

## PIECING TOGETHER A BLENDED LEARNING SYSTEM

The [Sun West School Division](#) (SWSD) spans 32,000 sq. km. (19,883 square miles) in south central Saskatchewan, Canada. There are 40 schools, 16 of which are on Hutterite Colonies that do not allow technology in their schools, while 24 schools are located in 19 small towns and villages. There are approximately 4700 K-12 students in total. Since most of the schools are small K-12 schools with usually less than 100 students, educational programming equity has been an age old issue. The school division has therefore been developing online programming since 2007.

The division initially had 3 teachers delivering synchronous (audio/visual real time) courses to groups of schools throughout the division. Some print based correspondence courses were also used. These teachers were housed in a [Distance Learning Centre](#) (DLC) within the Kenaston School. The online course development has shifted mainly to asynchronous online programming where full time online teachers develop and deliver courses over the internet. Teachers video themselves at the beginning and end of each lesson using mini audio-video production suites equipped with the latest hardware and software technology.

Fast forward to 2014, the DLC has grown to 31 online teachers housed 10 to a room so that their program development and delivery is conducted within a physical space in a cooperative/collaborative structure (<https://vimeo.com/109095854>). This structure is very conducive to supporting and mentoring teachers new to online instruction. The DLC has developed more than 100 online courses. Core programming in grades K through 12 and numerous electives at the middle and high school levels are complete. Many dual credit course options are available to high school students. A partnership with the University of Saskatchewan's Edwards School of Business has high school students take an [introductory Business online course](#) to receive a credit towards their high school diploma as well as receive credit for first year business should they attend the U of S. This model is used for other courses and is now moving into the trades and health science areas. A new [4<sup>th</sup> Class Power Engineering](#) program has just been implemented this past September 2014. High school students will be able to graduate having completed this Power Engineering program allowing them to transition directly into the work force or transition to a post-secondary Class 3 Power Engineering program.

Specially trained Education Assistants (teacher aides) have been placed in every Sun West school to supervise students who are learning independently via online DLC courses. This practice has increased student completion rates of online courses from the previous 30% average to presently between 80 and 95%. Every teacher in the SWSD has access to the DLC programming and is encouraged to use any aspects of the online courses for their own instruction within their face to face classrooms. This support has encouraged many more teachers to explore "Blended Learning" environments. This digital resource is one of the many resources teachers are using in Sun West to enhance differentiated instructions in their classrooms.

The Board of Education recently developed a new [Policy 18](#), "21<sup>st</sup> Century Competencies", which is meant to guide the division's long term strategic planning. This new policy strives to

infuse 21<sup>st</sup> Century skill development in all aspects of learning within the division. The SWSD Board has also established a [one million dollar innovation fund](#) (SWISI) for a 3-year period. Schools are encouraged to develop innovative projects focused on improving student learning and teaching pedagogy within a 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning context. If acceptable, the school receives seed money to develop and implement their plan. Many projects capitalize on the acquisition of one-to-one mobile devices operating within project based learning environments. A couple of schools have gone with one-to-one mobile devices for the entire school population whereas other schools have focused on similar specific grade groupings.

The focus on [21<sup>st</sup> Century Competencies](#) coupled with the [DLC digitized supports](#) and added financial incentives has created a real appetite for enhanced [professional development](#) (PD) opportunities. A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Educator role has been created within each school. This provides 10%, or approximately 90 hours, of release time for a teacher designated into this role. The role focuses on providing 21<sup>st</sup> Century competencies support to teachers in that school. A number division “Learning and Technology Coaches” provide the 21<sup>st</sup> CC sessions (2 half days and one full day to provide collaboration opportunities for teachers across the division) and infuse the workshops with strong curriculum, instruction and assessment pedagogy (<http://21stcenturycompetencies.wikispaces.com/>). Numerous webinars and artifacts have also been developed ( <https://sites.google.com/site/2013sunwestartifacts/showcase/about/home>) to complement commercial webinar workshop supports specifically purchased for providing PD focused on helping teachers promote and manage blended learning environments.

The SWSD Board has recently approved the building of a stand-alone DLC centre that will initially house 100 online teachers and be expandable to 200. Designs will promote state of the art online asynchronous program development and delivery embedded within the division’s cooperative/collaborative model. To complement dual credit programming as well as new programming in the trades and health sciences, a system wide teacher collaboration model is in the works. This project will see subject specific teacher teams throughout the division developing unit and theme based digital content. This content will then be available through the DLC to all Sun West teachers providing supports for blended learning.

A marketing plan is being developed that will promote DLC online course delivery internationally. Revenue streams created through such initiatives will be used to continuously refine and embellish the system’s virtual programming while ensuring that students within the SWSD have access to unlimited program choices!