

Proof Points: Blended Learning Success in School Districts

PUTNAM COUNTY SCHOOLS VITAL PROGRAM

Cookeville, Tennessee

INTRODUCTION

The Putnam County Schools Virtual Instruction to Accentuate Learning (VITAL) program provides a wide range of blended-learning options to students in the Putnam County School System. The program primarily helps students who have fallen behind in a class to catch up and students who have failed a course recover credits. It also delivers blended-learning opportunities to advanced students in middle and high school and to homebound students. Together these, and other programs, have improved the district's graduation rate and allowed students to earn college credit while in high school.

KEY ASPECTS OF BLENDED LEARNING PROGRAM

- VITAL began primarily as an online credit-recovery program in 2008 that was small and unsuccessful. Program leaders centralized the program at the district level, added blended-learning components, built upon early findings on how to improve it, and expanded into new courses and offerings.
- Cookeville High School is the furthest along in terms of blended-learning implementation. Its academic intervention programs allow students who have fallen behind in classes they are currently taking to catch up before they fail the class. Its programs for students who failed an original credit class differentiates between students who were close to passing and those who need more help.
- VITAL courses combine online course content, an online highly qualified teacher, and an onsite facilitator. This approach ensures that each student has personal attention in a face-to-face environment, as well as access to a teacher who is a subject matter expert.
- Additional blended-learning options include dual-credit courses with local colleges for high school students, an online personal finance course for all 9th-grader students in the district, and online courses for homebound students.
- All VITAL programs combined reach about one-third of the students in the district each year.



District Profile

Putnam County School System,
Cookeville, Tennessee

11,000 students in rural central
Tennessee

Twenty schools including three
alternative and virtual schools

The student population is 83%
white, 11% Latino, and 4% African
American; 58% of students qualify
for free and reduced-price lunch,
18% are in special education, and
6% are English Language Learners

The district is high performing, with
a 92.6% graduation rate

Blended Learning Success Proof Points

- ✓ Cookeville High School's graduation rate has increased from 86% to 94% between 2008 and 2014.
- ✓ The district graduation rate has increased from 86% to 92.6% between 2008 and 2014.

BLENDING LEARNING AT PUTNAM COUNTY SCHOOLS VITAL PROGRAM

The Putnam County Schools VITAL program began in Fall 2008 as a small online credit-recovery program. Although the original program was ineffective in helping students recover credits or master content, district leaders learned from the program's early failures and the program is now a central component of the district's instructional strategy.

VITAL retains a focus on helping students who have fallen behind in a class catch up and students who have failed a class recover credits. The program works with classroom teachers to intervene as soon as students begin falling behind in a class. Teachers assign students online modules to work on during nine-week blocks to replace failing grades within a current course. Students may work on these modules at home, during lunch, and after school. Students may also take part in credit intervention during fall and spring breaks to catch up in classes in which they have fallen behind by working on online modules at their own pace. Students who did not pass a course but earned a grade of 65% or higher and passed the end-of-course exam (if one exists) for that course are also eligible to participate in the "smart lunch" program where teachers staff an hour-long lunch period during which students work on online modules to make up the difference in points to receive a passing grade in a course.

At the high school level, VITAL combines an online "originating teacher," who is certified and highly qualified in the subject area, with an onsite facilitating teacher who is an active participant in the student learning experience. The facilitators answer to the head of VITAL and handle all components of blended learning at their school. With blended learning spreading across the district, the elementary and middle schools also have an onsite blended-learning coordinator.

VITAL has acquired some online courses, and licenses others, from Florida Virtual School, Odysseyware, Edgenuity, and Compass Learning. It uses the Blackboard learning management system and Genius student information system to manage students and content in blended courses and NWEA MAP for assessing student progress. Using content that the district can edit allows VITAL to reach a variety of student needs.

Additional VITAL program elements include:

- VITAL Collegiate High School provides dual credit with three local colleges and one university. In each semester of the 2014–15 school year, at least 300 students were taking one or more dual-enrollment classes, totaling more than 1,000 course enrollments.
- All 9th-grade students in the district take a nine-week online personal finance course through VITAL.
- Homebound students take online courses and learn from an online teacher to keep pace with students in the school. This approach allows homebound students to work with a highly qualified teacher in each subject area, instead of only with the homebound teacher.

District leaders believe that VITAL is improving student achievement in multiple areas. In particular, the program has produced impressive student gains in credit intervention and credit recovery at Cookeville High School. When the district first launched VITAL, failure rates declined by one third in the first semester and have remained at this level ever since. During the 2013–14 school year, 45 out of 52 students assigned to participate in smart lunch received credits in courses that they would have otherwise failed. Between credits saved through credit intervention and credit recovery, VITAL has saved or recovered more than 300 course credits. This program has played a key role in increasing Cookeville High School's graduation rate from 86% to 94%, and the district's graduation rate from 86% to 92.6%, between 2008 and 2014.

"We've experienced success by placing all of our blended-learning initiatives under one program—VITAL. We're giving students district-wide class options they wouldn't normally be able to take—or that they would take but want the opportunity to move at their own pace. All of these classes—from high school dual enrollment down to elementary school Spanish—will allow students to get what they want in their education and are all under one umbrella."

— Sam Brooks, Personal Learning Coordinator, Putnam County School System
