

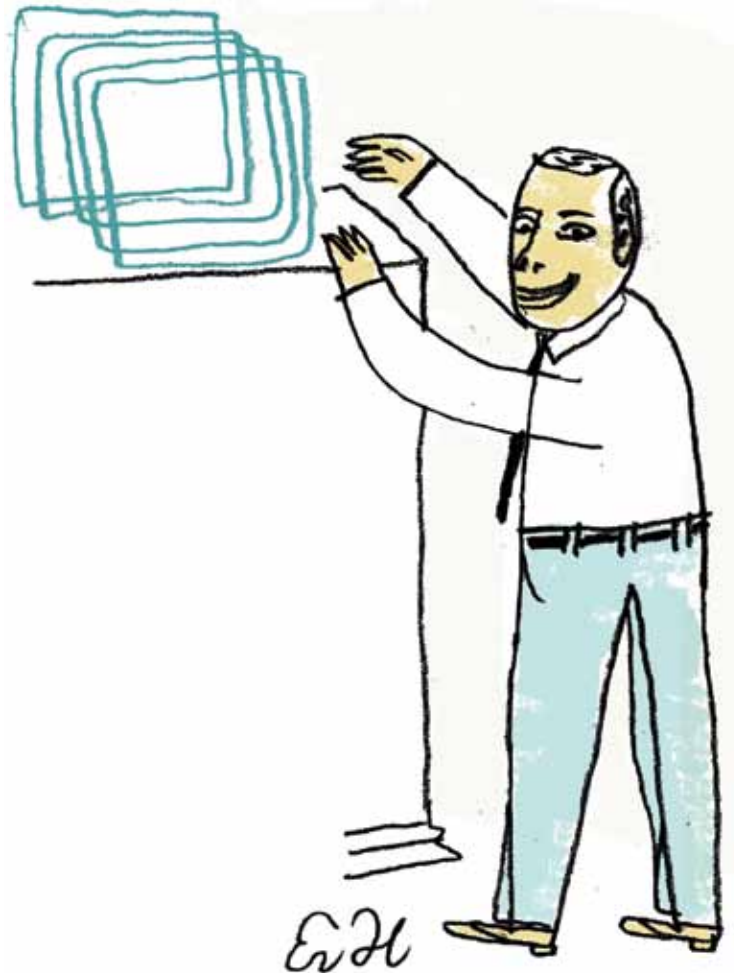
a revolution in the making

a new **virtual education** model - run by
public school educators - goes live

By **LAURIE WIMMER AND MEG KRUGEL** • Illustrations by **ERIC HANSON**

At the start of a term, Dena Marsch's students in her high school physical education course run a mile and record their time. They document the number of sit-ups and pull-ups they can do in a minute. They measure their body mass index and do a nutritional inventory of their diet. Using the results from all of these "tests," Marsch's students develop a personal fitness plan to improve their overall health. Every three weeks, they re-test themselves and adjust their fitness plan as necessary to keep on goal. Sounds like a pretty good, and a pretty standard, physical education curriculum, right? Here's the twist: Marsch is teaching her P.E. class online.

P.E. - online? It might be the last course one expects to take while sitting in front of a laptop at home or inside a school computer lab. But in Marsch's experience - the curriculum is working well. Her students have the flexibility to work on their fitness plans on their own timeline; some finish weeks before others in the same class. She has students who do their online postings for the P.E. class late into the night - allowing them to work while attending school, or take a full class-load through their traditional public school, and take P.E. as an additional credit online in order to graduate on time. One of her students hails from the remote little town of Long Creek, Ore., 60 miles south of Pendleton, where she attends a K-12 school with just 40 kids total. In the state's most remote districts



like this, students may find a much wider breadth of courses through online education than their own school can provide.

Some might say Marsch, who retired from Astoria High School after 28 years as a health and P.E. teacher in 2009 and has been teaching online classes for the past year, is part of a revolution that's been quietly brewing in Oregon over the past five years. The revolution trades traditional teaching venues, like brick-and-mortar public school classrooms, for teaching models that fire across the virtual airspace and onto students' laptops.

Marsch knows there are upsides – and downsides – to this new frontier known as virtual education. “There’s flexibility to it. Some students don’t do well in a normal school setting – and that’s reality. If we can offer a different form of curricula so that students have the opportunity to gain credit elsewhere, and they can be successful at that, then online education is awesome,” she said. But, she also acknowledges virtual education requires a certain kind of student – one who’s self-motivated – in order to be successful. “It’s definitely not for everybody,” Marsch added.

Online education made its way into Oregon around 2005, when full-time virtual schools began operating under the state’s charter school law, and also as district- or ESD-sponsored public classes in a handful of districts. A non-profit version called Oregon’s web academies also rose to prominence in this period, though several closed their doors mid-year after falling to financial ruin. Oregon students interested in pursuing online classes have been able to access them for more than a decade through options like Portland State University’s Extended Studies program, which requires parents to pay tuition for the classes and to buy accompanying textbooks.

