25 IDEAS
FOR ONLINE AND BLENDED LEARNING SUCCESS
Tips from Three Experienced Educators

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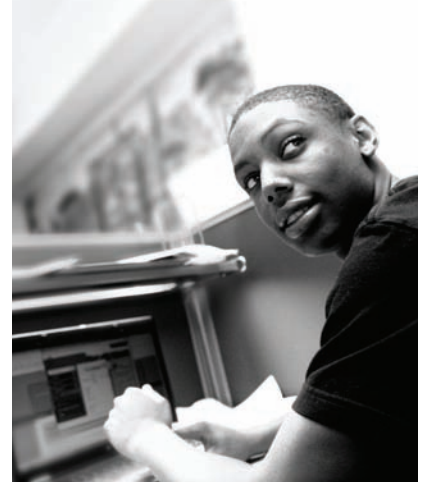
As an increasing number of schools and districts adopt online learning as a way to boost graduation rates, expand their course catalogs, and personalize learning for every student, it's important to understand the challenges and obstacles educators face as they introduce new programs. During a live webinar on March 13, 2013, three prominent educators—Carol Keenan, Tres Tyvand, and Keith Wilson—shared some of what they've learned during their years of experience with online education. Read on to learn about their recommendations to ensure an online program's success.

CAROL KEENAN
Director of Virtual Education and Teacher Programs

Virtual Independent School Network (VISNET)

Greensboro, NC

Since 2009, Carol has worked to create, develop, and implement online education for VISNET, a national educational consortium that provides its members with high-quality, affordable, online resources, tools, and professional learning opportunities to support innovative teaching and learning. Developed by independent school educators in reaction to market demands, VISNET offers comprehensive resources and training for 21st-century schools. The consortium now includes independent schools from North Carolina, Virginia, Florida, South Carolina, and California.

TRES TYVAND
Student Services Coordinator Bend-La Pine Schools Online

Bend, OR

Tres Tyvand has worked with the Bend-La Pine School District for 12 years. She was a high school English teacher before becoming a program coordinator with her district's online learning program six years ago. Tres moved into a student services position in 2012 and oversaw the launch of Bend-La Pine's K–12 online school program. All Bend-La Pine School District kindergarten through 12th grade students are eligible to enroll in the program, and students from outside the district can become eligible through a district transfer. Currently, about 1,400 students participate in the district program that provides flexible, part-time, and full-time online options.

KEITH WILSON
Principal

Lawrence Virtual School

Lawrence, KS

Keith Wilson is the principal of a full-time virtual school in Lawrence, Kansas. Lawrence Virtual School and Lawrence Virtual High School serve more than 1,500 K–12 students across the state. It has a special education population of approximately 12 percent, and approximately 15 percent of the students are eligible for supplemental education services. The state-sponsored charter school uses the curriculum from Fuel Education's content partner, K[12], to provide students with an individualized learning experience.

What needs or issues are you trying to resolve with online education?

1. Online programs can help schools and districts excel by providing richer, more personalized learning options for students and their families.

KEITH WILSON: We needed to address the need for scheduling flexibility and bullying issues, and were looking for a cost-effective way to provide an education to students dealing with medical conditions. We needed a way to provide individualized instruction for students who were struggling with the pacing in the brick-and-mortar setting. And, we were facing staffing issues for low-enrollment classes. Online education was a vehicle that has helped us address all of these issues.

CAROL KEENAN: Schools today are faced with a lot of challenges. But some of the challenges are occurring because we are still schooling like we did 30 years ago. How do we remain relevant and engage today's iGeneration? Online education allows us to create a student-centric environment where we can personalize learning plans and turn our students into 21st-century learners.

2. Use online learning to meet the unique needs of students.

CAROL KEENAN: Online programs have helped our schools fulfill their mission by providing students with a more customized and differentiated education. We see online learning used to meet the needs of advanced students. We see it used for credit recovery. We see it used to offer unique electives. The schools have used online learning to extend their own instructional programs.

TRES TYVAND: One of the key reasons families are coming to us is to customize their child's

education, so my primary goal is to help them do just that. If they ask a question, my answer is always yes. Do they want to slow down? Do they need to change something? Whatever it is, I let them know that they are welcome to come in and meet with me or schedule an in-depth phone discussion at a time that's dedicated to just their family.

