



Minnesota Virtual Academy: Lessons Learned from a Mature and Growing Virtual School

by Holly Maria Flynn Vilaseca, Senior Implementation Researcher, K12 Inc.
and Krin Abraham, Superintendent of Houston (Minnesota) Public Schools,
Independent School District #0294

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Minnesota Virtual Academy

Minnesota Virtual Academy (MNVA), established in 2002, is one of the earlier institutes in the network of online public schools managed by K12 Inc. From a small online elementary school, MNVA soon expanded to include middle and high school. Despite the growing pains that came with rapidly increasing enrollment, MNVA has remained focused on student learning and has positively responded to challenges by:

- developing a strong sense of community with parents and the school district,
- introducing a homeroom teacher program, and
- focusing on achieving the clearly defined goals in their school-wide academic plan.

Academic Performance: A Brief Overview

MNVA's largest increase of student enrollment occurred between 2009 and 2012. In the 2013–2014 school year, MNVA's total enrollment included 2,119 students in grades K–12.

Student Performance on State Assessments (Grades 3–8)

A review of state test data from the past two school years shows that MNVA has improved in both Reading and Mathematics in grades 3–8.

- From 2012–2013 to 2013–2014, the percentage of MNVA students at or above proficiency in Reading increased in all grades (3–8), with an overall increase of 12 percentage points, from 48% to 60%. (See Table 1.)¹
- From 2012–2013 to 2013–2014, the percentage of MNVA students at or above proficiency in Mathematics increased in grades 4, 6, 7, and 8, with an overall increase of 6 percentage points, from 38% to 44%. (See Table 2.)

TABLE 1: MNVA PERCENTAGE AT OR ABOVE PROFICIENCY IN READING (GRADES 3–8)

	2012–2013 School Year		2013–2014 School Year	
	%AAP	Total Count	%AAP	Total Count
Grade 3	50%	118	58%	109
Grade 4	37%	129	54%	114
Grade 5	55%	118	59%	120
Grade 6	51%	169	56%	100
Grade 7	52%	175	63%	160
Grade 8	46%	208	64%	170
Total	48%	917	60%	773

%AAP=percentage at or above proficiency

TABLE 2: MNVA PERCENTAGE AT OR ABOVE PROFICIENCY IN MATHEMATICS (GRADES 3–8)

	2012–2013 School Year		2013–2014 School Year	
	%AAP	Total Count	%AAP	Total Count
Grade 3	54%	118	54%	109
Grade 4	46%	127	60%	114
Grade 5	29%	119	28%	119
Grade 6	37%	167	43%	96
Grade 7	39%	175	41%	158
Grade 8	28%	209	40%	168
Total	38%	915	44%	764

%AAP=percentage at or above proficiency

¹ The results in Tables 1 and 2 include data for all MNVA students who were tested and for whom valid test results were available in a given school year, regardless of enrollment date.

Performance by Persistence

At K12 Inc., we are in the process of gathering data to examine the relationship between academic performance and persistence, with "persistence" defined here as the length of continuous enrollment in a K¹²-managed school. Preliminary data allow us to compare MNVA students in three ranges of persistence:

- Less than 1 year
- 1 year but less than 2
- 2 years but less than 3

While we continue to gather data on MNVA students enrolled for longer periods of time, the currently available persistence data show that MNVA students enrolled 2 years or more achieved higher percentages at or above proficiency in all subjects tested, compared to students enrolled less than 1 year. (See Figure 1 and Table 3.)

FIGURE 1: PERFORMANCE BY PERSISTENCE, GRADES 3-8 (PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS)