Over the last year and a half, however, a new delivery system has taken hold in Oregon that capitalizes on a recently enacted virtual school mandate and employs Oregon’s public school teaching force to deliver a high-quality (all teachers are Oregon-certified), low-cost alternative. “Oregon Virtual Education,” or ORVED, was started as a zero-profit venture in 2010 by the Northwest Regional Education Service District (NWRES D), which serves the North Coast area, including school districts in Clatsop, Columbia, Tillamook, and Washington Counties. ESDs are regional public school districts that provide technical support and educational services to school districts both inside and outside of their geographic boundaries. In September of 2010, ORVED opened its door to a modest enrollment of nine students, with a handful of teachers on staff, including Marsch. Now, just a year-plus into the enterprise, more than 100 students from around the state take ORVED’s online classes in subjects such as health, Mandarin Chinese, digital photography, and math.

How is it different from the other alternatives? Most virtual schools operating in Oregon are full-time programs run by for-profit corporations who negotiate a charter school agreement with a sponsoring school district. Nearly all of these charter schools are sponsored by small, remote, poor districts who’ve sought to make money from the enterprise. For instance, in the tiny district of Scio in Linn County, just 600 students from

Kindergarten to twelfth grade are enrolled in the district’s brick-and-mortar, traditional public schools. As sponsors of Oregon Connections Academy, or ORCA, however, the district calls some 3,000 more students – nearly all from outside Scio – “enrolled students” because of their laptop learning connection to a district in which most will never step foot. In May 2011, 73 percent of the senior class of this school failed to graduate – one indicator that for-profit “virtual schools” have a poor record of academic success. These schools have been found by researchers to have 1:50 teacher-student ratios, to lack personal, on-time interaction with students on a regular basis, and to have a series of other issues in terms of curriculum, teaching quality, and test performance.

By contrast, ORVED takes a different approach. NWRES D Superintendent James Sager knew from surveys that most students didn’t want to opt out of their hometown school. Most students interested in online learning, he said, want to take a class or two for any number of reasons – to take classes at an accelerated pace, to earn college credit, to recover a credit with an online “do-over” of a required class, or to circumvent scheduling challenges. Based on this understanding, Sager led the charge to reinvent online



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education in Oregon. His approach was to provide high-quality education taught by Oregon licensed teachers, including those working in schools who pursue online teaching as an “extra-duty assignment”, and retirees who’ve kept their certification current. ORVED’s initial course offerings would include the highest-demand classes, and the list of available classes would continue to grow as interest in the model expanded.

The ESD’s online school is expanding and revising its delivery model to conform to a new state law, which specifies that 3 percent of students residing in a district must be allowed to enroll in online education each year. Technically, ORVED must become a “virtual charter school” in order to compete for the 3 percent of students mandated by the state. A consortium of districts, in partnership with two community colleges, are collaborating to sponsor ORVED as a charter program that will serve TAG students, home-schoolers, advanced public school students, students needing remedial help, and young people who live in small and remote districts with limited course offerings in their resident districts. As a result, ORVED is evolving rapidly. So far, 17 school districts have signed intergovernmental agreements to send their students to ORVED on a per-class basis. Once ORVED is chartered, students will take half their classes through the ESD, but they will still receive the other half of their education in regular classes in their neighborhood school. This will enable students to retain the personalized, face-to-face interaction with teachers and mentors, to use school equipment, and to participate in activities, classes and social events.

Paul Peterson, the Assistant Superintendent of NWRES, noted “a lot of people in the education community look at charter (schools) as taking kids away from regular public schools. We’re trying to use the charter concept to strengthen schools. Every kid deserves the best of what Oregon’s schools have to offer. Small

school districts that have been impacted by funding cuts still need to meet the needs of kids. A student in eastern Oregon deserves the same high quality education that a student in the metro area might get.” And to this end, ORVED helps equalize the spectrum. “It really is about personalizing the education and getting them what they need,” he said.

But how much does it cost? School districts use their general fund dollars to “buy” students the courses they desire. Through ORVED, \$300 per semester per course buys a program that can start at any time in the semester, is fully accredited, and meets all state standards for quality, content and rigor. No tax dollars are siphoned off to corporate shareholders, as with the for-profit schools. One hundred percent of the fee pays for the operating platform, teacher, and other course-related expenses, with zero profit to NWRES. The Oregon Education Association worked with the ESD to develop a memorandum of understanding with districts in which ORVED teachers are employed

by day on an “extra-duty assignment”, based on the number of students enrolled in a course. Through NWRES, teachers are





given free, top-quality professional development training in online instruction, and the sponsoring districts who pay State School Fund money to ORVED will have the peace of mind knowing that their students will receive a high-quality education.

One feature of ORVED's program that sets it apart from other online experiments is its collaboration with professional educators in Oregon's public schools. The program has trained more than 200 educators to teach in an online environment so far, focusing on the opportunity to personalize education for each student they serve. "The idea was to reinforce collaboration between the classroom environment and the online environment," Sager explained. "We want to keep teachers employed, and we want to hire the best educators for our students."