KEITH WILSON: Not long ago, I received an e-mail from one of our eighth graders who wanted to thank me for having this opportunity in our state. Her father, who was serving as the Learning Coach for this child, was diagnosed with liver cancer about a year and half ago. She was able to spend the entire year with her father in the home getting her education. The student said that time with him gave her the opportunity to learn more about who he was. She took the state assessments in April and scored 20 percent higher than she had as a seventh grader. Her father passed away in May. As we evaluate how online learning fulfilled her needs, you be the judge of which was the priority—her student achievement or her family and fatherly connection.

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>
> **CAROL KEENAN**

Which students are you targeting?

How do you choose your curriculum and technology?

3. **Online programs can help schools and districts reach previously unserved students, such as students schooling at home or students with non-traditional schedules.**

TRES TYVAND: Even though Bend-LaPine Schools Online has been around for eight years, this is the first year we've targeted specific groups of students by marketing to homeschool families and students who've left our district for other online programs. We're contacting these families directly to make them aware of our program, and we're keeping enrollment open all year.

There are about 700 kids in our district registered as homeschooling and slightly more than 200 other students who are currently enrolled in other online programs. Now that they know our online program exists, we think 30 to 50 percent of those families may be interested in enrolling. As of today, we've enrolled more than 100 of these students in the program.

4. **By utilizing innovative technologies, online programs can customize instruction to each student's unique learning needs.**

CAROL KEENAN: Schools and districts are using online education to transform today's "one-size-fits-all" education system into one that combines curriculum, technology, and services to deliver individualized, child-centered learning that focuses on each student's unique capabilities, interests, and needs.

5. **Private online curriculum providers have invested millions of dollars to create innovative delivery models and research-based curriculum and should be considered a viable option for online curriculum.**

KEITH WILSON: Curriculum providers in the private world are able to put a lot of money into research and development that the public sector simply doesn't have. There's no sense in us reinventing the wheel. Public schools simply don't have the time and resources to research and develop best practices to create the type of curriculum schools would like to offer. But the private world can.

6. **Not all online curriculum providers are equal—be sure to investigate to be certain a vendor can meet your needs today and in the future.**

CAROL KEENAN: We weren't looking for a curriculum that just takes a hardback text and puts it online. We want courses rich in multimedia that are effective in motivating students. They have to include interactive activities that support key concepts and help students develop important skills. We also looked at the providers' instructional design to see if it was based on prominent instructional experts. We chose the curriculum from Fuel Education's content partner, K[12], because their instructional design is based on Cohen, Wiggins—names that we read about and use in our professional development.

TRES TYVAND: Often schools start their online program by offering one type of program, like credit recovery, and then add a host of courses. Most vendors have a few courses—English, math, science, and maybe a few electives—but a lot of them don't have four years' worth of each of those core content areas.

7. Choose a vendor with a deep course catalog.

TRES TYVAND: For the first 1½ years of our program, we tried a variety of vendors, but we quickly settled on working exclusively with Fuel Education. Not only are they the industry leader for excellent curriculum, they also have the broadest course catalog selection. We chose FuelEd because it has a huge range of credit recovery courses, a wide variety of core and elective areas for new credit, rigorous college preparatory AP courses, and foundation courses geared toward ELL and struggling learners of all kinds—plus FuelEd continues to add to its course catalog each year.

8. Select a vendor that allows local customization.

KEITH WILSON: I cannot emphasize enough that schools and districts should be very leery of vendors that are very rigid in their ways. A curriculum provider that allows local customization is a much better partner to work with. For example, within the state of Kansas we are required to teach Kansas history. A national provider will not include this in a national curriculum. With a good vendor, you can customize the curriculum to meet your state's requirements. Sometimes it's up to us to do the local customization and sometimes we work with our vendor—in this case FuelEd. Having a partner that works with us to help customize content is key.

How do you measure the quality of your program?

