

# VHS Learning Helps Academy Expand Course Offerings Without Adding Headcount

*Hartford Magnet Trinity College Academy, Hartford CT*

Hartford Magnet Trinity College Academy in Connecticut began using VHS Learning about 10 years ago and has been expanding its use of the online educator's courses ever since. Serving about 1,100 students in grades 6-12, the school has built up its course offerings without having to add staff. Along the way, it's gained a reputation of having a wide selection of general and advanced courses for its growing student body.

When Katie Kiniry joined the school as its new VHS Learning site coordinator a few years ago, her predecessor had already set her up for success. "Everything was already in place when I got here," says Kiniry. "As long as a VHS Learning course does not require students to download new software or files, they're free to take any course they wish."

If someone is interested in an elective that the Academy doesn't offer on campus, they can simply take it through VHS Learning. For example, Kiniry says students can pick from a broad selection of online Advanced Placement® (AP®) courses that would be difficult for the school to orchestrate on campus.

"It's a really good way for them to be able to take classes they're interested in," says Kiniry, "Without having to go somewhere else to take them."

## **An Oasis-Like Classroom for Online Learning**

Students in grades 10-12 are encouraged to explore VHS Learning's offerings and take online courses, with digital photography, fashion design and AP courses ranking as some of the most popular options with students at the Academy. Currently, the school has a total of about 35 students taking advantage of VHS Learning courses.

The school carved out a designated, daily block of time for the online coursework, which takes place in Kiniry's classroom. "They sit in here and I play music for them," she says. "It's a nice, calm atmosphere that's conducive to learning and accommodates their learning parameters."

Students know Kiniry's expectations and that they can come to her with any questions and for help as needed.

"My classroom is kind of an oasis in that it's a place where kids can work without worrying about who else is in their class, who they're sitting next to and whether they have to converse with that person," she explains. "They can focus solely on their online classwork."

This environment is especially supportive for students who enjoy self-study, pacing and making their own schedules. "One of my students who is a senior just loves it in here and is thriving because of it," says Kiniry, adding that the student takes two VHS Learning courses at a time and has a 100% grade in both of her current selections (anatomy & physiology and early childhood education). "She can make her own schedule, enjoys the learning format and how accessible everything is in the learning platform."

### **Why Online Learning Matters**

Online learning offers students opportunities that they can't get face-to-face. It also opens the doors for schools to offer a more personalized course catalogue at a time when finding, training and retaining teachers and staff can be extremely challenging—particularly at the middle and high school levels. Kiniry estimates that the cost of the school's VHS Learning's partnership is roughly equivalent to 10% of an average teacher's annual salary.

"Our on-campus elective offerings are very limited, but with VHS Learning our students get a lot of classes that we can't offer," says Kiniry. In the science category, for instance, students can take interesting courses like oceanography and astronomy, both of which help them expand their horizons and consider innovative career tracks. "It's also a great opportunity for them to connect with students who don't live here in Hartford and interact with different teachers," says Kiniry.

Online learning also helps shy students open up a bit more in class, and particularly those who would be afraid to raise their hands in class. "In discussions especially, students are more inclined to interact because no one knows them personally," says Kiniry. "Especially for my younger students, I encourage them to embrace the fact that since no one knows who they are, what's the risk of contributing to the class?"

### **An Online Teacher's Perspective**

An English teacher herself, Kiniry is currently teaching a screenwriting class through VHS Learning.

Because screenwriting is a different mode of writing, she's very intentional with her feedback and uses clear, straightforward communication to get her points and feedback across.

"I share a lot of encouragement around things that they did really well, and then I offer up suggestions in areas where they need to grow," she says. "This direct, detailed approach works very well in the online learning space."

And because she's in the room that students are learning in, Kiniry hears the student feedback on the courses. "A lot of them really like the format," she says. "Once they figure it out and get the hang of it, they enjoy being able to learn whenever they feel like it. Or if they finish all their work, they can either relax or get some other homework done."

In assessing the way the Academy offers the online learning component, Kiniry says offering a designated time and space for it has worked out very well. "Some of the students at other schools don't necessarily have that, or their site coordinators are the principal or the vice principal, both of whom tend to be pretty busy people," says Kiniry. "To other schools I'd say that if you can create a model with dedicated time and space for the online learning it'll be more effective for the kids, who like it because they don't have to get all of their work done in their free time."