



# Jon Voss of ISD287, a cooperative educational service agency

More Minnesota schools retooling their classrooms to better meld with online learning

A Civic Caucus Focus on Human Capital Interview

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## Present

John Adams, Steve Anderson, Dave Broden (vice chair), Paul Gilje (executive director), Ted Kolderie, Dan Loritz (chair), Paul Ostrow, Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter, Jon Voss. By phone: Randy Johnson, Sallie Kemper (associate director).

## Summary

A number of Minnesota schools are innovating by blending online learning with retooled types of classroom learning, says Jon Voss, director of teaching and learning for Intermediate School District 287, a cooperative educational service agency serving school districts in the western suburbs of Minneapolis. One of its programs is Northern Star Online, which offers online courses full-time or part-time for students from its member districts and from around the state.

Voss reports that more schools are now using online learning to run "blended" and "flipped" classrooms. Blending incorporates online learning in a variety of different ways with classroom learning. In a flipped classroom, students watch lectures or lessons at home on a digital device. The following day, they attempt to put the concepts into practice in the classroom, as their teacher guides and assists them.

According to Voss, digital learning offers teachers the flexibility to think creatively to find a combination of online learning and classroom learning that works. Most students, he says, still want some kind of social experience in learning. He notes that a lot of schools incorporating online learning are innovating by retooling their classrooms to be more like labs, where students can work on their own or in groups.

But Voss asserts that online learning options by themselves won't have a great impact on closing the achievement gap or on closing resource gaps among schools. Two things that would help, he says, are expanding broadband access to every home and every school and obtaining digital devices for every student.

Full-time enrollment in online classes seems to have reached a plateau, Voss says, but part-time enrollment and other types of digital learning are growing. About one to two percent of Minnesota students are enrolled full-time in online classes. Most students enrolled in Northern Star Online take one or two online courses per year.

## Biography

Jon Voss is director of teaching and learning for Intermediate School District 287 (ISD 287) and principal of its Northern Star Online program. Voss first became involved with distance education in 1992, when he taught Russian over interactive television for eight high schools in the western Twin Cities metro area through ISD 287. In 2003, he helped establish Northern Star Online, a program of ISD 287 that has become one of the largest providers of online supplemental courses in Minnesota. Since 2010, he has been chair of the Minnesota State Online Advisory Council and he is a founding member of the Minnesota Learning Commons. He has directed the Minnesota Partnership for Collaborative Curriculum since its establishment in 2013.

Voss earned his B.S., M.A. and Ph.D. in Slavic and East European Languages from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He also has an educational administration license from the University of Minnesota.

## Background

The Civic Caucus has released two recent statements on human capital: [one in September 2014](#) laying out the human-capital challenges facing the state today and in coming years and [a follow-up paper in January](#) offering recommendations for maintaining a high-quality workforce in Minnesota. The Civic Caucus interviewed Jon Voss to learn more about the role of K-12 online learning in helping Minnesota prepare students for higher education and the workforce.

**Information about Intermediate School District 287 (ISD 287).** Formed in 1967, ISD 287 is a cooperative educational service agency in the western suburbs of Minneapolis. It serves 12 member school districts: Brooklyn Center, Eden Prairie, Edina, Hopkins, Minnetonka, Orono, Osseo, Richfield, Robbinsdale, St. Louis Park, Wayzata and Westonka. It also serves students from nonmember school districts. Its online classes include students from throughout the state.

District 287 offers 120 programs and services designed to help meet the learning needs of students in its member districts. Students are served through area learning centers (alternative education), care and treatment programs, career tech programs, gifted education, a mentor program, Northern Star Online courses, special education and world languages. During the 2013-2014 school year, ISD 287 served 12,633 students part-time or full-time.

## Discussion

**Intermediate School District 287 (ISD 287) was formed in 1967, primarily to organize career and technical education and special education for its member districts.** The district offers programs and services that work better collaboratively rather than individually, according to ISD 287's director of teaching and learning, Jon Voss. The district is also able to offer low-incidence programs or "things ahead of the curve," he said. It operates as a public intermediate school district under state law. Most of its funding, he said, flows through its member districts. District 287 served 12,633 students part-time or full-time in 2013-2014.

**ISD 287 has offered Russian, Japanese, Chinese and advanced math to school districts around the state, using an interactive TV system.** Voss said many Greater Minnesota districts still use these interactive TV classes for their students. But the TV networks haven't been used as much in the Twin Cities, partly because the larger metro districts could offer those classes themselves and partly because other ways of doing it began to evolve, he said.

**The district eventually started looking at online programs as a way to offer world language classes.** Voss said the district was looking for a way to overcome the space and time barriers that occur when students are spread around. It eventually began developing online language classes in Chinese and Japanese.

