



A la Carte Model

In schools using an a la carte model, students take one or more courses entirely online, while continuing to take traditional classes at a school. Students may take the online courses on or off campus.

The a la carte model has grown in popularity as Alabama, Florida, Michigan and Virginia now require students to take at least one online course before high school graduation. These states want to get students acquainted with virtual learning, which they will likely see in college and the workplace. Similar legislation is pending in other states.

In 2009, the rural Quakertown Community School District in Pennsylvania had a budget deficit that was worsening as more students choose to go to online charter schools. The district rolled out blended courses that September, in hopes of drawing them back. Today, more than half of the district's high school students are taking at least one online course, which is strongly recommended in the school's graduation policy.

About 90 percent of Quakertown's blended courses are developed by district teachers with their own curriculum. It took about 40 hours of professional development for teachers to learn to create their courses, including how to embed videos, link to outside sites, and set up exams, says Superintendent Lisa Andrejko. It took hundreds of hours more to actually develop the courses. The district licenses some courses.

A student may have traditional face-to-face classes for the first two periods of the day, then take a Chinese course in the school's cyber-lounge, and then go back to regular classes for the rest of the day. "The No. 1 advantage to blended learning is the flexibility, and all of the choices we can offer for a school in a small town," Andrejko says.

The results have been highly positive, according to Andrejko. From 2011 to 2012, the graduation rate increased from 88 percent to 95 percent. More students are taking AP courses, and the SAT and ACT scores are at the highest they have ever been in the district. Mean critical reading and mathematics SAT scores rose by 20 points from 2008 to 2012, and the average ACT scores exceeded the standard readiness scores in English, algebra, and social sciences.

Working online also has helped teachers create better tests for digital and face-to-face courses. Because the assessments are given online, teachers have to think of more in-depth questions that can't be answered quickly with a Google search, Andrejko says.

After the first year, 73 percent of teachers feel the initiative has increased student engagement, and 60 percent said they believe it has increased academic success, according to a district survey. "It's not cheaper to educate kids online," Andrejko says, "but you're going to keep them in your schools, and offer them flexibility in a competitive market with cyberschools and other opportunities."