Our Vision of Online Teaching and Learning

by Liz Pape, President & CEO

Over the years, we have shared our student, teacher, site coordinator and school successes in the VHS Network. We have also shared with you our vision of online teaching and learning and how it fosters the development of 21st century competencies and global citizenship. Through global classrooms and partnerships with schools, VHS offers online courses to enhance educational opportunities for students.

VHS’s vision and successes are based upon a strong culture of beliefs that is shared by all our staff and promoted in all that we do. In this newsletter we present to you examples of how those beliefs have come to fruition in the VHS collaborative model, our course design, and our teacher, student and school support.

VHS believes that student-centered online courses can be designed and delivered to students to promote a high quality collaborative learning environment in which student exchange and interaction is a valued component of the instructional process.

Amy Michalowski, VHS Director of Curriculum and Instruction, has walked VHS’s virtual halls and describes how Tom Sager, VHS teacher and Mike Stevens, VHS teacher and course developer, demonstrate a student-centered approach to developing and delivering the VHS course, Engineering for Sustainable Energy. See pages 2 and 3

VHS believes that educational opportunity need not be limited by barriers of time and place or lack of qualified faculty. Rather, we believe that high-quality education is possible today for all students in all locations. Online education offers any school with Internet connectivity a wealth of trained, experienced faculty members qualified in numerous disciplines to teach a wide array of courses designed to meet the needs of all students. An innovative, standards-based curriculum delivered online offers diverse, exciting learning choices for students and the opportunity and skills to participate in a national and global community.

Small schools, remote schools, and any school seeking to deepen its course offerings to students can benefit from VHS’s course catalog, which gives students the opportunity to take unique, innovative online courses. In this issue, students and staff describe how VHS courses help students explore possible careers and areas of interest, in Colleen Worrell’s article, Small Schools, Big Plans. See page 4

VHS believes that online teaching should augment, rather than replace, traditional classroom teaching. The Virtual High School’s online courses are a proven, flexible solution for schools needing an expanded curriculum, teachers seeking new horizons, parents wanting more involvement with their children’s education, and a society grappling with ways to offer opportunity to all its citizens.

Mark Stover, VHS Site Coordinator for Jenkintown, PA public schools, shares his school’s perspective in his article, Need to Expand Curriculum? Problem Solved! Jenkintown has used VHS courses to expand their offerings to middle students in their gifted and talented program. Jenkintown’s VHS teacher has also benefited from her VHS training and has incorporated her online teaching skills into her classroom practice. See page 6

VHS believes that the goals of education are advanced best by putting value and service first. When schools work together in a collaborative network, such as VHS, they become part of an abundant and generous educational community that promotes the affordable sharing of professional resources.

One of the greatest pleasures of working with the teachers, site coordinators and school leaders of VHS is learning from them about how VHS is transforming education within their school. Carol Ribeiro has collected great feedback about this topic in her article, VHS Value and Service: Transforming Education through Collaboration. See page 7
Imagine, for a minute, that you are a school administrator walking down a hallway at your school. Here are some of the snippets of conversation that you hear through the open classroom doors:

There is just too much competition out there to not always strive to be in the top 20% that produces 80% of the results.

If you don’t develop a strong, diligent work ethic and establish good habits it can cost you a job, a promotion, and potentially your livelihood later on…

Whenever I am consumed with something that weighs heavily on my mind I tend to spend a great deal of time contemplating and dreaming about it… your dreams can lead you towards ideas or solutions to many of the problems you’re wrestling with… as you work this week perfecting your group and individual visions for your themes, pay attention to your dreams. They may just lead you to some beautifully elegant solutions.

What would you feel? Proud of this teacher who is so willing to share meaningful life lessons with his students? Good fortune to have such a caring, dedicated professional on your staff? Honored for being able to share this profession with an educator who is so clearly invested in and passionate about his work?

