‘Online Courses for the 21st Century’
devolved by PNW BOCES, districts

By Ellen Lane

While many school districts are scaling back on high school course offerings as a result of budget woes, some districts in Westchester and Putnam counties are expanding offerings to include topics like archeology, architecture and sustainability. It’s all thanks to a unique program known as Online Courses for the 21st Century, created by Putnam/Northern Westchester BOCES in collaboration with 12 forward-looking school districts.

Now in its second year, the OC 21 program offers students in participating districts the opportunity to study subjects not typically offered in local high schools, to gain valuable experience in online learning and to engage with peers across the region. The courses use a blended approach that combines online learning with in-person activities such as field trips and all-day symposia.

OC 21 grew out of the desire of school districts in the region to offer innovative online/blended learning to their high school students.

“The idea came up at a regional planning meeting of districts interested in working together to create new and exciting learning opportunities for their students,” said Marla Gardner, director of curriculum and instruction for PNW BOCES. “But our districts are high-performing. They didn’t want to buy something off the shelf. They wanted to offer courses that were meaningful and relevant to their students and that had the same rigor as what is offered in their schools.”

To that end, the BOCES lined up experts in technology, curriculum development and online learning and recruited interested teachers from eight districts to develop curriculum. The teachers met during the summer of 2011 with consultants from the Lower Hudson Regional Information Center and Learner-Centered Initiatives. Since then, teachers have developed a dozen courses, 11 of which are being offered or will be next year (see sidebar).

“As teachers, we came into the pilot program with a concept for a course but we had no idea what the technology was, no idea how to reach kids in a virtual environment,” said recently retired Mamaroneck High School teacher Nick Cucchiarella, who developed a course on architecture. “By asking all the right questions, the experts helped us to create something brand new.”

Using live webinars, chats, forums and social networking tools, students are able to create resources, share work virtually and learn from a variety of media. To build a sense of community, the BOCES has hosted daylong gatherings of students and teachers at its Yorktown campus. “We know this is one of the environments that students need to be familiar with within higher education today,” said Drew Patrick, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction in the Bedford Central School District. “By blending online learning with face-to-face interactions, you get the maximum benefit. We’re creating a sandbox here in the region to figure out what works for high school students.”

Although part of a growing trend – 40 states have virtual schools or online initiatives for grades K through 12 – OC 21 is not your standard online learning program.

“In my experience, most of the online learning that I did lacked real engagement and interconnectivity between the students in the class. This program, by design, goes above and beyond,” said Bedford teacher Chris DeMattia, who created the sustainability course. He also thought the program offerings were unique in their subject matter.

Judging by student feedback, the program appears to be a success. Kevin Carroll, a senior at Walter Panas High School in the Lakeland Central School District who took two OC 21 classes last year, said she came back for a third course this fall because the program “gives me the flexibility to learn about a lot of topics whenever I want.”

Juan Portem, who graduated from the Bedford Central School District in June, said he appreciated getting a jump-start on the web-based technology being used at so many colleges and universities today as well as being exposed to different points of view.

“By taking this online course, you are already a step ahead of so many other students when you get to college,” he said, noting that students not only learn how to use the technology but how to manage their time independently.

School districts also benefit from participating. Brian Alm, high school principal in Putnam County’s Haldane Central School District, noted that online learning exposes students to new classmates, sometimes from other cultures. That’s a plus for Haldane High, which has only 300 students.

Teachers are invigorated, too, he said. “I’ve seen the training received in OC 21 leveraged to give new life to seasoned teachers who were very set in their ways but found brand new ways to engage students.”

Annie Ward, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction in Mamaroneck, had the same assessment.

“I can’t say enough about what an incredible professional development experience OC 21 offers,” she said. “We had one teacher who was nearing retirement, and he is reborn as a result of this program.”

Ellen Lane is communications coordinator for Putnam/Northern Westchester BOCES.

Offered online

Online courses currently available or planned by Putnam-Northern Westchester BOCES are:

• Making a Lasting Impression: Architecture Across the Centuries
• Wanted: Solutions to Problems of the 21st Century
• Take Action! Support a Sustainable Community
• Living in the Cloud and What My Parents Didn’t Tell Me About the 1960s
• Sports Management, Media & Marketing
• Mythbusting 101: Science vs. Frauds, Lies, Hoaxes and Mistakes
• European Cultural History: From Monet to Mendezon - An Artistic Journey through 19th Century Europe
• Intro to Anthropology
• History of Media and Presidential Elections
• 21st Century Literacy: My Digital Life
• Historical Geology and Paleontology: The Prehistoric Age

For descriptions of courses and video interviews of students and teachers, visit http://goo.gl/yyTBu.