CASE STUDY

INTERDISTRICT COLLABORATION POWERED BY OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE

THE CALIFORNIA–OHIO–WISCONSIN (COW) PROJECT

When education leaders from innovative districts come together, innovative projects result. That's what happened in early 2015 when Devin Vodicka, superintendent of Vista Unified School District in California; Matthew Miller, superintendent of Mentor School District in Ohio; and Patricia Deklotz and Theresa Ewald, superintendent and assistant superintendent of Kettle Moraine School District in Wisconsin, found themselves seated at the same table during a meeting of the League of Innovative Schools. The League, run by Digital Promise, is an independent, bipartisan nonprofit authorized by Congress to use technology and research to improve all Americans' opportunities to learn. It brings together dedicated district leaders from across the country to leverage technology and new approaches to improve student outcomes. In this case, the chance meeting resulted in the COW—California–Ohio–Wisconsin—Project.

From idea to implementation

The COW leaders wanted to see if they could develop a competency-based, interstate, interdisciplinary course focusing on a single topic. Each district sent two teachers to the Mentor School District outside Cleveland to work on the project for three days in July 2015. Together they developed curriculum around a singular guiding question: "How do people affect the land and how does the land affect people?"

They "focused on Common Core English language arts (ELA) standards for the skills and learning, using social studies as the context for addressing those standards," said Theresa Ewald, assistant superintendent for teaching and learning for Kettle Moraine.

Another challenge, according to Bob Boyd, director of technology for Kettle Moraine, was "having 165 or so students trying to collaborate with different levels of infrastructure handling network traffic—or not." Shorr added another issue: "There isn't any off-the-shelf content for what they were teaching. Everything had to be something they had built, adopted, or adapted."

"We used current information, including open educational resources," said Erin English, director of blended and online learning for Vista. Open educational resources (OER) are licensed in such a way that educators can share, reuse, and adapt them to meet the needs of their students—a perfect vehicle for this project. In addition to developing units of study tied to standards and finding appropriate resources for activities, the COW teachers designed the specifications of a project through which students would demonstrate their learning.

Educators in the three states started to teach the units at the end of October. Students were put into small cross-district groups and selected a subtopic related to the guiding question. "The students had to come up with an idea of a [project] to demonstrate their learning, and they had to choose the ELA standards they were going to address, then create the [project]," said English. "It was hard, because they had never even seen the standards before, much less had to tie their work to them."

A promising start offers ideas for refinement

The results, however, "blew me away," said English. At the end of the course, Vista held a showcase for students to display their projects. "The parents came out in droves, and they and the kids were proud of the work. And they should have been, because the projects reflected very deep thinking and learning, and the methods of displaying them—such as a Claymation movie—were creative and effective. One student told me, 'I can finally learn and show what I am thinking, not just what the teacher wants me to think.'" Teachers benefited as well, according to Ewald: "Teachers were able to interact with like-minded people from other parts of the country. That always is beneficial and results in even more idea generation."

There are many lessons to be learned for next time. "We found that the students didn't get into soft-skill standards enough. We plan to look more deeply at the ELA standards, especially collaboration, communication, and presentation skills, teaching those explicitly," said Shorr. Participating teachers are developing in-class and self-paced modules to support the students and exploring ways to increase the use of asynchronous collaboration despite time zone challenges and differences in technology access across districts.

A few teachers struggled with the new approach, suggesting they didn't have as much contact with their students as they were used to. But "students were getting more face time with each other as they were off on their quests and turning to each other with questions instead of the teachers. Teachers had a hard time figuring out how well the students were learning," said English. "As a result, we will be designing more periodic check-ins to be sure they know students are making progress."

The bright future of going open

A key takeaway centered on the instructional materials used. "Mentor is using this experience … to develop project-based learning modules specific to Ohio standards, and all of them will be OER. This is a major step in our move to eliminate all paid content," said Shorr. English and Ewald have similar thoughts. "My observation is that when kids are using OER materials and can select them, they are getting a wider experience and learning to be selective, as opposed to the textbook feeding it to them," said English. "In Kettle Moraine," according to Ewald, "students routinely look for content on their own because [teachers] encourage students to engage with content that fits their passion."

Through the COW Project, the three districts have signed on to the #GoOpen initiative. Kettle Moraine hopes to glean the processes others are using to discover and vet OER materials. Similarly, Vista is "interested in the collective wisdom from people who have been doing this a while," said English. Mentor has been considering how best to leverage OER for some time and Superintendent Matthew Miller is committed to sharing widely the instructional materials they develop. Vista has a similar goal. "If we can transform education with our population of 60 percent of students on free and reduced lunch and 10 percent homeless, others can, too. We want to be a model for the rest of the nation," said English.

This case study was commissioned by ASCD as part of the association's commitment to #GoOpen, a U.S. Department of Education campaign to encourage states, school districts, and educators to use openly licensed educational materials. To learn more, go to www.ascd.org/goopen.