Well—each of these adjectives summarizes my feelings after taking a “virtual walk” past Tom Sager’s Virtual High School classroom door. Tom’s classroom style epitomizes a student-centered approach to teaching. His style in the classroom is firm, yet casual. He shares effortlessly with his students and easily connects with the “kids” in his class.

In times when the educational lens may be focused on assessments and data-driven projects, it is important to refocus a bit on the impact that a teacher can (and still does!) have in VHS online classrooms. I took a few moments to speak with Tom about his experiences in his VHS class. He mentioned that connecting with students has been a breeze and a lot of fun, since he has the opportunity to leverage technology such as images, audio, and multimedia to enhance his message.

Tom reflected on the importance of his role as an online classroom teacher. He has been surprised at his students’ lack of comfort communicating in an online environment. Given the amount of time students spend communicating via text and instant messaging, he thought that “talking” in an online class would come naturally to students. He has found that many of his students don’t have effective collaboration skills and he has had to use many different motivational techniques to keep his students on track and remind them of the responsibilities they have to each other and to themselves.

Personal connections are important too—Tom makes a point to check-in with students in their Private Topics and posts inspirational videos each week, just for fun. He participates in many of the class discussions which are self-exploratory and are designed to

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VHS teacher, Tom Sager from John Handley High School, Winchester, Va.
provide students with an opportunity to reflect on who they are and recognize how they learn. According to Tom, “At the end of the day I hope it’s inspiring, because I was in their shoes at one point in time and I overcame many challenges to get to where I am today. I hope that means something to them.” It doesn’t get more student-centered than that, does it?

Tom teaches Engineering for Sustainable Energy, a course which embodies the VHS belief in student-centered content. This course, written by veteran VHS teacher Mike Stevens during the 2009-2010 academic year, is an engaging mix of content centered around a core question “How can society and engineering be harnessed to better manage energy use in our society?”

Mike’s goal during course development, was to utilize his engineering background and create a course that would provide students with an opportunity to explore this extremely relevant topic. His hope was to stimulate student interest and ignite a passion to pursue this content in higher education.

In his opinion, the nature of VHS classes allows students the opportunity to explore in ways that are difficult in a face-to-face classroom, including deeper research projects, greater integration of technology in student products, many student-created modeling projects, and more meaningful class discussions where each student contributes thoughtfully. This is clearly evident upon looking at the course syllabus and seeing the variety of assignments students complete each week such as teamwork, discussions, research and presentations, model making and math applications. Here’s a look at the fantastic variety of activities students complete in a typical course week:

• Social collaboration activity in which students share examples of entropy problems in a class wiki

• Interactive discussion about the extent to which the global community has prejudice against peoples from the past and future and the impact on sustainability

• Research and quiz on physics principles related to the content of the week (entropy)

• Hands-on work designing a model of a power system and building it to share with the class (part of a multi-week project).

• Graphical analysis and interpretation of population pyramids.

As you can see, this course has something to reach any type of learner and engage every type of student. There are many places where students can delve deeper into the content and extend their learning beyond the scope of a lesson. According to Mike, feedback from students is that they enjoy the variety and challenge of the class, even if they don’t love the time it takes to complete the assignments.

All students participate in the culminating activity for the class; a multi-week collaborative project in which students create a sustainability plan for the fictional city of New Meddling, Tennessee (population 300,000). The project outline indicates that the student groups have been hired by the city of New Meddling to formulate rules for this utopian society that models best practices in sustainability. Students collaborate over a period of six weeks to develop a comprehensive presentation for the town. Reaction to this project has been positive, overall, though both Mike and Tom admit that large-scale collaborative efforts can be challenging. The structure of the course is such that students complete a variety of mini-projects before this large group effort. The end products of this project are something of which all students can be proud.

Feedback on the course has been positive too, both from students and from other VHS members, like Pete Sampou, PhD, the VHS site coordinator at Rising Tide Charter School in Plymouth, Mass. Pete writes, “The guidance, resources and student product I saw coming from Mr. Stevens’ class was truly amazing! This class should be a featured example of the power that VHS has to teach self motivated students who can utilize the vast and expanding resources available on the Web.”