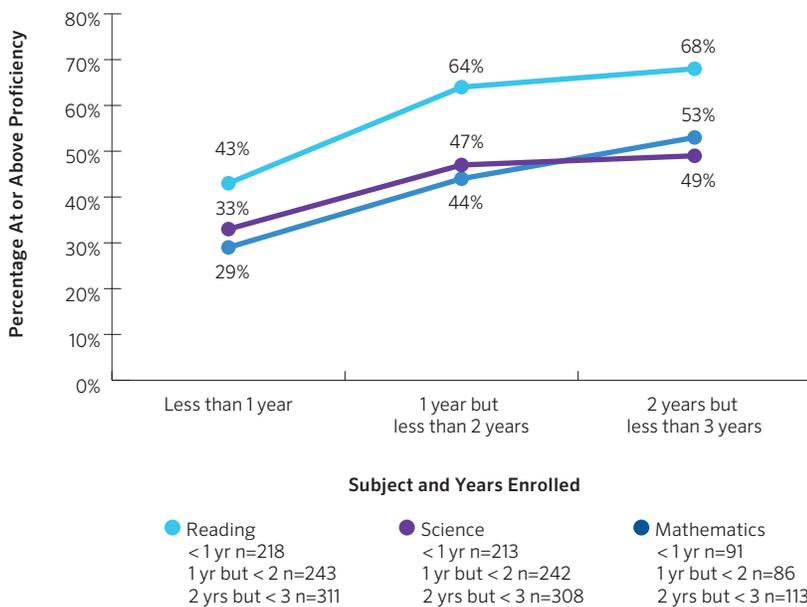


TABLE 3: CHANGE IN PERCENTAGE AT OR ABOVE PROFICIENCY (RELATIVE TO PERSISTENCE)

Students enrolled 2 years or more compared to students enrolled less than 1 year	
Percentage At or Above Proficiency: Increase or Decrease (in percentage points)	
Reading	+29
Mathematics	+25
Science	+24

High School Graduation Test Results

Minnesota administers high school graduation tests known as the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments. Students are tested in Reading in grade 10 and in Mathematics in grade 11. The percentages reported include scores for the grade in which each test is first administered.²

- From 2012–2013 to 2013–2014, the percentage of grade 10 MNVA students at or above proficiency in Reading increased by 2 percentage points. (See Table 4.)
- From 2012–2013 to 2013–2014, the percentage of grade 11 MNVA students at or above proficiency in Mathematics increased by 2 percentage points. (See Table 5.)

TABLE 4: MNVA OVERALL PERCENTAGE AT OR ABOVE PROFICIENCY (HIGH SCHOOL): READING

Reading			
	2012–2013 %AAP	2013–2014 %AAP	%AAP Increase or Decrease (in percentage points)
Grade 10	53%	55%	+2

%AAP=percentage at or above proficiency

TABLE 5: MNVA OVERALL PERCENTAGE AT OR ABOVE PROFICIENCY (HIGH SCHOOL): MATHEMATICS

Mathematics			
	2012–2013 %AAP	2013–2014 %AAP	%AAP Increase or Decrease (in percentage points)
Grade 11	25%	27%	+2

%AAP=percentage at or above proficiency

² States and school districts generally report assessment results only for students who are categorized as Full Academic Year (FAY), which means that the students were enrolled on or before a cutoff date typically very close to the beginning of the school year. In reporting high school results, we report FAY data only and limit our analysis to MNVA students enrolled on or before the state’s FAY cutoff date. Source: <http://rc.education.state.mn.us>



Practices and Programs that Support Student Learning

As MNVA's enrollment continues to grow, school leaders are focused on implementing key practices and programs that they see as vital to improving student academic performance. MNVA is one of four schools within Minnesota's Houston Public School district and, of those four, it is the only school that is fully online.

Building a Strong Sense of Community

Krin Abraham, Superintendent of Houston Public Schools, relates that at the school's graduation exercises on June 7, 2015, a parent approached her and said, "My child feels valued at MNVA. Before coming to MNVA, she treated school like a playground. Here, she really has learned how to learn. This is a life skill my child has learned, and I cannot thank the dedicated teachers and staff enough for this." For Ms. Abraham, these words confirm that MNVA is succeeding in developing a strong sense of community among students, families, teachers, and staff. Ms. Abraham emphasizes how important it is to build this sense of community in order to support the academic and social-emotional needs of every child at MNVA.

MNVA has also developed a strong sense of community with brick-and-mortar schools within Minnesota's Houston Public Schools district. Even though MNVA is a virtual school, it closely collaborates with other schools across the district to share best practices and participate in joint professional learning opportunities. Even human capital is shared in that three Houston Public Schools educators

teach part time online at MNVA and part time in one of the brick-and-mortar schools in the district.

