



# An Inviting and Engaging Online Learning Experience

*Gwinnett Online Campus' interactive learning experience thrills students*

# Overview

From completely virtual schools to the rise of blended learning in the traditional classroom, online learning is taking hold in K-12 education. It helps provide students with new digital methods to meet learning objectives. It also gives educators new ideas and offers schools better ways to manage costs.

According to a report by the Evergreen Education Group, nearly all of the 14,000 school districts in the United States today are using some form of digital learning. That means approximately 56 million K-12 students are using tools ranging from fully online schools to supplemental online courses and skills software for specific subjects like Math and English language arts.<sup>4</sup>

Gwinnett Online Campus (GOC) is the oldest online educational program in the state of Georgia.<sup>5</sup> The school began serving students in 2009. In 2010, it adopted Brightspace as its learning platform. In the fall of 2011, GOC became a full-time charter school. They now serve over 5,000 students through full-time and supplemental programs.<sup>6</sup>

GOC uses the Brightspace platform to create a blended instructional model where teachers can provide individual attention to each student. GOC implemented interactive, custom-designed interfaces that enable students to access content by clicking on pictures rather than providing a list of options. Student engagement with educational material has improved and GOC has seen outstanding test results. Its fourth grade even scored first state-wide in reading and language arts.<sup>7</sup> For its inventive work creating an innovative and collaborative learning experience for its students, GOC received a 2015 Brightspace Excellence Award.

## AT A GLANCE

|                 |                                      |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------|
| <b>Client</b>   | Gwinnett Online Campus               |
| <b>Students</b> | 5,000+ <sup>1</sup>                  |
| <b>Staff</b>    | 100+ <sup>2</sup>                    |
| <b>Level</b>    | K-12                                 |
| <b>Solution</b> | Brightspace Online Learning solution |

## CHALLENGE

- Maintain core value of exceptional instruction while using rich digital content
- Create an interactive online “classroom” for students at different grade levels
- Offer students access to district-provided and approved resources
- Enable students to socialize within the online learning environment

## SOLUTION

- Use custom interfaces to provide students quick access to tools and resources
- Different interactive classrooms designed for the specific needs of grades 4-12
- Development of a “media mall” to provide easy access to district-approved resources

## RESULT<sup>3</sup>

- Outstanding test scores across all grade levels
- Recognition from the local community as an innovator in education
- 25% growth in full time online enrollment year over year
- High school students meeting and exceeding state test standards

<sup>1</sup>Including students in full time and supplemental programs

<sup>2</sup>Including full time and adjunct teachers

<sup>3</sup>Results courtesy of Gwinnett Online Campus

<sup>4</sup>Watson, John, Larry Pape, Amy Murin, Butch Gemin, and Lauren Vashaw. *Keeping Pace with K-12 Digital Learning*, Rep. no. 11. Evergreen Education Group, 2014. Web.

<sup>5</sup>“Historical Overview | Gwinnett Online Campus.” *Gwinnett Online Campus*. Gwinnett Online Campus, n.d. Web.

<sup>6</sup>Information courtesy of Gwinnett Online Campus

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

 Challenge**CREATING AN ENGAGING ONLINE ENVIRONMENT FOR YOUNG LEARNERS**

Since 2011, educators at GOC have worked to build a full-time online school designed specifically to engage the K-12 learner. When they started developing their middle school program, they realized they had to be cautious about how they delivered the learning experience for younger grades.

“Sometimes we think we can just take a high school and water it down and it’s going to be a middle school. Then, if it’s watered down a little bit more it’s going to be an elementary school,” says Dr. Christopher Ray, Principal at GOC. “We needed to provide students with the right scaffolding at these different levels in order for them to be successful and organize our school to meet the needs of students within that continuum.”

With that in mind, the GOC team knew they had to build a learning environment suited for their entire student population. “We realized early on in designing the school that it was very important for students to always feel welcomed when they come to school. This meant creating an interactive and inviting online environment where younger students can feel they are listening to their teachers and their administrators first-hand,” says Dr. Ginger O’Neal, Assistant Principal at GOC. “When our students log in to the learning platform, they should feel as if they are walking into the classroom.”

GOC’s leadership team was inspired to create an on-line environment with graphics that reflect the campus experience. Their online campus is complete with common areas and a media mall. They also have classrooms designed for elementary, middle, and high school levels.

**EASY ACCESS TO DISTRICT-APPROVED RESOURCES**

“One of the challenges we faced was finding a way for students to have easy access to district-provided and approved electronic media resources within the learning environment,” explains Dr. O’Neal. “In brick and mortar schools, students are generally taken as a class to the media center, where a media specialist provides them with a list of resources. Because our students primarily complete their work independently in an online environment, it was important to give students access to these resources without losing engagement or understanding.”



## **USING CREATIVE DESIGN ELEMENTS TO ENGAGE STUDENTS**

GOC administrators recognized that design would be important for providing online students with an appealing ‘real-world’ school experience. To help with the designs, GOC worked with a Brazilian company that specializes in creating graphics for video games and children’s television shows. Collaborating with this vendor, the team created classroom interfaces and course navigation bars of the same artwork style. They also produced illustrations of teachers to link to their introductions.