We commend both Mike Stevens and Tom Sager on their success in creating an inspiring student-centered environment within their VHS online classrooms.
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Small Schools, Big Plans  
by Colleen Worrell, VHS Education Programs Coordinator

Stephan Keeme-Sayre, a freshman at Immaculate Heart High School (IHHS) in Oro Valley, Arizona is a young man with a plan. He wants to be a writer and has already mapped out his entire high school career around this goal. Since IHHS is a small private school with 90 students and 6 full-time teachers, Stephan's plans hinge on courses he can take through his school's VHS membership, including Creative Writing, Journalism in the Digital Age, and AP Literature and Composition. As his site coordinator Kay Shannon notes, “We'd like to clone Stephan since he has 4 years of VHS courses planned.” While IHHS originally joined VHS to fill a resource gap and build more flexibility into their scheduling, Kay explains that the school has come to realize that their VHS membership offers so much more. IHHS views VHS courses as a means to promote exploration and to tailor a program of study to fit each student's interests and passions.

Stephan's VHS experience was highlighted at this year's Virtual School Symposium (VSS) in Glendale, Arizona. The conference brought together over 1,800 educators and industry leaders from national, state, district, private, and other school programs. Stephan and IHHS senior Maggie Ethridge participated in a student panel that kicked off the event. Both Stephan and Maggie emphasized the ways in which their school's VHS membership allowed them to take advantage of a wider range of learning opportunities and experiences without ever leaving the small nurturing school setting that they love. VHS enables them to enjoy their small school and pursue big plans. As Stephan writes, “VHS has allowed me to invent my own future.”

From the Catalina foothills of Arizona to Tenakee Springs, Alaska (with an average total K-12 enrollment of 13 students) and beyond, the mission of “all students in all locations” resonates in the experience of VHS students—especially those hailing from small schools and remote communities. Kim Spangenberg, VHS Curriculum Coordinator for Science, recalls a conversation with one parent who was delighted that VHS offered her daughter the opportunity to pursue her interest in science. Kim remarked, “Our courses open up a whole new world of possibilities for students from schools with limited resources. Who knows maybe one or more of those students will go on to pursue a career in science after taking one of our courses.”

IHHS senior Carlyne Cathey couldn't agree more. Carlyne's experience in VHS's Kindergarten Apprentice course has reaffirmed her interest in becoming an elementary school teacher someday. “This semester I took the course Kindergarten Apprentice Teacher and it is one of my most memorable experiences. I took the course because I want to become a kindergartner teacher after college. This VHS course gave me the chance to actually go into a classroom, read a story and do a follow-up activity with a kindergarten class. I had an amazing time in the classroom and I loved working with the children.”

As Stephan Keeme-Sayre puts it, VHS is more than school. “It is an environment that I can immerse myself in and that allows me to choose whatever I want to do to further my own education.”
VHS 4th Annual Student Scholarship Program!

VHS is pleased to announce its 4th annual scholarship program for graduating high school seniors in the class of 2011! Up to (2) $1000 scholarships and (2) $500 scholarships will be awarded. Scholarships are available only to high school students graduating in 2011 and planning to attend a post-secondary program. Applicants must have successfully completed at least one VHS course as a junior or senior. Students will be required to submit either a video, multimedia, audio, or written entry that addresses the following question: How has your VHS course experience influenced your future college or career direction? The submission deadline is March 15, 2010. Complete scholarship instructions are posted on our website at: http://www.govhs.org/Pages/ProfDev-Home.

Best of luck to all applicants!

Publication Contribution

The International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) announced the release of its first published book: Lessons Learned from Virtual Schools: Experiences and Recommendations from the Field at the annual Virtual School Symposium (VSS) on November 15, 2010. The book was edited by Cathy Cavanaugh and Rick Ferdig. Carol Ribeiro, VHS Chief Operating Officer and Liz Pape, VHS President and CEO contributed a chapter about Virtual High School Global Consortium.