**ISD 287 started online programming in 2003 through its Northern Star Online program.** The program started when Minnesota law changed to allow students to enroll in an online course from outside their enrolling district, essentially creating a form of part-time open enrollment, Voss said. The law (the Online Learning Option Act (124D.095)) allows students to take online courses from another school district and get the course credit in their home districts. "It's pretty rare around the country," he pointed out. "Very few other states allow online course enrollment outside of the home school districts." He noted that some students in Minnesota take all their classes through an online school and get their diplomas directly from that online school. There are about 30 approved programs in the state offering online courses, run by districts, consortia of districts or by chartered schools.

Eventually many districts started offering online classes, Voss said, but they found it to be resource intensive. Offering the online classes through Northern Star Online was more efficient, included courses that met most of the high school graduation requirements and made use of teachers who had already received some training in online learning in their own districts. Online courses and teachers for the inaugural program were provided by Hopkins, Edina, Eden Prairie, Richfield, Bloomington and Osseo.

The district's Northern Star Online program served 2,032 students in 2013-2014, some full-time, but most part-time. Approximately three thousand students enrolled in 5,200 Northern Star Online course this year (2014-2015). Most of those students take one or two online courses per year, Voss said.

**There is some tension between online providers and students' home school districts, because the money follows the student.** Voss said if a student enrolls in an online class through Northern Star Online, 88 percent of the student's state funding apportioned for the one class goes to ISD 287 and 12 percent goes to the student's home school district.

**There are several Minnesota organizations that have grown up around online learning:**

- **Minnesota K-12 Online Learning Alliance** , which is a group of online providers that have been approved by the state, both supplemental and full-time. Voss said the group has always focused on sharing as much as possible: ideas, curriculum and processes.
- **Online and Digital Learning Advisory Council** , which operates through the Minnesota Department of Education.
- **Minnesota Learning Commons** , which is a partnership between K-12 and higher education that everybody can use and share.
- **Minnesota Partnership for Collaborative Curriculum** , which is a group of school districts creating courses as open education resources which can be shared publicly under creative commons licensing and attribution.

**More schools are now using online learning to run blended and flipped classrooms.** Voss said blending, combining online learning with classroom learning, is now a hot topic. And he said the use of flipped classrooms-in which students watch lectures or lessons at home on a digital device and then get help with the concepts as they put them into practice in the classroom-has "exploded." A number of districts are offering the flipped-classroom format as a regular practice, including the Byron and Stillwater School Districts. "It's great when it all comes together," he said. "The teacher can circulate and help students who are having difficulties." Students spend the classroom time working on higher order thinking problems and can work in groups to learn team-building skills.

**There is not one answer to what the best combination of online learning and classroom learning is for every student.** But Voss said being able to combine the two allows for a lot of flexibility. "There's a richness of different models just in the fully online models," he said. "There are some that operate as project-based and some that operate with a specific focus. And there are all sorts of different models for how school districts are incorporating the online curriculum."

**About one to two percent of students in Minnesota are fully enrolled in online classes only.** Voss said there seems to be a plateau in the number of families who are comfortable with their students in a full-time online program. There are still custodial and social functions in having students participate in an educational community in a classroom. "A lot of the fears that school buildings will all be empty with tumbleweeds blowing across the parking lots have not been borne out in the near-term," he said.

But, Voss said, the number of students doing digital work inside their classrooms has grown substantially. "Ultimately," he said, "that would be the goal: that every student has some sort of online experience in every class, at every grade level, in every school. It's almost impossible to think how you could move forward without it." Examples include blended learning projects (Edina, Richfield, Orono), digital curriculum initiatives (Eden Prairie, Hopkins, St. Louis Park, Wayzata, Westonka); online programs for local students (Minnetonka, Robbinsdale, Osseo), or fully online school options (Brooklyn Center).

**ISD 287 builds some online courses for districts to share and use as they want and some for online programs run through Northern Star Online.** The [Minnesota Partnership for Collaborative Curriculum](#) has become the largest effort to pool resources from all districts in the state to build open digital courses that meet Minnesota academic standards and can be shared openly through creative commons licensing.

**People have raised questions about the role of teachers in online courses.** Voss said the question is often posed as, "Can the content be the teacher? Can you have all the online content there and not have to have as much of a teacher presence with it?" He said the questions raise issues to consider in moving from largely a classroom-based experience to some kind of blend of content in a digital format and innovative use of classroom time.

"Most students still want some kind of social experience in learning," he said. "It's nearly impossible to put all students into a digital environment and expect that they're all going to do well. The questions are what is that combination, what is the role of the teacher and what is the role of the building. Those things are ripe for innovation."

**Colleges do accept online credits if the student's home school has approved the transfer credits from the online courses and entered them onto the student's transcript.** In Minnesota, only school districts can offer online courses with state funding, Voss said. So, the home school district determines how to transfer those credits, as they do with any other credits from another school district.

