

Bringing the World to Rural Schools in Bethel, Maine

Telstar Regional Middle/High School - Bethel, ME



Charlie Raymond
Alternative Activities
Coordinator



200 students



EdOptions Academy



Grades 6 to 12

The Challenge:

Across the country, urban areas are growing, while rural communities are making do with less. That is particularly true in education, where schools are consolidating or simply closing due to shrinking enrollments and tightening budgets. This often means that such schools can only afford to offer students the core curriculum that meets graduation requirements, so they are not able to allow students to explore career opportunities, interests, or the world at large.

Telstar Regional Middle/High School in Bethel, Maine, is one such school. Roughly 200 high school students are served, and nearly two-thirds of them economically disadvantaged. That enrollment has gone down in the past several years, as has the school's teacher corps.

Because of this, Telstar High was only offering one foreign language course while other nonessential programs were cut altogether. The district found itself struggling to offer students enough opportunity to explore interests, pursue possible career paths, and prepare for college.

Between urban migration and ongoing budget shortcomings, rural schools in the U.S. have been making do with the bare minimum. This often means that those schools cannot provide opportunities for students to explore beyond the core curriculum. Through Edmentum's EdOptions Academy, Telstar Regional Middle/High School in Maine provides more foreign language instruction, elective courses that can lead to better college preparedness, and coursework that better engages students by reflecting their interests.

How They Did It:

The Approach

The leadership at Telstar High recognized that a hybrid blended learning model could provide more choices for students without having to scrap daily schedules or hire more teachers. The school partnered with Edmentum's EdOptions Academy as a way to bring the world back to its students.

Understanding that virtual options are not the right solution for all learners, administrators start enrollment in this model by thoroughly vetting students to make sure that they are positioned for success in Telstar High's online program. Things like homework completion rate, at-home Internet access, parental engagement, and afterschool commitments are considered. A guidance review is undertaken, studying what students' goals for college and career are, what courses they have taken so far along that path, and what other courses would be of most benefit to them moving forward.

If students are a good fit, they sign a contract that gives them two weeks to try the program. If they are not successful after that time, the students and/or parents have to reimburse the school.

Telstar High's alternative activities coordinator, Charlie Raymond, explained, "That flexibility has allowed us and the students to try new things during the trial period that would normally not be possible financially and academically."

Implementing Edmentum

It is rare for a rural high school serving only 200 students to be able to offer courses in anthropology, sociology, advanced math, and multiple foreign languages, but through its virtual program partnership with EdOptions Academy, those are only a few of the options that Telstar High is providing. During the vetting process, students and parents are given access to the course catalog, and they are given the opportunity to come up with a plan in collaboration with school staff.

"We have found that the students actually like having a plan and hold themselves accountable," Mr. Raymond said. "They often tell *me* when they are falling behind and what they plan on doing to catch up."

Telstar High's online course program takes communication seriously. Students are in regular contact with teachers, and teachers communicate with parents and guardians often, all in an effort to make sure that the school's resources are being used wisely and that students are best positioning themselves for success.

Telstar High's staff has been impressed with the depth of knowledge and pacing provided by EdOptions Academy's courses and excited about how well-organized the syllabi and tutorials are. If students are struggling, either online or in-person, often all they have to do is retrace their steps to find their learning gap and take ample notes from there to guide continued learning.



Some students lobbied to take courses outside of the school day, and their ideas just exploded based on their interests. We love being able to meet their needs when they say, 'I want more,' and love offering that to our community.



**Charlie Raymond
Alternative Activities Coordinator**

Success:

Telstar High's virtual learning program has empowered students to take ownership of learning, especially those who don't come naturally to academics and those who have had trouble finding areas of interest. It has also served as an engine for greater parental involvement because parents are engaged from the beginning of the contract. Larger schools in the area are often impressed when they encounter Telstar High students who have taken advanced or niche courses not available anywhere else in the area.

In the 2018-19 school year, 60 students were taking at least one course in the virtual program—one-third of the school. In three years, students have successfully passed EdOptions Academy courses 90 percent of the time.

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The Future:

Telstar High wants to continue building on the popularity and success of its virtual program. The school hopes to see more students enrolling in upper level math courses and electives that fit specific postsecondary interests. Several middle school students have also leveraged EdOptions Academy to take advanced coursework—a trend which the district hopes to grow. The Telstar High staff is committed to continuing its partnership with EdOptions Academy to ensure that students have access to a broad selection of courses that will prepare them for success beyond the classroom.

Lessons Learned

“Having a stringent application process encourages buy-in,” said Mr. Raymond. “Ours requires five different signatures, which produces many conversations between students, parents, guidance, administration, and teachers. It’s also important to monitor student progress during that two-week trial period to make sure the student will be a good fit for the program. Interest should come from the students. We do not require enrollment in the program, which makes sure students are truly interested in their course of study.”

For more information:

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