

## LARGE URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT TURNS TO THE VIRTUAL HIGH SCHOOL TO HELP PROVIDE ACCESS & EQUITY FOR LOW INCOME POPULATION

### SITUATION

Walk into the city of Worcester, Massachusetts and you may feel as if you're in the United Nations. The city's successive wave of immigrants over the past 340 years has resulted in residents hailing from every country imaginable—from Albania to Vietnam. The third largest school district in the Bay State and one of the more underprivileged, Worcester Public Schools, is as varied as its surroundings with 80 languages spoken throughout the district. Finding commonality may seem impossible when faced with such a diverse population, but there exists a collective language of achievement.

### SOLUTION

They did this by partnering with The Virtual High School, the non-profit pioneer of K-12 online learning. A collaborative of worldwide schools, VHS offers much of the same diversity as the Worcester Public School District with the potential to have students from different countries participating in each class together with a teacher that is often located in another state or country. For every teacher the district provides that is trained to teach a VHS online course, the school receives 25 student seats per semester.

Initially Worcester participated in the organization's Online AP® Academy grant, which afforded 52 low-income middle and high schools worldwide the opportunity to partake in VHS' wide range of AP classes in exchange for providing a teacher. The initial grant made it possible to offer the VHS courses at three of their high schools and the success of this program led to an additional grant. Shortly

thereafter, Worcester Public Schools was able to allocate and reserve city funds to pay for the VHS offering on a continual basis for all of the district's participating high schools.

Today, Worcester Public Schools participates in VHS with four teachers who each receive a reduced workload for teaching a VHS course, has 100 student seats that are shared amongst the high schools, and often purchases additional seats as needed to accommodate demand.

"We want every student who desires to take an online course, the opportunity to do so," said Lisa Dyer, Manager of Staff Development. "Even when we don't know if the student will be successful, we need to try. We've even had a number of special education students with learning disabilities on IEP's take classes and I know of one, in particular, who had great results and is planning on taking college online because of it.



*"I didn't realize that psychology was so much work until I took VHS' Psychology Honors class. I like the fact that it is more like a college class. It is all up to you to do your work, there is no teacher rushing you or telling you what you need to do—it's just you. This assignment made me realize there is a lot of work that has to be put into being in any area of Psychology."*

William Sanchez  
Junior, Worcester Technical High School



- ▶ Urban Disadvantaged District
- ▶ Pilot through Online AP® Grant
- ▶ Four VHS Teachers
- ▶ 100+ Student Seats
- ▶ Special Ed & IEP Participation

## continued

Stephanie Stockwell is a math teacher at Worcester Technical High School and began teaching online a year ago in addition to her role as VHS site coordinator for her school. "Our school culture is very much about things like doing well on standardized tests so, in general, our students are on a very clear track and go above and beyond what's expected of them," said Stockwell. "VHS fits in nicely with that, not only for AP, but also for providing electives since we have a very minimal offering."

## RESULTS

Worcester's investment in VHS over the years has paid off. Enrollment in AP courses in the district has nearly doubled, so much so that the school has begun offering more face-to-face AP classes. "By offering VHS AP classes, we've been able to promote AP and garner more

interest in it overall, which has helped us to identify classes that we could successfully offer in-person," said Dyer.

Of all of Worcester's high schools, South High has been particularly noteworthy in producing the most qualifying AP scores. The school's AP enrollment has increased so much that the district has recently added a number of new math and science AP courses.

"As an urban district I feel that VHS is particularly a good fit for us because of the flexibility it offers," said Dyer. Most of our students have a lot of family, work and other responsibilities that they are juggling. Without VHS, many of these kids wouldn't be able to take an advanced class because they just don't have time in their schedule during the day."

## about the organization

Founded in 1996 and headquartered in Maynard, MA, The Virtual High School is the pioneer of K-12 online learning. Since then, the nonprofit organization has been setting the standard for quality online education. VHS provides engaging courses taught in global online classrooms for secondary school students and online professional development in 21st century teaching best practices for educators. The organization also meets the unique educational needs of schools through custom course development, private course offerings, and support for blended learning initiatives.

VHS' design and delivery standard was the model used by the National Education Association in their recommended standards for online learning. The organization has won numerous awards, including the Stockholm Challenge Award for Global Excellence in Information Technology and is a three-time winner of the United States Distance Learning Association's (USDLA) award for Excellence in Programming and Excellence in Best Practices.