9. Measure the satisfaction level of both students and families after they have completed your online course.

TRES TYVAND: One of the major pieces that we look at is feedback from parents and students. Families that have come from a homeschool background, from other online programs, or from your own brick-and-mortar schools in your district will naturally begin to compare their experiences. All you need to do is listen. The feedback we received was the FuelEd and K^{12} curriculum is more rigorous than brick-and-mortar schools and more detailed than privately purchased homeschool curriculums.

KEITH WILSON: The same success indicators that you have placed for a brick-and-mortar school are the ones we use to determine the quality of our program and our deliverables. We look at our customer satisfaction and growth—the growth of the staff, the growth of our families, and the cognitive and effective growth of our students.

10. Analyze enrollment levels to determine if students stay enrolled for the entire year—and re-enroll for the following year.

TRES TYVAND: You're always going to lose people because of their own issues—whether they move or they have a lifestyle change. But, overall, if your families stay with the program for a full semester to earn high school credits or stay for a full year at the K–8 level, then you've got some clear satisfaction there. If they're really unhappy, they would leave.

You can't automatically assume they are withdrawing from the program because they don't like it. But if they tell you that they're leaving to go

back to what they did before—they preferred their brick-and-mortar school or previous homeschool curriculum—then you know your program could be more successful somehow. But if they stay—and they say the reason they're staying is that they're satisfied, it meets their needs, it's what they hoped for when they enrolled—you use that as a measure for success.

11. Measure the students' growth rate.

TRES TYVAND: Many students who enroll in online programs are academically at-risk and have consistently tested below grade level. Traditional standardized tests don't account for the time required to remediate academic deficiencies. They simply confirm, year after year, that the student remains behind grade level. When you consider that most students have been in the online program for fewer than two years, these types of tests are more reflective of their previous educational experience than their online educational experience. A better way to measure the success of an online program would be to look at the progress a student makes over the course of a school year.

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> **TRES TYVAND**

Implementation and Onboarding

How do you onboard your students and their families?

12. Meet face-to-face with the parent and student before they enroll for the first time in online learning.

KEITH WILSON: It may seem contradictory, but the human element is the most vital part of the online world. Before our families even start in our school, we have a minimum of two face-to-face meetings with them somewhere in the state that is convenient for them. These orientation sessions are designed not only to help the families understand how the program works, but to help us ensure there will be an adult in the home who we can rely on to guide and assist to educate the child.

13. Find out why students are enrolling in the online program—and be on the watch for those looking for an "easy" way to pass courses.

TRES TYVAND: Once the families complete their online registration, they are directed to contact me. I ask them to come in—either with or without the child—although I prefer the child or children attend, too. During that meeting, we discuss all their reasons for their enrollment. I use that time to manage expectations properly.

14. Be upfront and honest about the time commitment required for parents and students.

TRES TYVAND: There's a fine line between wanting to grow a program and creating a solid, successful, ongoing program. At first, when you want to grow, it's pretty tempting to make enrollment easy and to encourage anyone who's interested to enroll. But eventually, and I think the sooner the better, prescreening mechanisms become really important to make sure that online learning really is a true fit for the family and for the student.

KEITH WILSON: I tell the families that online learning is a total family participatory sport; those seeking to be spectators will be disappointed. You must be a participant.

15. Require students and their families to complete an introduction to online learning minicourse if they have not previously experienced online learning.

TRES TYVAND: Building in a few steps along the way before they just jump right into classes gives them time to adjust to the new learning environment that they've chosen. Until they experience online learning, they don't fully understand the commitment that they've made. We have our students and families take a mandatory introduction to online learning minicourse before we put them in any academic courses. Sometimes by the end of four days, they realize that just having Johnny home all the time is not going to be a good fit—and Johnny is going back to his brick-and-mortar school on Monday.

16. Have parents and students sign an agreement outlining the key commitments needed to be successful in a more independent learning environment.

CAROL KEENAN: Just because they're online doesn't mean they understand an online course. We have them sign a code of conduct that outlines our expectations.

TRES TYVAND: Our parent and student agreements each have about 20 points on them. We ask them to initial each point and sign at the end. It really lets them know just what they're getting themselves into.

17. Provide a window where students can withdraw without a penalty and your district hasn't incurred any cost.

TRES TYVAND: As a district, there is a point when you've invested some time enrolling the family, but you're not paying for any courses yet. It's a good idea to give students a chance to feel committed with a window where they can withdraw without a grade repercussion and before your district has incurred any cost.

