

CASE STUDY UPDATE | HOUSTON, MN

2019



Houston Public Schools. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.unescocorp.com/portfolio/houston-public-schools/>

A local district's online learning program demonstrates the benefits of innovatively committing to technological advances in a rural community.

Back in 2006, Houston's economic development strategy was distinct: to create an online learning program that would reach rural students and bring both computers and better, more widespread broadband internet access to community residents. Since then, different types of internet access have expanded across town, including fiber. In addition, thanks to Minnesota Virtual Academy (MNVA), the district is now the largest in the county. MNVA Head of School and District Superintendent, Krin Abraham, says that, "We were 3rd in the county before we started MNVA—now we've not only catapulted to Number 1, we far overshadow other districts in the area in terms of enrollment."¹ Overall, MNVA demonstrates the benefits of innovatively committing to technological advances in a rural community.

Currently, Houston's residents have access to nine different internet service providers. John Tabbert is the marketing and sales manager at AcenTek, the primary internet service provider in the area. Although he

¹ Phone interview with Krin Abraham on August 8th, 2019.

points out that the definition of acceptable broadband speeds can change depending on the FCC (Federal Communications Commission),² broadband is already available throughout Houston with DSL coverage of about 99%.³ This past summer, AcenTek also expanded to include fiber. In addition, the company is applying for a state grant; the goal is for all of rural Houston to have fiber internet access within the next several years. Krin Abraham notes that, as state broadband grants expand, this will benefit Minnesota Virtual Academy in the local district and beyond. For example, while students can complete classes without higher internet speeds, it can be more difficult during Minnesota winters. Abraham says, "In Minnesota, instead of students saying, 'the dog ate my homework,' they can't complete their work because the satellite dish isn't working due to the cold." The move for broadband expansion will have a positive impact on both the local community and MNVA as a whole.

² Phone interview with John Tabbert on October 2nd, 2019.

³ "Internet Service Providers in Houston, MN," *BroadbandNow*, October 27, 2019, <https://broadbandnow.com/Minnesota/Houston>

In the original case study, the Minnesota Department of Education estimated that, thanks to MNVA, Houston Public Schools would soon grow to be the largest district in the county in terms of enrollment. This prediction proved correct. During the 2018-2019 school year, between 1,600-1,700 full-time students enrolled with around 80% living outside the area. In addition to full-time students in the program, around 200 enrolled in supplemental classes last year. Students can stay in their resident districts and take supplemental classes through the program while their district is tuition billed for each class taken. For example, if a student's respective school has difficulty offering ag classes, the student can take these classes via MNVA. This helps the resident district to keep their students and also pay a fraction of the cost of what they would pay a full-time teacher for the curricular program. Apart from students living outside the district, resident students in Houston Public Schools numbered around 450 in 2018-2019.

Looking to the impact of MNVA both within and outside of Houston Public Schools, the program continues to allow the district to enhance course offerings. According to Abraham, the school has added multiple curriculum upgrades since 2008: "For K-12, we now have Class Connect which is synchronous teaching—so it's almost like a traditional school." Through this offering, the program works to develop meaningful connections between caring faculty and students of all learning styles. In addition to teaching core subjects such as English/language arts, math, science, history, music and art, MNVA electives help to prepare students who want to pursue college as well as a large percentage interested in industry careers. Abraham says, "We're looking at the needs and desires of students and providing them with opportunities for whatever route they want to take."

With this goal in mind, MNVA recently opened a school within the school—Destination Career Academy—which offers career-focused electives. Through DCA, students can work to acquire industry certifications (such as Microsoft® Office certificates) or prepare to take industry-recognized certification exams for a variety of jobs—including those in-demand in the state.⁴ For example, in Northeast Minnesota, 23.9% of jobs are in health care and social assistance, "amounting to more than 34,000 jobs in that corner of the state alone."⁵ Given MNVA's resident students as well as the 80% enrolled outside the district, such a program will potentially create both local and broader economic impacts.

MNVA is already a boon to the community in multiple ways. For example, Abraham shares that the program has allowed Houston Public Schools to remain an independent school district: "Without the school, we would be struggling to continue—we probably would be looking at paring and sharing or even consolidating with another school in the area." Since students who register for MNVA are counted as part of the district, regardless of physical location, the local economy profits. Thanks in part to the "economy of scale" offered by MNVA, the brick-and-mortar school has received 6 million dollars' worth of improvements in the last four years with no need to raise taxes.

The improvements to the brick-and-mortar school also enhance the attractiveness

4 "The Destinations Career Academy," *Minnesota Virtual Academy*, n.d., <https://mnva.k12.com/curriculum/high-school/destinations-career-academy.html>

5 "Minnesota Virtual Academy Now Enrolling for 2019-2020 School Year," *Business Wire*, February 28, 2019, [https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20190228005095/en/Minnesota-Virtual-Academy-Enroll-](https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20190228005095/en/Minnesota-Virtual-Academy-Enrolling-2019-2020-School-Year)

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of Houston for potential residents. As Abraham emphasizes, “A community without a school is not a community that can attract people to live there. Our realtors lead with the school when they’re trying to sell homes. Because of economy of scale, we’re able to have a brick-and-mortar school that other schools can’t have.” As a whole, MNVA—an innovative online learning program created to boost local enrollment for rural students and bring computers and enhanced broadband access to residents—continues to showcase the long-term value of committed public-private partnerships and dedication to technological progress in a rural area.

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