

Education that Connects

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Atlanta Adventist Academy (AAA) had been a thriving school since 1979. It was located in the southwest region of Atlanta on the same campus as Cascade Elementary School and a strong Seventh-day Adventist church. After time, the church relocated, and it was not long that AAA was the only SDA entity that remained on the Cascade property. By 2004, the enrollment started to decline and the finances began to get tighter--which meant that the facilities were also being neglected. In 2007, there were only 5 seniors--something had to be done to preserve education in the Atlanta area.

AAA was known for its fine academics, but fewer and fewer students were able to benefit. During the 2005-2006 school year, it was clear that the enrollment was not going to increase in the present situation. There were 72 board members and only 64 students. There were 13 different constituent churches of AAA, but few had students actually attending AAA due to transportation issues. Many of them wanted to discontinue support since they did not have representation in the student population.

The city of Atlanta was growing daily and many of our constituents were spread out to far reaches of the city and suburbs. A busing program was not affordable and parents could not manage a commute to drop off students at different schools (K-8 and high school) and then manage to make it to their own jobs. The Atlanta traffic was increasing and so was the commute time, so parents started choosing to send their children to public school or boarding schools.

The Metro campus environment was no longer working. Concerned board members, parents, students, and faculty were realizing the reality of the school's closing. Loyal supporters--parents and board members--started strategizing how to save AAA. In the meantime, constituent churches began withholding support for a school that was headed toward closure.

The property was up for sale and it did not take long for interested buyers to take an interest in the location. It was sold in the spring of 2005, but AAA could

remain on the campus until the school year ended. The administration and other stakeholders did not want to fathom the idea of there not being an Adventist high school in a city the size of Atlanta, so all involved knew that no matter what, the new plan needed to be big. With much prayer and a multitude of meetings, it was decided that AAA should utilize the money from the sale of the property and develop a multi-campus school that included a busing program. With only 6 months to plan, the constituent board was discontinued and a small transition team took over this huge project - one that admittedly seemed larger than what was humanly possible.

Decisions had to be made quickly, and the model of three campuses in Atlanta emerged - all connected by interactive videoconferencing. The campuses were chosen according to student population, available space, and having an already healthy feeder k-8 school on the same campus.

Three times a week, parents would have the luxury of bringing their students to whichever campus was closest to home, thus cutting down on commute hassles. And since each individual campus would be smaller, all the metro campus students would meet in Duluth (the main campus) on Tuesdays and Thursday for the purpose of doing labs, athletics, music, drama, core classes in a face-to-face style, and other electives.

There were not any exact models for this type of delivery in education, so it was basically up to the administrative team to create something that would meet AAA's individual needs. After several demonstrations, the Tandberg broadcasting system became the basis for the new classroom design. Each classroom is outfitted with teacher camera, student camera, screens/LCD monitors, document camera, surround sound system, classroom ceiling microphone, media components, podiums, built-in table desks with electrical charging stations, and interior finishes chosen to compliment broadcasting.

After successfully connecting the three metro Atlanta campuses, it was evident that others (specifically, more remote students throughout the South) could benefit from classes taught at AAA, so partner schools were added. Currently, there are five partner schools connected to the system. These schools purchased their

own equipment and connect a small group of students in a rural campus to the same classes the Atlanta students attend each day. Using interactive technology makes it possible for them to be in the class--see the teacher, the presentation, and the class members on other sites, as well as communicate with them in real time. These students are required to travel to Duluth, Georgia, at least twice year - at the beginning of each semester - for an orientation and a face-to-face experience with their classmates. Deliberate plans are made to make sure that these days include academic, social, and spiritual activities. This is a time when relationships are developed and all students are able to get to know each other and the staff - this makes a significant difference in how they relate to each other in the videoconferencing setting.

While not the focus of the educational experience at AAA, the technology-driven delivery system is the means by which an academically driven curriculum can be shared without boundaries of walls and still be interactive. With a traditional block schedule, the classes are varied with projects, lectures, group activities, research, and assessment. All the connections for each class are set up in advance, so the teacher walks in the classroom to prepare for class as usual and then the connections between campuses appear automatically. AAA teachers have in-service training each year to develop skills in using the technology to its fullest benefit. They know that they have to be well prepared for each class--along with power points, electronic handouts combined with the personal touch that a traditional teacher brings to the classroom each day. An awareness of distant students is key, so there is much effort and evaluation to make sure teachers are connecting with all students--no matter the location. According to an article in *Principal Leadership* called *Shifting Ground*, "by 2019, half of all high schools will be taught either fully online or in a blended fashion, with between 30% and 80% of the interaction happening online."¹

In addition to videoconferencing classrooms, AAA has a one-to-one Apple laptop program. In a 2009 article in *EdTech*, the author discusses a study done that

¹ Lehmann, Chris, "Shifting Ground." *Principal Leadership* 10, no. 4 (2009): 19.

schools with one-to-one programs report significant gains in academics for their students. Author Vanessa Jo Roberts reported that 79% of the schools with one-to-one Apple laptop programs indicated that they have improved academic achievement.² This program has been vital to the success of AAA--students are connected to resources (virtual library), other classmates, and the teachers using laptops. Students do not have the same hesitancy about technology as previous generations, so this is a natural extension of their culture.

Making an Adventist high school education available and affordable is a driving force behind the decision of delivering education in this method. Tuition is competitive with "day student" tuition in other Adventist schools--with a myriad of financial assistance/work study opportunities available for Metro Atlanta students. Partner sites are charged a fee according to the number of students attending that campus and the finances are handled through the local church. Many of these sites are subsidized by the local churches, but it is less expensive for students that are receiving the education primarily from a distance, a significant benefit as most of these remote campuses are in rural areas where lower incomes are typical.