According to Ferdig, “K-12 Virtual Schools are an important part of our 21st century educational system. This book captures the successes and lessons of leaders from some of the most experienced state-led and consortium-based virtual schools in the nation. Readers will get advice and strategies on everything from teacher professional development to data management.”

For more information about this publication, or to order a copy, visit the iNACOL online bookstore at: http://www.inacol.org/research/bookstore/index.php

VHS Grant Partnerships

VHS is excited to announce new partnerships with both Westfield and Haverhill Public Schools through Massachusetts DESE (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education) grant initiatives. The Westfield project will develop curriculum for Technology-Infused Teaching and Learning that will be designed to promote the integration of technology into classroom instruction, develop skills and tools for developing and assessing students’ technology literacy skills, focus on strengthening the integration of technology skills into the teaching of Common Core State Standards, and facilitate standards-based lesson planning.

The goal of the VHS and Haverhill Public Schools partnership is to create a hybrid professional development course for teachers in the elementary schools. The course is titled Using the iPod Touch and Technology to Differentiate Instruction in Mathematics. It will be designed to promote the integration of technology into mathematics classroom instruction at the elementary level, develop skills for planning and delivering differentiated instruction, focus on strengthening mathematics content knowledge in support of Common Core State Mathematics Standards, and facilitate standards-based lesson planning.

If you are interested in working with VHS on grant-funded initiatives, please contact Jim Barton, VHS Educational Project Manager at jbarton@goVHS.org or 978-450-0435.

Welcome New VHS Member Schools!

Welcome to the following schools that joined the Virtual High School collaborative during the 2010-2011 school year.

| Arlington Catholic High School | Arlington, MA |
| Avon Middle School | Avon, CT |
| Blackstone-Millville Regional High School | Blackstone, MA |
| Bloom Carroll | Carroll, OH |
| Bloomfield High School | Bloomfield, NJ |
| Carver Public Schools | Carver, MA |
| Catholic Memorial School | West Roxbury, MA |
| Chester Union Free Academy | Chester, NY |
| Craftsbury Academy | Craftsbury, VT |
| David Prouty High School | Spencer, MA |
| Dubois High School | Dubois, WY |
| Early College High School | Holyoke, MA |
| Fairfield Union | Lancaster, OH |
| Granby Jr. / Sr. High School | Granby, MA |
| Groton Dunstable Regional School District | Groton, MA |
| Hazen Union School | Hardwick, VT |
| Kinnelon High School | Kinnelon, NJ |
| La Reina High School | Thousand Oaks, CA |
| Liberty Union | Baltimore, OH |
| Lisbon High School | Lisbon, ME |
| Livermore Falls High School | Livermore Falls, ME |
| Marshall School | Duluth, MN |
| Meeteeze Schools | Meeteeze, WY |
| Millbury Jr./Sr. High School | Millbury, MA |
| Monson High School | Monson, MA |
| Norton High School | Norton, MA |
| Pomperaug High School | Southbury, CT |
| Portsmouth High School | Portsmouth, RI |
| Public Safety Academy | Enfield, CT |
| Scafied Magnet Middle School | Stamford, CT |
| Sharon High School | Sharon, MA |
| Tewksbury Memorial High School | Tewksbury, MA |
| Ursuline Academy | Kirkwood, MO |
| Walnut Township | Millersport, OH |
| Westchester Hebrew High School | Mamaroneck, NY |
| Weymouth High School | Weymouth, MA |
VHS believes

that online teaching should augment, rather than replace, traditional classroom teaching. The Virtual High School’s online courses are a proven, flexible solution for schools needing an expanded curriculum, teachers seeking new horizons, parents wanting more involvement with their children’s education, and a society grappling with ways to offer opportunity to all its citizens.

