

Bringing World Language Education to Everyone

Learn how one small Vermont school's "transformative" decision to create a blended learning program has galvanized its students, faculty and community.

In 2011, the [Weybridge Elementary School](#) went global. Nestled in a bucolic village of 800 residents in Vermont's Champlain Valley, the tiny school, which has 50 students in K-6, became the first in Vermont to offer high quality, online world language instruction to its students.

Certainly, school leaders, including Weybridge Principal Christina Johnston, recognized the benefits of second language acquisition for younger learners. It



seems like every week a new study is released that shows how learning a language can boost critical thinking skills, creativity, cultural awareness, empathy and memory. Learning languages also better prepares students for academic and career success.

Despite the proven benefits of early language learning, many elementary schools don't offer world language programs. Traditional language programs are expensive and trained language teachers, especially in languages like Chinese, are difficult to find.

In 2009, Weybridge began a limited brick-and-mortar Spanish language program. In 2011, Weybridge

seized the opportunity to incorporate a more comprehensive, digital learning program in order to increase the scope and frequency of instruction and practice, and extend language learning into students' homes.

The school worked closely with Middlebury Interactive Languages, the leading provider of online and blended language instruction, to integrate the blended courses into their curriculum. Middlebury Interactive is a joint venture between Middlebury College and K12, Inc. that has taken the pedagogy of Middlebury College's famed Language Schools and adapted it to the online and blended learning environments.

The partnership allowed Weybridge to deliver its students access to the nation's best world language curriculum—developed by top language professors—and authentic language and cultural material in a dynamic blended learning environment. The program uses original online content (videos, animation and task-based activities) to help students understand language and culture.

[Weybridge's Spanish Program](#) was designed to:

- Prepare students who begin the Spanish program in kindergarten, by the end of the 8th grade, to achieve the intermediate level in all skill areas: listening, speaking, reading and writing, as outlined in the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) guidelines.

- Support students' capacity to communicate and genuinely interact with others who speak Spanish.
- Incorporate grade-level core curriculum (STEM, English language arts, social studies, music, art, physical education) and enhance students' understanding, enjoyment and use of English language (history, derivations, patterns, grammar, syntax, mechanics).
- Empower students to continue learning outside of the classroom setting and to help parents become more involved in the world language education of their children.

Transforming School Culture

One of the most remarkable aspects of the language program is how it has galvanized the entire Weybridge faculty to helping students learn world languages. In addition to the hands-on leadership provided by Principal Johnston, Spanish teacher Michael Portal, and Megan Sutton, Weybridge's technology integrationist, have been instrumental in the ongoing implementation of Middlebury Interactive's courses.

But the commitment to the program has been universal among the teachers: the classroom, art and music teachers have all contributed to the success of the program. Having all of the teachers on-board as curious, supportive and critical advocates of its relevance to student learning across disciplines has been essential to the success of the program.

The program has also been a huge hit with the students, who have embraced both the technological applications and the Spanish curriculum. Portal said, "The students have all shown great interest in the program and love how interactive it is. I appreciate that it seems to address the needs of different types of learners and that students can move at their own pace."

Since the courses are fully accessible outside of the classroom, parents have the opportunity to work—and learn—with their students at home or at the library. "This fall, parents have reported that students come home eager to share Middlebury Interactive with them, which means Spanish is 'in the homes' and not limited to the school environment," said Principal Johnston.

The result has been a different view of world languages, one that recognizes its importance in putting students on a path to academic achievement and cultural empathy. "The language program has grown from being perceived as an enrichment activity to a core subject area that is increasingly integrated with and central to the rest of the school curricula," said Principal Johnston. "Middlebury Interactive's courses have been transformative to our school and is unique in my 40 years of experience as an educator."

Positive Results

While the program is in its early stages, it has already proven to be very positive for the students and community. Over the past three school years,

approximately 100 students have used Middlebury Interactive's courses. While the school has informally assessed students' proficiency relative to the state and national standards, this is the first year Weybridge will be using assessments such as STAMP and other standard measures.

Speaking Lab: Greetings / 12

Record yourself saying the greetings, then record yourself saying the sentences in Spanish.

Hola, ¿Cómo te llamas?

Adiós

Buenos días

Buenas tardes

Buenas noches

¿Cómo te llamas?

Bien, gracias

¿Cómo estás?

Yo me llamo...

Por favor

Record a sentence saying "Hello, how are you?"

Record a sentence saying "My name is _____, what is your name?"

A task-based exercise from one of Middlebury Interactive Language's elementary Spanish courses.

The Weybridge students now entering seventh grade are prepared to reach the intermediate level in all skill areas as outlined in the ACTFL guidelines by the end of eighth grade, or one year earlier than would have been possible without the courses. These students have a leg up on their peers by possessing the creativity and confidence that is difficult to achieve through late-start language programs.

But the language program has also become a point of pride for the community, which in recent years saw enrollment at the school dip. The school was always regarded as well-run and a positive place for learning, but the dwindling enrollment led to whispers of closure and consolidation. The language program has clearly become a selling point as parents visit the school. The school population has clearly turned the corner and is on the upswing, and many view this program as a great marketing tool for the town to attract young families who make education a priority.

Successful Model for Vermont and Beyond

While Middlebury Interactive Languages is headquartered in Vermont, the company was growing more rapidly in other states, like Florida, Michigan and Texas, that had policies in place to encourage virtual learning. But it was looking to increase its reach within its home state.

The Weybridge model proved that Vermont schools, including the smallest ones, could benefit from—and take advantage of—high-quality online language programs. This, in turn, encouraged Middlebury Interactive and Middlebury College to create the Vermont World Language Initiative (VWLI), a statewide program to increase access to world language digital and blending learning resources.

The VWLI provides participating public or private secondary schools with deeply discounted, unlimited access to Middlebury Interactive's academically rigorous, world language courses in Chinese, French, German, Latin and Spanish. In addition, Middlebury College is subsidizing the costs for content development and on-site teacher professional development training for each participating school on an annual basis. The first year of the VWLI will reach up to 10,000 students at 28 Vermont schools this fall. The program also has the potential to boost the Ver-

mont economy by creating a culturally aware, bilingual workforce. At the VWLI launch in January, Governor Peter Shumlin hailed the program for helping "more Vermont students gain the language skills they need to prepare for the global economy."

The Third-Party View

A challenge for all educators, from small schools like Weybridge to larger urban districts, to ensure that content and courses are effective in helping students learn. For that reason, Middlebury Interactive tapped the Center for Research and Reform in Education



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—Weybridge Principal Christina Johnston

at Johns Hopkins University to conduct a third-party assessment of its courses. Johns Hopkins researchers surveyed teachers, lab monitors and program administrators that are using Middlebury Interactive's courses across different implementation models and also conducted a case study of Middlebury Interactive's Fluency level blended learning courses.

Johns Hopkins reported that the feedback from educators was "overwhelmingly positive surrounding the pedagogy, the authentic material and overall content." The report concluded that "Middlebury Interactive's courses are very successful in promoting cultural awareness and appreciation and growing language proficiency."

Middlebury Interactive CEO Jane Swift was buoyed by the Johns Hopkins results and her team has used the report to help improve the courses and teacher/students experience. Swift, the former Massachusetts governor, sees the potential for courses to help transform how students learn world languages.

"More than almost any other subject, world language adapts extremely well to the blended and online environments. We believe our courses are providing more teachers and students access to top content and training that simply wasn't available before."