



Strategic Engagement with Online Education

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Schools that are beginning their journeys with online learning often ask, “Where do we start?” and “How do schools that are further down this path engage strategically?” All independent schools are unique, therefore many factors can lead to strategic engagement in online learning: culture, financial stability, student and parent course demand, and other strategic initiatives. However, most schools start with a single reason to enroll students (usually to alleviate scheduling conflicts or expand course offerings) and a single reason to engage faculty (usually to explore new pedagogical approaches), after which momentum builds. That said, the most strategic schools are the ones that have leaders who put online learning on the table as a possible solution to challenges that arise around time, space, or staffing. As online learning gains traction, a paradigm shift occurs, moving from a mindset of using online learning to solve problems to a mindset of leveraging online resources to propel teaching and learning forward within the school. The snapshots below capture how five different schools in the Online School for Girls consortium have engaged strategically in online learning:

Enrollment Driven by Student Engagement

2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015
2	0	8	20	25

This school was a founding member of the Online School for Girls. Yet, the first few years of the program were only marked by minimal enrollments and very little faculty interaction. The school’s administration recognized that it needed more student and faculty engagement, and thus began to encourage faculty to consider teaching for OSG more strategically and directly—initially two faculty members took professional development courses and committed to teach for OSG. At the same time, the school committed tuition for students to take OSG courses and instituted an application process, making the selection more privileged and desirable. Administratively, the school decided that OSG courses would count as school courses and appear on school transcripts. In 2012-2013, the school strategically focused on offering two courses through OSG. Over subsequent years, the school has continued to look for courses to add to their catalog through OSG. The school’s next steps include deeper engagement of the faculty in online learning. This summer the school will offer a professional development opportunity through OSG for more than twenty faculty members in order to foster greater understanding and curriculum development around blended and online learning. The school considers OSG to be a true partner in advancing pedagogy and expanding opportunity, and believes that the partnership will continue to grow over subsequent years.

Enrollment Driven by School Strategy and Program Expansion

2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015
4	5	18	33	32

This school’s journey into online learning began in 2010 with four students, when the school decided to “test the waters” of online learning. The following summer, key faculty members volunteered to take online professional development courses on blended learning. Organically, teachers and students began to see how the school could re-imagine the use of time and space,



and the school realized that OSG provided several opportunities beyond what could be offered on campus. Not only did its partnership with OSG allow the school to greatly expand elective offerings without increasing their staff, but it also allowed their students to gain new college-preparatory skills and collaborate with girls all over the world. For these reasons, the school now requires the completion of an online course for graduation and the school has reduced the number of low-enrollment courses that are offered face-to-face. Five years into strategic engagement with online learning, the school expects to enroll fifty-eight students for the 2015-2016 school year.

Enrollment Driven by Small Class Size

2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015
9	5	3	13	28

Over a five-year period, the school increased enrollment in OSG classes to meet its goal of enrolling about 25% of upper school students in an OSG class each year. In the first year, this school looked to OSG only to provide student elective and faculty professional development courses while the community acclimated to the safe and high quality, albeit different, online learning environment. In years two and three, OSG enrollments alleviated scheduling conflicts for students and freed up teachers—who might have otherwise been teaching under-enrolled classes—to coach, teach in the core curriculum, take extended maternity leave, or perform other service to the school. The school was now using OSG as a partner. In year four, the school started using OSG strategically in the curriculum: the school began budgeting for OSG enrollments annually, and put OSG courses in the course catalog as well as on student transcripts. Enrollments grew exponentially as many seniors completed their math requirement with OSG, where the girls could choose from five advanced math courses, and the school transitioned its Latin program to a hybridized sequence (some courses on-campus, some courses online). By year five, not only were students exploring the myriad of humanities and science courses offered by OSG, but the school also launched a comprehensive STEAM strand by integrating face-to-face requirements with computer science and engineering coursework through OSG. The school now promotes the OSG experience to every rising ninth grade family, with the goal that all students will graduate having taken an online class.

Specific Course Engagement

2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015
3	4	3	17	19

Since 2010, this school has dramatically increased its enrollment in OSG courses as a way of extending the Upper School curriculum to meet the academic needs of an increasingly diverse student body. Online course enrollment at this school arose out of individual student goals and desires. Students who expressed an interest in a specific academic area not represented in the school’s curriculum or who sought additional academic challenge might be advised to take advantage of the OSG offerings. Initially, online courses were generally ancillary to the curriculum rather than a component of the curriculum. As the Women in Science and Engineering Program (WISE) has grown, so has the student interest in math, science, and technology, and the institutional imperative to build a strong STEAM program is now very much at the forefront of the school’s strategic planning. With these goals in mind, the school became far more transparent and intentional about including online courses in the academic advising and college search processes. Issues of equity and access have intensified the importance of this transparency in the service of the school’s broader commitment to diversity and social justice. To this end, the school now publicizes a series of OSG courses in the Upper School curriculum guide as additional options to help students fully realize their academic goals. As a school that celebrates the empowerment of girls, the school recognizes the importance of equipping its students with the tools needed to navigate a global culture, which demands fluency in online communication and flexibility in our approaches to teaching and learning.

Specific Department Engagement Led to School-Wide Engagement

2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015
0	3	4	18	23



The introduction of online education was very deliberate at this school. Initially, the school enrolled students in advanced mathematics courses that tended to have low enrollment. Over time, the school has enrolled students in OSG courses to alleviate scheduling issues and expand course offerings (particularly in the sciences and at the AP level). The school found that as students took OSG courses, they were enthusiastic about their courses and their teachers, allowing for even greater program expansion. During the 2014-2015 school year, the school has students enrolled in eight different courses ranging from music theory, to mathematics, science, and social studies. Moreover, the school has a strong commitment to college preparation, and believes that eventually all students will need the opportunity to take a quality online course as a part of their high school experience. Engagement of faculty members in OSG professional development courses has also been key in school-wide understanding of online learning. New faculty take the course designed for teaching in a girl's school and all the professional development that the faculty has taken has received rave reviews.

Conclusions

In each example, students and faculty engaged in online learning programs while school leaders cultivated the credibility and usefulness of online learning, built momentum for program growth, and expanded into the online space when opportunities arose. There are a number of commonalities among these examples, including:

- ***Schools engaged strategically to enhance their curricular objectives.*** They used online learning to meet subject-specific goals, create interdisciplinary strands, alleviate schedule conflicts, and smooth friction resulting from under-enrolled classes.
- ***Online learning became an extension of the school's programming.*** Strategically engaged schools used online learning partners (in these cases, the Online School for Girls) as a flexible department within the school.
- ***Faculty engaged in online learning as a part of their professional development.*** Teachers learned about new pedagogical approaches and gained first-hand experience in online learning. Not only did this serve to establish online learning as a part of the school's approach to teaching and learning, but it also advanced cutting edge tech tools and personalized practices in the face-to-face classrooms.
- ***Schools treated their online learning consortium as a true partner in problem solving.*** School leaders looked to their consortium to reliably add useful, affordable, and implementable ideas, and to help plan for long-term strategic engagement.
- ***Schools removed barriers to online learning.*** While the specific barriers depended on the needs and challenges of the school (financial efficiency, transcript credit, school climate, faculty receptiveness to change, etc.), each school looked to make sure that policies or personalities did not stand in the way of engagement with online learning.

All of the examples demonstrated that it might take years to cultivate community confidence in online learning and figure out how to use online learning strategically. In each case though, the key to establishing online learning was the willingness of school leadership to consistently seize opportunities to move particular courses and professional development online, and to partner with the consortium to advance their mission and strategic goals.