The learning environment within the Brightspace platform received equal care and attention. It’s completely customized to meet the needs of K–12 learners. Specifically, students are able to click throughout multiple graphic interfaces, navigating quickly to the tools and resources they need in their online courses and face-to-face interactions.

In addition to the external campus depiction that welcomes them when they initially log on, students can navigate to interactive classrooms for grades 4–5, 6–8, and 9–12. The media mall provides another option where they can view informational videos that are created and shared weekly.

## **BUILDING MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT**

For GOC, the key behind engaging students is hiring and investing in the best possible online teachers. “I get the luxury of choosing the best of the best out there,” says Dr. Ray. “These are teachers that have a drive for online

learning. It’s not just people walking in and saying, ‘Let’s teach in the online environment.’ We then put them through our Teacher Institute so we’re really developing those teachers to make sure that they are meeting our expectations—which are extremely high.”

With a focus on hiring and retaining passionate online teachers, GOC opens up a world of possibilities for instructors to use the tools found within Brightspace. The pictorial representations of the Grade Book, Checklist, and Calendar tools help provide students with a highly interactive learning experience. Teachers also make use of graphics within their courses. These help make lessons for the youngest students engaging and easy to understand. Using Brightspace course pages, GOC has also created custom interfaces for measuring student engagement and achievement.

“One of the big parts of education in general is building relationships and communication in the classroom. Now typically, when we say ‘in the classroom’ we are referring to the physical building, but at GOC, we also mean the online environment because for a lot of our kids, it is the major part of their learning,” says Dan Lollis, a language arts teacher at GOC. “Technology should help students—never hinder their learning or discourage them because it is frustrating to use. The Brightspace platform is simple and easy to use for our students at every level, from elementary, to middle school, and high school. Having kids literally be able to click once or twice to get to the different things they need to do—that’s a big deal.”



“The first time I logged into our online school I thought, ‘how awesome is this!’ It looks like a video game I would play that is educational, yet fun, and I am still learning. I am so proud to show my friends how cool it is to go to GOC. My favorite is the media mall where we can access all of our research materials and eBooks. It is so easy to check out a book. I just click on the picture of the media specialist and it takes me right where I need to go. GOC is a special school and our online classrooms couldn’t be better.”

Fifth Grade GOC Student



### **GOC'S SCHOOL OF THE FUTURE MAKES THE GRADE**

In the short time GOC has been operating as a full-time school, it's been recognized as a school of the future. Using a blended instructional model, teachers at GOC use the Brightspace platform to offer students an interactive and engaging learning experience. Brightspace also allows teachers to provide individual attention to each student. Full time online enrollment at GOC has increased 25% year over year.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to increased enrollment, GOC's state test scores have been simply outstanding. GOC's fourth grade students scored first in the state in reading and language arts. The fifth grade students passed the state writing, reading, and language arts tests. GOC's sixth graders were sixth in the state in reading, seventh graders passed all five subject areas, and all eighth grade students passed the reading and language arts tests. High school test scores consistently meet or exceed state standards. Their students even achieved the highest mean scores on one of the math exams.<sup>9</sup>

Overall, GOC student test scores are showing just how effective online learning is. Students who are engaged in the process excel in a blended environment.

"I really see blended learning becoming the standard in all our brick and mortar schools. It is not the exception anymore," says Dr. Ray. "Our key core value is exceptional quality instruction and Brightspace helps us achieve that. It provides a platform that ensures the delivery of high quality instruction to students while at the same time putting that learning into rich digital content."

### **WHAT STUDENTS ARE SAYING**

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"I feel very prepared to attend college because I am already familiar with the Brightspace platform. Because of my experiences at GOC, I am a more self-directed student and ready for the college environment. One of the things I appreciate about attending GOC is the overall online learning environment. The interactive graphics deliver a one-stop experience that is engaging and personalized. When I log in to Brightspace it feels as if I am actually going to school. It helps to create a sense of belonging to a campus-culture even though we are online." - GOC Senior/Salutatorian

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"I have great relationships with my teachers in the Brightspace environment. The tools the teachers use are engaging and help us feel connected. I love how each page has the GOC look and feel. The characters in my courses have been created to look just like my actual teachers." - Tenth grade GOC student

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# About D2L

D2L is the software leader that makes the learning experience better. The company's cloud-based platform—Brightspace—is not a common one-size-fits-all learning management system (LMS). It's easier to use, more flexible, and smart. With Brightspace, you can personalize the experience for every learner to deliver real results. The company is also a world leader in learning analytics: its platform predicts learner performance so that you can take action in real time to keep them on track. Brightspace is used by learners in higher education, K-12, and the enterprise sector, including the Fortune 1000. D2L has operations in the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, Brazil, and Singapore. | [www.brightspace.com](http://www.brightspace.com)

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