 environment.

We have found one method of finding teachers who have an “aptitude” for online teaching. When we interview teachers, we usually start with a web-based video conference. It allows us to see how a teacher interacts in the online space.

A face-to-face interview follows. An additional part of the interview process is having the teacher audition by creating an example of an online lesson incorporating the tools of our current teachers (Moodle, Slidrocket, Voicethread, Screencasting, etc.). From the beginning, it is very clear who is a good fit for the online teaching environment.

Once we have hired teachers, we provide ongoing professional development to help train them in the use of tech tools. Teaching online means teachers must remain current with the ongoing developments in eLearning. We ask each of our teachers to be active in creating their own personal learning network, using Twitter, LinkedIn, and other web-based social tools that keep them tied into the most current developments. Many of our professional development sessions are put on by our own

teachers, who share their new finds and how they are applying them to their classrooms. It results in a continual evolution of our online classrooms.

What’s your best or most useful ed-tech advice for your colleagues?

The best advice I could give other educators would be to search out tools that are both collaborative and cloud-based. Those are the two key words that govern how we choose tools for our school. Tools must be collaborative, giving teachers, administrators, and students the ability for peer-to-peer and faculty-to-peer interactions, despite location or distance. Cloud-based tools serve a similar role, in that they give each end-user the ability to access school, materials, professional development, and resources from any place, at any time.

True innovation in education has the power to transform, but only if it is available for other schools to implement. Open High School does not just innovate and build for the benefit of its own students, but also openly shares the fruits of its efforts with other educators. 