The Houston district designates mentor teachers to work together to add to the "Idea Library," an online library of best practices accessed by teachers across the district. MNVA's mentor teachers work to adapt instructional resources from brick-and-mortar teachers so they make sense for online teaching and learning. Mentor teachers from the Houston district examine the online practices gathered by MNVA mentors and adjust them for use by teachers in the brick-and-mortar classroom. Here, shared learning and resources reinforce the culture of community across the district and pave the way to better opportunities for students.

For a virtual school, regular face-to-face meetings help sustain a strong school community. MNVA coordinates and promotes monthly outings, which provide opportunities for teachers to engage with students and families in person. Students also have the opportunity to connect with other students. Outings are usually planned at museums, theaters, or a sporting event in or around the Minneapolis/St. Paul area, where most of MNVA students live.

Introducing a Homeroom Program

During the 2013–2014 school year, MNVA implemented the homeroom concept in middle school and extended the program to high school during 2014–2015. Homeroom teachers are assigned 20 students whom they meet weekly.

Middle school homeroom teachers focus on early career exploration and the goals and habits necessary for success in high school. High school homeroom teachers work with students on preparing for college and career readiness. Together, they set and revisit career and college goals personalized for each student, review college requirements and applications, virtually visit different colleges and universities, and discuss the habits needed for success. MNVA's homeroom teachers are committed to providing the support, guidance and direction students need to be prepared for post-secondary education, technical careers, and life in general.

Homeroom teachers also serve as adult “educators-advocates” for each student. For example, if a student is struggling with science, the homeroom teacher reaches out to the science teacher to find a solution. The homeroom teacher gives each student a direct connection to a caring adult in the school. This sense of personal connection and caring is likely partly to credit for the increase in retention rates at MNVA, which are currently nearing 80% re-enrollment.

Focusing on the School-Wide Academic Plan

In August, the MNVA leadership team meets with teachers and staff to review prior-year state testing data to develop a school-wide academic plan. The academic plan focuses on four to five goals related to Reading, Mathematics, Science, Student Engagement, and Retention. From among these goals, MNVA designates one as a central school-wide goal. In response to the 2017 annual yearly progress (AYP) target set by the Minnesota Department of Education, MNVA's most recent school-wide goal focused on improving student performance in Reading.³

To achieve the school-wide goal, Reading teachers at MNVA closely monitored student performance and used data-driven instructional principles to guide their instruction. As part of their action research, they worked with students on vocabulary acquisition skills and the use of context clues to decode unfamiliar vocabulary.

All teachers play an important role in implementing the academic plan, which is aligned to the school-wide goal. Because the 2013–2014 school-wide goal was focused on increasing the overall number of students at or above proficiency in Reading, teachers in other subjects not directly related to Reading incorporated specific strategies to fortify reading skills and objectives in student learning. For example, Mathematics teachers incorporated more story problems into their daily instruction, while Science and History teachers included more vocabulary and expository texts in their lessons.

As a result of its dedicated efforts, MNVA met the school-wide goal: 64% of MNVA students in grades 3–8 and grade 10 were at or above proficiency on the 2013–2014 state Reading assessment. Houston Public Schools publicly recognized MNVA teachers and staff at an end of year district-wide celebration. Also, all MNVA teachers were awarded an additional stipend as part of Q Comp (Quality Compensation for Teachers), a grant from the Minnesota Department of Education awarded to the Houston Public Schools district to encourage the recruitment and retention of highly qualified teachers.

A Positive Outlook on Student Academic Outcomes

In its thirteen-year history, MNVA has responded to growth in enrollment by strategically implementing programs and processes focused on improving student outcomes and addressing the needs of each and every student. MNVA is focused on building a strong sense of community, providing all middle and high school students with support from homeroom teachers, and achieving the goals set forth in carefully developed annual academic plans focusing on targeted areas for improvement. These focused efforts set the stage for continued positive academic outcomes at MNVA in the years ahead.

³ The AYP goal is set by Minnesota Department of Education and is part of a No Child Left Behind extension waiver. Source: <http://fundedprograms.mpls.k12.mn.us/waiverinformation>