Implementation and Onboarding

18. **Make sure students know that if they don't meet certain requirements— such as a minimum amount of weekly progress in each course—they can be dropped from that course.**

TRES TYVAND: In the agreement contract, we lay out our expectations and explain the reasons that the student might be dropped during the year. For example, if they don't use courses within a certain number of days, they can be dropped even if they don't choose to withdraw.

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>
> **KEITH WILSON**

Culture, Communication,and Alignment

How do you encourage parents to support the online learning program?

19. **Be patient and communicate frequently with parents and students as they adapt to the new learning environment.**

TRES TYVAND: Online schooling has a learning curve for the students and parents. I find that people adapt really well when they are aware of that curve going into it. I tell parents that there are trade-offs. They're trading in their old frustrations with homeschooling or with brick-and-mortar schooling for a different set of challenges. The old frustration may have been bullying. Now it may be that the website is down for a period of time and no work can be submitted. That's probably a pretty good trade for a lot of people.

KEITH WILSON: Even if you take all these steps to prepare a family for what is to come, there will be some hiccups or bumps along the way. For many families, this is the first time the parents are truly getting engaged in their child's education. The parents and children are finding out more about each other, which is great! But it can also be challenging for them. Kids get frustrated with their parents when they're asked to clean their room, let alone when they are working together on a math concept or science experiment.

So, celebrate the fact that a parent is engaged and be very patient with him or her. Communicate frequently via e-mail or phone. Provide opportunities for parents to connect with other parents, and to attend social or educational workshops. We are finding that we spend as much time educating parents as we do children. And I wouldn't want it any other way, because who's best to be a child's most influential educator than their parent?

How do you select and train teachers, mentors, and administrators?

20. **Look for people who are great communicators and who know how to engage students in the curriculum and get families involved.**

KEITH WILSON: When I interview potential candidates for teaching assignments or administrative assignments within our virtual program, I never ask them if they have a love of technology or online learning. I ask them if they have a passion for serving children's needs. If they have the passion to connect with an individual child, then we've got it made.

21. **Be sure your staff receives the professional development they need to make the paradigm shift to online learning.**

CAROL KEENAN: Online education isn't about the hardware. It's about integrating the technology to enhance learning. It's vital that teachers get trained in how to use these new tools to engage the student and customize the learning plan to meet each student's needs.

What can schools do to increase student involvement?

22. **Create a nurturing and caring atmosphere of learning within the online community.**

KEITH WILSON: We begin in August by establishing a positive environment that includes face-to-face time, phone time, and patience and understanding for the families and what they are going through.

23. **Engaged students become more committed learners.**

TRES TYVAND: We realize the importance of all types of learners and hope to grow our entire program utilizing field trips, science and art competitions, and online clubs to help keep students engaged.

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> CAROL KEENAN

How do you create a positive testing environment?

24. **Conduct state testing in small groups to help alleviate test anxiety.**

TRES TYVAND: In an effort to make testing more comfortable, we are testing in grade-level chunks. Our third, fourth, and fifth graders will test as a group. Our sixth and seventh graders will test as a group. Our eighth graders will test alone because we have more of them, and our eleventh graders will test alone.

The students are "invited" through a series of phone calls and e-mails to come in and test at the computer lab in the district office. "Invited" is a kind way of saying, "Remember, this is a required test that you agreed to take when you enrolled." We decided to offer the test at the district office so the students won't have to worry about navigating a school they've never been to or mixing with hundreds of other students. We were concerned that testing at a brick-and-mortar school could be overwhelming for our online students which could skew the test results due to the students' anxiety about the testing environment.

How do you track and monitor student success?

25. **Select an online curriculum provider that has robust reporting features that allow you to see at a glance how students—in a classroom, a school, or across your entire district—are performing in their online course(s).**

TRES TYVAND: One of the reasons we use FuelEd is because its reporting features allow us to monitor each student's progress. We can see if the student is on target, moving at a slower pace, at risk, or disengaged. By instantly identifying students who need help, we can take action to remedy the situation before they fall through the cracks.

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