Peterson says ORVED's relationship with a new teacher begins with the question, "What courses would you like to teach?" and then, "How many students would you like in your class?" He says there's a deep awareness that many Oregon educators have been significantly impacted by cut days, layoffs, and the inability to earn any extra money, aside from taking on a coaching job. "A lot of teachers want to be able to use their own skills to be able to do what they're so good at - and they may want to do something where they get to control their own terms," he said.

ORVED provides the space for that. When Marsch was hired by NWRES D as a health and P.E. teacher last year, she opted to begin the year teaching just one health class before she took on any other assignments. Now, between her two classes, she spends about two hours per day, including weekends, checking in with her students via email, phone calls and text messaging.

ORVED requires teachers to make at least two in-person contacts with each student per week. Within the first week of the term, Marsch can tell whether or not students are falling behind, simply by the number of times they log in to the system and during phone call conversations with them about course content. And, where the P.E. curriculum is concerned, Marsch says it's just helpful having long-term experience teaching the subject - "I know if they're flubbing around and not doing what they should be doing."

While many districts find themselves in perilous budget situations, having to gut their programs of everything but the very basic core content subjects, Peterson says ORVED is open to the idea of innovation. In some ways - the virtual program is picking up the pieces that school districts have had to cut due to funding loss. In one instance, a teacher in Clatsop County, who'd lost funding for the school's

agriculture program, is now partnering with several other school districts to create an "Intro to Ag" class through ORVED. "That's a program that we can bring back to kids, using an Oregon teacher. And it won't be all online-based. They'll be out doing things - quite literally 'in the field', and probably getting involved in the County Fair. It's Oregon educators creating it for Oregon kids, and that is just so powerful," Peterson said.



As for the technical side of the enterprise, Northwest Regional ESD made a decision at its inception to maximize the work that had already been done by the Oregon Department of Education and its Oregon Virtual School District. This program is essentially an online curriculum repository and library, which every district may access for technology education in Oregon schools, and includes access to tools like the Moodle software. ORVED makes use of these curricula as well as the technology required to operate the system (the “platform”), which is also housed at the Department’s Virtual School District. Additionally, Sager has purchased curriculum from companies that offer courses, just like they offer textbooks.

One district that has signed on with ORVED will combine this program with its own “wraparound” services. Tigard-Tualatin School District has rented a facility off-campus and near a MAX transit station to host a computer lab for its online enrollees. Staffed by a teacher and an education assistant, this drop-in center-style lab will remain open from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. for students, who will have access to district computers, internet service, and live instructional assistance as they complete their ORVED coursework. Nestucca High School on the Oregon Coast is creating a similar add-on at their North County Tech Center, where students may drop in during a study hall, teacher-aide period, or at other times throughout the day. Not all districts have the resources to supplement the ORVED program in this way, but Sager says that he is actively encouraging districts to plan for similar support to students in participating districts.

Scott Holmstead, a retired educator and OEA member, teaches digital photography through ORVED. Prior to retirement, Holmstead worked for 32 years in education, teaching photography at Astoria High School for 20 years and then moving into the district’s technology director role for the last 12 years. Now, through ORVED, he gets to combine his love of photography *and* technology – which he says is a perfect fit.

His experiences teaching in online education aren’t all that different from the time he spent in the classroom. There are still students who are highly motivated, who have tremendous parental support, and who do very well in his course. And then, there are the students who rarely check in, have difficult home lives and whose parents are unengaged in their education. It’s about finding the right balance and getting to know what makes a student “tick” – all through a virtual relationship.

Last spring, Holmstead noticed that one of his students was taking a lot of photos of a guitar. One evening, while they were chatting online about the photos, Holmstead told his student he’d love to hear him play the guitar. Within 24 hours, the student had made a YouTube video of himself performing, uploaded the video and sent Holmstead a link to hear him play. “In some cases, I feel like I get to know the student even more than I would in a traditional classroom,” he said.

ORVED hopes to expand beyond its current enrollment to serve all public school students in Oregon who wish to take some



coursework online while still remaining a part of the traditional school setting. Said Sager, “It’s been a challenge to develop a virtual program that serves students, teachers, and school districts well, and it takes time for people to understand that ORVED really is a new way of doing business that complements and strengthens the regular schools, because that’s where kids belong – in their local school, learning from Oregon teachers.”

Holmstead agrees, noting that there are increasingly more and more opportunities for students to pursue their K-12 education in spaces other than traditional public schools – namely, through private companies, online university programs, and homeschooling. Even in its infancy, ORVED is filling a unique niche as a public school program that operates online. “Unless public education really starts to ramp up and prepare for this, I think we’ll lose a lot of our kids.

“I told our Superintendent the other day, ‘It’s not like the headlights are coming. The headlights are here.’ You don’t want to be looking at a situation five years from now and say, ‘what happened?’, and try to recover those students, when you could have been more proactive and retain those students to begin with,” Holmstead said. “I think that’s part of the mission of ORVED – to provide those online opportunities to our own kids, without losing them.” ■