



HOW A TECHNOLOGY-DRIVEN SCHOOL DISTRICT IS MOVING FORWARD WITH DIGITAL LANGUAGE LAB TECHNOLOGY.



The Warren High School language program has 22 foreign language teachers offering Spanish, French, and German to nearly 2,700 FL students.



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Amy Mason
French Teacher

Warren Township High School is a comprehensive four-year high school in Illinois with enrollment of approximately 4,500 students. It is the very model of a modern, progressive, technology-driven school district, with facilities equipped with everything from smart classrooms with whiteboards to tablet computers for teachers, engineering programs with CAD software, and facility-wide wireless connectivity. In fact, until recently, Warren HS was equipped with just about every technological advance a school could hope for except for one thing: a digital language learning lab.

Enter the Sony Virtuoso™ and Soloist® digital language learning solution.

Warren's sizable language program consists of 22 foreign language (FL) teachers offering Spanish, French and German to nearly 2,700 FL students in the freshman/sophomore and junior/senior buildings. After an unsuccessful experience with an analog lab, the school was highly motivated to make the move to digital technology. For their digital solution, they selected the Sony Virtuoso and Soloist digital language learning software acquired through Ken Busam, their SANS regional sales manager.

According to Amy Mason, 9-10th grade French teacher at Warren, one of the main attractions of the Sony Virtuoso software was the ease of use and the intuitive way it is set up. "You can keep it very simple and just do a clean and simple pair activity or make it as complicated as you want and have pre-recorded audio that you push out to the kids," she said. "I would say that the way it's set up makes any level of teacher comfortable using it, and the variety of things that you can do are really awesome."

The FL teachers had already experienced two other lab systems that didn't function, so reliability was a critical concern. "We just got very frustrated when we'd try to plan something, and we'd come into the lab, and it just wouldn't work. Most teachers would say,

'you know what, it's not working, I just don't have time to go in there and have it not work.' The reliability of the Sony Virtuoso labs was a really big draw for us," said Mason.

A fundamental choice, technically speaking.

The implementation of the Virtuoso digital language lab was also part of the overall technology plan for the school. As Warren schools transitioned from a non-tracked to a tracked curriculum, the goal was to academically challenge and move more students into Advanced Placement® (AP) courses – and to prep those students for the AP tests, they would use the Virtuoso digital language lab technology. "We were taking direction from what we could do based on what was possible with the software, but also for what kids could do in the future, and how we could get them there," explained Mason.

Mason reports that incorporating the use of the Virtuoso technology into the curriculum has resulted in more spontaneous conversation and less rote question and answer activity between paired students. "I'm using a variety of activities and doing more," she said. "And that's because the lab is so easy to use – it's so quick to use the practice-record function and do something on the fly. It's very easy for me to pre-record something in 10 to 15 minutes and have that file ready to push out to the students," she added.

Adding accountability to the learning process.

In a traditional classroom setting using ancillary curriculum material, a teacher copies a worksheet, and the students speak from it – but the teacher is not able to listen to every student individually. In a digital lab, however, a student records a file, the teacher listens to it and gives the student immediate, individualized feedback, which Mason believes, builds in an accountability factor for the student. "It really holds students more accountable, and



they know they're held more accountable," said Mason, "because you can listen in, record comments, and give them a grade for it, and you're assessing what they're doing more efficiently than you would in a regular classroom."

"The students love being in the lab."

"The students love being in the lab, and the first thing they do is come in and put on the headphones," said Dominique Geocaris about her 9th and 10th grade Spanish students. "They just want to speak to one another and that's really cool. Students used to complain about the old system when it didn't work, but now they're really excited about being in here," she added. Geocaris also reports that the ability to modify any activity in the lab to make it more user-friendly for the kids is also a valuable feature.

"The other thing I've noticed is how the lab helps my shy students because they feel that they're kind of isolated and don't have to speak out in front of 25 other people," added Mason. Mason also noted that in a lab setting, students are more willing to help their partners. "If I'm pairing them, they're not face-to-face, so they can't just look at their partner and get it visually. So they really need to rely on their speaking and listening skills," she added.

Teachers speak out too.

To get up to speed with the Virtuoso digital technology, the FL teachers had initial training sessions and workshops with Sandy Hayward of Language Lab Training and Resource Inc., a company specializing in professional development focusing on SANS and Sony language lab technology curriculum integration. "And everybody's been very excited about it," said Geocaris. "They come into the training sessions with a very positive mindset. And we even have technology-

shy teachers who are starting to feel very comfortable with the system, because it's just so much easier to use than any other system we've had in the past," added Geocaris. Teachers are also continuing their own training at their own speed, becoming proficient in using the instructional features and lesson creation tools.

FL teachers also have the ability to record students in the language lab and then access and play back the file from the smart classroom for class feedback and review. "So we don't have to just use the technology in the lab," said Geocaris. "We can actually bring it back into our classroom."

Meeting and exceeding the foreign language mission.

According to Mason, the basic mission of Warren's foreign language program is to introduce students to languages and cultures and give them a working knowledge with the languages. While it is not a required subject, many students choose to take at least two or three years of foreign language in order to fulfill college entrance requirements. And for students belonging to the large Spanish-speaking population, Spanish classes are integral to their bi-lingual culture.

Although Warren does have two Virtuoso digital language labs in place, they would like to expand the program. "We'd love to have another lab built or somehow get more stations in the lab, so that we can get students in here to practice more often," said Geocaris. "The goal of our program is proficiency and being able to communicate – it's a really communicative program, so we're really pushing them to speak and to write as much as possible, not just sit back and take it in," she added.

The school's technology-driven culture has made their language lab very successful, not to mention popular. "Our kids are very tuned in to technology. And they're not intimidated by it at all. When you get them into the lab and you use lab-speak, they're used to hearing it," said Mason. "Technology is huge in our school," added Geocaris. "I don't feel that it's to the point that it's overrunning a traditional classroom, I think it's just enhancing it."

Final verdict on the Virtuoso digital language lab? "We're just thrilled to have lab technology that's stable and reliable and has so many options and activities for the students... and then the support that comes along with it," said Mason.



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