



CASE STUDY

TO TURN CHALLENGES INTO OPPORTUNITIES, A RURAL DISTRICT GOES OPEN



WILLIAMSFIELD SCHOOLS, ILLINOIS

When newly hired Superintendent and Curriculum Director Tim Farquar came to Williamsfield Schools in 2013, he was already familiar with the small, rural town about 30 minutes from Peoria, Illinois. He had grown up there, as had his parents and grandparents. Yet this homecoming to a district of 300 K–12 students wasn't completely smooth.

When he arrived, the elementary teachers were trying to select new math textbooks aligned to the Common Core State Standards. Farquar knew from his prior work as a content specialist at the Illinois State Board of Education that the available math textbooks did not align well to the new standards. That was his first challenge.

The second challenge was that the district was struggling to provide adequate access to technology, including creating a technological infrastructure robust enough to support regular use in the classroom.

By embracing open educational resources (OER), which are freely available and licensed in such a way that educators can share, reuse, and adapt them to meet the needs of their students, Farquar felt that he could address both challenges at once, turning them into opportunities.

The first challenge: Elementary math resources

After comparing the standards with the scope and sequence they had already established, Williamsfield teachers started to select OER materials and create some of their own. "Our elementary teachers are utilizing a variety of online sources and curating their own to provide skill-building activities within the established scope and sequence. We give them the autonomy to use a variety of platforms," said Farquar. The teachers were energized, even though it was much more work than just cracking open a textbook.

Bringing parents along on this journey was a bit trickier, said Farquar, because "parents were used to helping their kids with the sample problems provided in the textbook." The teachers had to educate parents about the new math program and provide them with other resources and websites that emphasized problem solving, number sense, and other concepts that might not have been as familiar to them. "The school gave them good places to go and calmed their fears," Farquar said.

The second challenge: Technology access

The second challenge—insufficient access to technology—was addressed by applying the money saved by using OER materials. Farquar estimates that in 2013, the district



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was able to divert approximately \$8,000 from a forgone math textbook adoption to purchase enough Chromebooks for all Williamsfield students in grades 1–4. Since then, all students in grades 5–12 have also gotten devices.

Calling on its increased access to technology and the efforts of innovative teachers, Williamsfield has worked hard to expand high-quality academic opportunities for students, particularly in the sciences. For instance, with science teacher Lori Secrist’s support, high school students can now enroll in a variety of massive open online courses (MOOCs) from various prestigious institutions. “The level of engagement and excitement has been fun to watch,” said Farquar. “They are not just doing time—they are delving deeply into content; they are excited and learning.” The result of using OER is an environment that is “more dynamic and less static,” according to Farquar.

Secrist said the biggest transition for her from a teacher’s perspective was that now “students can do things that they are interested in instead of having one prescribed method that comes from a textbook. Kids can do what they are truly interested in, and when they are truly interested, they are engaged. And when they are engaged, they learn.”

The results

The effect of using OER and related changes on the faculty has been palpable. “I have seen our staff become more dynamic teachers, using all the resources that are available,” said Kathy White, the Williamsfield business education teacher. Zack Binder, a principal, added, “We have teachers being more creative because there are more options and they don’t feel tied to the textbook.” The effect on students, according to Binder, is just as significant: “Students are excited to learn because anything can happen.”

Plans for the future

Williamsfield wants to embrace the spirit of openness and give back to the OER community, sharing the OER materials they have created and serving as an ambassador for the #GoOpen project. Although the district would be the first to assert that there is no single scripted way to go open, it does believe the journey offers benefits to both teachers and students. According to Farquar, “Kids’ visions of themselves, of their future, and the world has really opened up.”

“If a little district in a rural pocket of Illinois can change the environment for students so that they can not only learn but also create things that other students and teachers can use,” Farquar concludes, “then why can’t every district do that?”

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.



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