**All subject matter can all be delivered remotely.** Voss said the question is what experience you want to get out of it. We're learning that the knowledge basis, the basic-skill building and things that are more routine and repetitive can be done more efficiently in an online format. It can adapt to the students as they go and give students immediate feedback, so they can move on to the next thing without having to wait.

"Anything that's a little more complex," he said, "is always going to take more time to set up and more resources to create an environment where students are interacting more, using higher-order thinking skills and thinking beyond the basics. That's where the strength of classroom teaching and getting groups together in time and place becomes a lot more important. You never lose the importance of the teacher, because he or she can put people together, find out their strengths and weaknesses and guide them in the right direction."

But instead of the teacher being the source of all the information, he said, all of the information can be accessed from different places. The teacher builds the environment and the kind of activities that encourage the students to find it.

**Online education through Northern Star Online will probably grow in some areas and diminish in others.** Voss said some of the early remote or online course offerings are moving back into the schools, as schools become more flexible in how they manage their time and space. But there will

always be a certain number of students who need to do their work away from school for various reasons, such as students catching up on credits, accelerating their learning or needing a flexible schedule.

"We keep looking at the next content area we can do that schools may not be ready to do yet," he said. "We're focusing on project-based learning as the software systems become more sophisticated." He said it's becoming easier to track what skills students are developing on more complicated problems.

**Students must get permission from their school districts in order to take online classes from non-district organizations or to accelerate their time in high school.** Voss said there are no legal barriers to students moving through high school in less than four years, but there are structural and financial barriers. And districts generally tie achievement to some type of course, rather than separately assessing a student's knowledge, since credits are tied to courses and credits lead to earning a diploma. "There are ways for schools to do it, but they're limited," he said. "Most districts have some kind of credit-for-learning system."

An interviewer observed that, in contrast, we don't hold students back because of age in high school sports. Talented seventh- and eighth-graders can play alongside high school students on high school varsity teams.

**Online learning options by themselves won't have a great impact on closing the achievement gap between white students and students of color or between rich students and poor students or on closing resource gaps among schools.** Two things that would help, Voss said, are expanding broadband access to every home and every school and obtaining digital devices for every student. He noted that school computer networks must keep growing to meet increasing demands. And having sufficient broadband capacity in the regional library system is critical for people who don't have it at home, he said.

**Doing repetitive work on a computer might not be very engaging for those students who aren't that interested in academic work to begin with.** Building in the social learning environment that motivates kids to spend time on online work is as important as having online courses available, Voss said. "In blended programs, we can put the digital curriculum where the teachers can do whatever they want with it," he commented. "But if teachers don't think creatively about how to change the way they organize their classrooms, their time and their groupings, it's not going to do the students any good."

**Online learning raises the question of the role of the school.** Creating opportunities for students through online learning raises the issue of education versus schooling, Voss said. "They used to be the same thing," he said. "But now with so much of education becoming possible outside of school, what's the role of school? It's still based on the academic diploma notion. But schools should also be working with students on social, emotional and mental health issues and should be offering career and technical education. If we can move some of the routine academic learning to a digital environment, then we can concentrate on those additional things."

**A lot of schools are innovating by retooling their classrooms to be more like labs, where students can work on their own.** Voss said the innovations are responses to concerns about the

best ways to use classroom environments. In the lab-like classrooms, students can get together and work in groups on their own on projects that cross academic disciplines and involve higher order thinking skills.

**ISD 287 offers career and technical education (CTE) programs, some of them online.** In a new program called [Gateway to College](#), students go to Hennepin Technical College and spend part of the day doing their K-12 coursework, Voss said. Then they spend the rest of the day taking CTE classes at the college. The district also offers individual Career and Technical courses at Hennepin Technical College, and a range of CTE courses in its special education and area learning center programs.

He said it's possible to put CTE into an online format, but the courses still have to be organized so students will want to do the online work and can see what the purpose of their work is. Then students will have more incentive to take the next step in learning in a hands-on classroom environment.

**Homeschool students enrolled in a full-time online program get public funding, but they can't get public funding for taking online courses part-time.** A shared-time provision in state law allows homeschool students to take some of their courses at a public school. But the courses must take place in the school building, not online, unless the students are enrolled full-time in an online program.

**Metro suburban districts are the biggest consumers of Northern Star Online programs.** But Voss pointed out that kids from around the state use the program, mainly for specialized courses like Japanese or to manage a flexible schedule. There is no online school run by the state, but kids from all over the state can take courses from Northern Star Online or any other state-approved online learning provider through the Online Learning Option Act (124D.095).

**ISD 287 has promoted the use of Coursera, Kahn Academy and other free, open, online course providers.** "We recommend that schools take advantage of all that's out there to meet their needs," Voss said, noting that Kahn Academy is a great resource for math. The explosion in growth of open education resources has given schools a wealth of curriculum to choose from, he said. But it is still the school's role and responsibility to organize, guide, document and verify student achievement to prepare them for the next steps toward college and career.