



# Alpena Public Schools: Becoming a District of Choices for Students

Alpena Public Schools gives students more learning choices with D2L

*Alpena is harnessing D2L's Brightspace platform to deliver personalized education — combining classroom, online and blended learning experiences to help each student learn in whatever way is best for them.*

## AT A GLANCE

**Student Number:** 4,100

### Interviewee:

- Dr. John VanWagoner,  
Superintendent,  
Alpena Public Schools

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*Dr John VanWagoner, Superintendent, Alpena Public Schools*

## **SUMMARY**

To support its vision of personalized education, Alpena is using D2L’s Brightspace platform to create intuitive online and blended courses with high-quality digital content, videos, interactive elements, and support for project-based learning. The project also lays a strong foundation for Alpena to align with the State of Michigan’s evolving competency-based education standards.

## **QUICK FACTS**

- 3 years of skyrocketing growth in online enrollments
- 17% of high school students now take courses online
- 90% success rate for students passing online courses

## **FOSTERING STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING**

Like many school districts across the United States, Alpena Public Schools faces the challenge of preparing its students for successful lives and careers while meeting state educational standards and operating within tight budget constraints.

To align with the State of Michigan’s increasing focus on competency-based education, Alpena realized that it needed to take a more student-centered approach to teaching, and set out a strategy to become a leader in personalized learning.

Alpena decided to adopt a learning management system (LMS) that would help it develop a range of online and blended learning experiences, with a focus on technical education and project-based learning to complement and augment its traditional academic classroom-based approach.

However, initial experiments with various LMS platforms were unproductive. Overly complex systems made it difficult for teachers to learn how to create digital content themselves. On the other hand, purchasing content from external vendors was expensive, and often not optimized for Alpena’s needs.

Furthermore, although the district now provides personal computers for most students, many of them have little experience with educational technology. Alpena knew that it had to make the learning experience as intuitive as possible to ensure that no student is left behind.



“To provide personalized learning, we need flexibility,” says Dr John VanWagoner, superintendent of Alpena Public Schools. “We want to pick the most relevant content from partners and vendors, and combine it with our own content to build tailored learning experiences for different types of learners.”

#### **SEARCHING FOR AN OPEN APPROACH**

Alpena’s administrators decided to look for a new LMS that would provide a more intuitive and open approach to course creation. When they saw D2L’s Brightspace platform, they quickly realized that it offered something different.

“We’d been using all these clunky LMS platforms and getting frustrated,” says Dr VanWagoner. “Brightspace is the first tool we found that doesn’t put a barrier between us and our goals, so getting teachers on board and building new courses is really straightforward.”

The Brightspace platform makes it easy for teachers to upload information, videos and other content and use it directly in their classrooms.

“What I love most about Brightspace is its ability to put education in the hands of my students anytime and anyplace. It is a one-stop shop for students to find the agenda for the day, help videos, daily work and links to other classroom activities.”

*Melissa Jarema, Teacher, Alpena Public Schools*

It is also being used by the ACES Academy (Alpena’s alternative education community) to build engaging blended and online courses for high school and community college students.

“I am thrilled with the fact that Alpena has incorporated Brightspace into our educational experience,” says Kris Copping from the English Department at ACES Academy. “I enjoy the ease with which I can create and share course material in Brightspace and supplement it in a variety of ways, while housing everything in one easily accessible place for students.”

Crucially, Brightspace also gives Alpena access to an open marketplace of educational content, so teachers can pick and choose the elements they need to augment the content they develop themselves. This not only saves time — it also provides a broader range of educational tools and techniques to suit a wider variety of learners.

“The D2L team have been phenomenal to work with. Our people have been delighted with the training and support from that standpoint.”

*Dr John VanWagoner, Superintendent,  
Alpena Public Schools*

Once teachers have created their course content in the Brightspace platform, they can share it with colleagues and re-use it in different contexts over multiple semesters.

*“Brightspace allows me to keep everything in one well organized space that can be accessed anytime, anywhere. All of the courses I worked so hard to build last year were uploaded with a click of a button and ready to be reviewed and used again this year.”*

*Alissa Miller, Eighth Grade Math Teacher, Alpena Public Schools*

Alissa Miller, Eighth Grade Math Teacher at Alpena, comments: “Brightspace allows me to keep everything in one well organized space that can be accessed anytime, anywhere. All of the courses I worked so hard to build last year were uploaded with a click of a button and ready to be reviewed and used again this year.”

One third of Alpena’s 300 teachers are using an LMS in their lessons, and this figure is expected to rise as the district expands into project-based learning and technical education. For example, the district already offers an innovative geometry and construction course, where students learn geometry by building a house. It is also pioneering a course called “Amped Up”, which combines algebra with design and manufacturing.

#### **DRIVING ENGAGEMENT AND RAPID ADOPTION**

In the three years since Alpena began its student-centered learning journey, the district has seen the number of online enrollments skyrocket. 17 percent of its high school students now opt to take online courses, and the average course completion rate is over 90 percent—testament to the varied and engaging learning experiences that Brightspace provides.

“If you only offer one way to learn, students can get stuck,” says Dr VanWagoner. “But if you have options for visual learners or hands-on learners as well as academic learners, you can keep engaging and motivating them to succeed.”

“We’re seeing students becoming much more proficient in using technology. Our sixth-graders can save all their work in Brightspace on their Chromebooks, so we can almost go paperless in some courses. That’s been a real shift for our school district.”

*Dr John VanWagoner, Superintendent,  
Alpena Public Schools*



When asked about their use of Brightspace, Alpena students reported that they find the platform “user-friendly”, “organized” and “easy to navigate”. In particular, several students commented that Brightspace gives them the flexibility to “work at their own pace”—catching up on assignments that they missed through absence or move ahead if they master the material faster than their classmates.

Alpena is now looking to expand its use of Brightspace and align even more closely with state standards around competency-based education. The district is in contact with a network of other D2L clients across the state, including Michigan Virtual, a specialist in professional development and digital content creation.

“Michigan Virtual uses Brightspace too, so that partnership is a huge plus for us,” says Dr VanWagoner. “We’re excited to continue working very closely with them to help our teachers develop their skills and build even more compelling blended learning experiences in the future.”