The benefits are equally important to the students that live in a sprawling metropolitan city as it is to a student that lives in a rural region, hours away from the closest Adventist academy. Transportation is an everyday issue for those that live in the metropolitan area. Parents find it difficult to drive their children to schools that are not convenient and then have to continue a commute to another part of the city for their own jobs. Many of the parents were dropping off a K-8 student on one campus and then a high school student on another campus before going to work. The other alternative was to send the high school student away to a boarding school, and many parents prefer to have the option of keeping their children at home. Five days a week, the Metro Atlanta parents can take their children to the location that is nearest to them and save hours of commute time. AAA has a fleet of 3 buses and two vans to assist in transporting students. On

² Roberts, Vanessa Jo, "Ready for Launch." *EdTech* 7, no. 2 (April/May 2009): 28.

Tuesdays and Thursdays, all Metro students are bussed from their home campus to the main campus in Duluth.

With students being taught from all areas of the city and several remote sites, AAA gets the benefit of a very diverse student population. It attracts students from many different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. The cultures vary in a more profound way than seen at any traditional school. It is common to be at an event and see students from all different backgrounds mixing and relating in a positive manner - whether the students are from the inner city or a rural area, black, white, Hispanic or Asian, they are getting the same excellent education and learning about different cultures in a positive environment.

Many parents and students have realized that this style of education is preparing students for their future. Technology is not going to disappear! AAA students are technically savvy and ready to meet a world that is not defined by the same boundaries of past generations. A student from AAA is comfortable making a multi-media presentation speech or working on a group project with classmates that are 400 miles away. It is common for a student to do an assignment by a deadline and drop it in an electronic box before closing time--whether he or she is sitting in Atlanta or in Tennessee or watching from a different time zone.

Communicating effectively in our technical world is an everyday activity for students attending AAA. This system teaches students that there is more than one way to achieve a goal. Even if a student has to be absent due to sickness or an unexpected trip, he or she does not have to fall behind in classes. For example, a student recently had to have a surgery that involved a week-long recovery. He had the benefit of being able to see all his assignments and handouts online and even watch the classes that were recorded. He was able to return to school without being behind in any subject. Students can even watch classes live from their laptop computers if they are not present at the campus.

Along with the many benefits of having a multi-campus school with videoconferencing come some challenges. The first challenge was to find an existing model that has used this method of delivery in an educational setting. Many universities had one or two classes taught in this way. However, there was very little

research found on high schools with this kind of classroom-to-classroom delivery throughout the curriculum. There were a few distant education school models that gave us some insight on how to set up the classrooms, but the actual delivery had to be developed by trial and error.

An ongoing challenge is to manage eight different campuses and keep everyone feeling fully included in the program. This dilemma has caused the staff to work together as a team and come up with solutions to problems that seemed impossible to solve. At AAA, cooperative learning, projects, and presentations are an important part of the curriculum--all of these present difficulties when you have eight sites that must be interactive and inclusive. The teachers are encouraged to work with the facilitators to plan ahead and make arrangements for activities. These activities might include using a chat room for cooperative learning or evaluating presentations as students participate on one campus and then switch to the other. Something as simple as the teacher bringing a snack for the students must be coordinated for all campuses so that facilitators will bring snacks for their sites.

Another concern that is always present with technology is the cost of replacing and updating equipment. With the constant changes in cutting-edge technology, AAA is always looking for those things that will improve our program. Anticipating and planning for buying improved equipment is vital. Along with capital improvement funds that are available to AAA, grants have proven a valuable asset. E-rate has made it easier to fund our connectivity needs. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) runs the E-Rate program. Over the last 12 years, the FCC has "given over \$2.25 billion a year to schools and libraries for phone and internet services and networking equipment"³

AAA is currently implementing a new and innovative use for its technology by creating a distance language school called 3ALI (AAA Language Institute). This program was initiated to help fund AAA's operating expenses and to connect AAA students to a global community. Once the program is launched, trained students will be employed as language coaches for distant students that are learning English

³ Wong, Wylie. "The E-Rate Edge," *EdTech* 7, no. 4 (2010): 25.

from another country.

Virtual field trips are another example of a creative use of AAA's resources in the future. Companies all over the world allow students to virtually visit locations like Antarctica or the Everglades, even tour a Shakespearean theater in London without leaving their classrooms, are using this same technology. The tour guides are experienced in leading these live tours over technology similar to ours and the students can interact with them, ask questions and experience a new part of the world with just a little bit of pre-planning. Students can participate in already existing virtual field trips or develop new ones.

Innovation and change is an important element to education, because it serves as a role model for students that have to survive in a fast pace, changing world. It will help students to take more risks and to not live within the traditional walls. When a student can learn from a person that is miles away or to connect with an expert remotely, an entire new level of learning takes place. The technology at AAA will help bridge the gap between a small school and the rest of the world-- which creates a culture of learning.

Educators have shown an interest in the AAA initiative--both the videoconferencing classes and the one-on-one Apple laptop program. Everyone is looking for an answer to fit Adventist education into the 21st century. This system of delivery has allowed AAA students to get a cutting edge education while holding on to the values of Adventism. Observers might see all this technology as a distraction or disruption to education; however, it is the preparation needed for the success of this generation. Technology is the vehicle for creating a learning culture that connects a diverse group of students as they prepare to interact effectively in a society that will constantly change with innovation and people that they work among. AAA connects them to that future.

Bibliography

1. Lehmann, Chris. "*Shifting Ground.*" *Principal Leadership* 10:4 (2009): 18-21.
2. Roberts, Vanessa Jo, "Ready for Launch," *EdTech* 2:7 (2009): 28-30.
3. Wong, Wylie, "The E-Rate Edge," *EdTech* 7:4 (2010) 24-26.