Need to Expand Curriculum? Problem Solved!

by Mark Stover, K-12 Gifted Support Teacher at Jenkintown Public Schools and VHS Site Coordinator

Jenkintown, Pennsylvania is a borough located just north of Philadelphia. Jenkintown Middle and High School has a combined enrollment of 300 students in grades 7-12. A VHS member since the 2001-2002 school year, the school has incorporated the VHS catalog into its program of studies to expand student course offerings.

Jenkintown High School has been very fortunate to have the opportunity to participate in VHS’s collaborative online education and professional development for the past ten years. VHS believes that online teaching should augment, rather than replace, traditional classroom teaching. As a small public middle school/high school located outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, we are always looking for ways to expand our curriculum and open our students to new ideas and concepts applying what they learn in school and home.

Typically, forty students a year take advantage of the expanded opportunities offered through VHS—this represents about 10% of our student population. Some of our gifted and talented students have taken as many as four or five VHS courses during their middle school and high school years. The availability of courses for middle school gifted and talented students is an incredible way to meet the unique needs of some of these learners by providing courses in areas of interest that are not otherwise available. Anne Van Meter, our VHS teacher noted that she has also benefited from the professional development received in preparing to teach her online course. Some of the ideas about online discussion have been incorporated into her face-to-face classes expanding learning opportunities for all her students.

Gabriel Lorenz, Class of 2011 has been involved with VHS since eighth grade. He has completed three VHS classes—Number Theory, Honors Statistics, Latin I and is currently enrolled in his fourth VHS course, AP Calculus BC. When asked about his experiences with VHS he quickly points out that VHS opened up enrichment and extension opportunities which provide new learning. He especially appreciates the fact that he can continue to work on higher level math concepts and skills since he depleted the math course offerings available in our curriculum. Gabe also likes the ability to progress at his own pace and the flexibility built into the week.

As a senior, Gabe was able to modify his day to accommodate a chemistry class at the college level. This was made possible by the additional elective credits he received from the VHS courses taken in addition to his regular course of study.

This is an example of the power of the VHS online learning opportunity. Schools which embrace and embed these types of learning options into their curriculum are better able to meet the needs of our diverse populations.
VHS Value and Service: Transforming Education Through Collaboration

by Carol Ribeiro, VHS Chief Operating Officer

Most people understand that participation in the VHS Global Consortium grants members access to online courses for students, and professional development for teachers. But what are the true benefits of participation in this educational collaborative? Through VHS and its network of schools, members become part of an abundant and generous educational community that promotes the affordable sharing of resources. As a non-profit organization, VHS offers exceptional value and service to its constituents: however, the best way to get a true sense of the Virtual High School experience is to see it through the eyes of its members: educators, administrators, and students at face-to-face schools around the world.

These members seek opportunities. The opportunity to share ideas on effective use of web 2.0 tools in the classroom with fellow educators from around the world. The opportunity to be immersed in an online course just as a student would, to learn how to instruct and support students in an online classroom. The opportunity to quickly and cost-effectively expand school-year and summer curriculum options within school districts. VHS Global Consortium provides all of these opportunities and more.

Members in the VHS collaborative are greatly enriched through the extensive support and infrastructure Virtual High School provides, as well as their interaction with one another. This transformative sharing of resources and ideas is reflected in this comment by a Massachusetts VHS teacher, “My knowledge of pedagogy and technology in the classroom has increased due to my participation with VHS. I feel like I’m better able to instruct today’s learners, and I feel more open-minded about strategies that work in the classroom.”

VHS offers students a true online classroom experience—not simply an online course taken independently. Students learn from and with their peers—and instructors—from other geographic areas, races, and cultures. An Ohio VHS teacher comments that “I love the class I teach and the way my VHS students work with each other on their writing.” One of her fellow VHS teachers adds of the value of VHS classrooms, “One of the most important benefits is interacting with students/colleagues from across the U.S./world and getting their viewpoints. Also, because the course is online, I have no pre-conceived ideas concerning students based upon their mannerisms/looks.”

Those unfamiliar with the VHS collaborative model might think that VHS instructors interact with their students in isolation. You may be surprised to hear that VHS teachers tell us they enjoy the interaction they have with their fellow VHS educators just as much as they enjoy their online teaching. Many of these teachers don’t have as much time as they would like to brainstorm ideas with face-to-face colleagues because they are busy with their teaching duties and after school responsibilities; however, the flexibility of communication within the VHS consortium model provides educators 24/7 access to a network of their peers. Notes a VHS teacher from Montana, “As a teacher at a tiny school in Northwest Montana, I often feel shut off from the rest of the world. This allows me some connection back to the East coast.” Her Pennsylvania teaching colleague adds, “It has been great working with teachers and site coordinators from other regions and countries. Conversations are not always just business. I have made a lot of cyber friends.”

This sharing of innovative practices between virtual educators often translates to sharing transformative ideas with face-to-face colleagues as well. A Massachusetts VHS teacher shares, “I use many of my VHS best practices to enrich my face to face classes,” and his fellow Massachusetts VHS teacher adds, “Being a leader in the realm of online education at the high school level has allowed me to bring technologies used in this course into my face-to-face classrooms and to my colleagues.” The online learning experience is more intuitive for some educators than for others, as this Vermont instructor confides, “I am the unlikeliest person to be working online so I appreciate the opportunity to be involved in something that is clearly cutting-edge. It is way outside my comfort zone and that keeps me sharp.”

The value and service provided through sharing resources within the VHS collaborative can be summarized by the feedback we received from this VHS site coordinator, “I was somewhat skeptical of online courses before I started the process of VHS but now I am a full proponent and I am strongly encouraging all of my students to take at least one [VHS course] during their high school career. I enjoy the new dimension of interacting with students and other VHS site coordinators and support staff from around the country. I enjoy the high quality and enthusiasm which is shown by the students and the professionalism exhibited by the VHS consortium. It is the most exciting thing which I have recently been involved with in the field of education.”

To learn more about how VHS student courses and teacher professional development can transform education at your school, visit www.goVHS.org.
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VHS Conferences and Events

VHS will be attending the following conferences this year. For the most up-to-date events listing please visit our website at: http://www.govhs.org/Pages/AboutUs-Conf

NJASA New Jersey Association of School Administrators
January 26-28, 2011
Techspo Conference
Bally’s Atlantic City
Atlantic City, NJ 08401
http://www.njasa.net/70171081911545867/site/default.asp

AASA American Association of School Administrators
February 17-19, 2011
National Conference on Education
Colorado Convention Center
Denver, CO 80202
Presentation - “Online Teaching and Learning: Policy, Cost and Quality Considerations” by Robert Gratz, Superintendent at Hackettstown Public School District (NJ) and Dana Koch, VHS Director of Global Services
http://www.aasa.org/NCE/default.aspx

ASCD Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
March 26-28, 2011
Annual Conference
Moscone Center
San Francisco, CA 94103
Presentation - “Successful Online Course Programs: Planning, Policy and Promotion” by Dana Koch, VHS Director of Global Services

NCEA National Catholic Education Association
April 17-27, 2011
Annual Conference
Ernest N. Morial Convention Center
New Orleans, LA 70130
http://www.ncea.org/events/NCEANewOrleansCentral.asp

NJASA New Jersey Association of School Administrators
May 24-25, 2011
Annual Spring Conference
http://www.njasa.net/njasa/site/default.asp

MASS Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents
July 13-14, 2011
Executive Institute
Mashpee High School
Mashpee, MA 02649
http://www.massupt.org/

MSSAA Massachusetts Secondary School Administrators’ Association
July 27-29, 2011
Summer Institute
Sea Crest Resort
Falmouth, MA 02556
http://www.mssaa.org/

VHS member services available for credit include:
• Enrollment in online summer school
• Enrollment in Best Practices professional development
• Teacher Training (NIM)
• Yearly membership
• Mix and match any of the above.

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