



# Keeping rural students on course

*ACCESS Distance Learning bridges the opportunity gap for  
Alabama's rural high school students*

# Overview

In 2003, Alabama was ranked among the lowest-performing states for producing high school and college graduates.

Students in rural and impoverished areas were dropping out of high school in droves—not surprising considering the lack of teachers and very limited access to the “Advanced Placement” courses that improve student success in both college and career.

Alabama administered only ninety-nine Advanced Placement exams for every thousand juniors and seniors, ranking fourteenth out of sixteen southern states.<sup>2</sup>

Just over ten years later, the changes have been dramatic. With the help of D2L, Alabama has nearly doubled its number of AP exam takers—and now has the third largest virtual school in the U.S.

## AT A GLANCE

<b>Client</b>	The State of Alabama
<b>Students</b>	27,700 in 2014
<b>Level</b>	High school
<b>Solutions</b>	Brightspace Online Learning solution

## CHALLENGE

- Provide rural schools with the same opportunities as city-based schools
- Ensure all students can access AP courses
- Extend the reach of teachers to benefit rural populations

## SOLUTION

- Provide online access to resources and Advanced Placement courses
- Monitor student progress and address lapses
- Give rural students access to highly-trained teachers through virtual classrooms

## RESULT<sup>1</sup>

- 2x the number of AP exam takers
- 5x more low-income students taking AP exams
- 4x more African-American students taking AP exams
- 2x the number of qualifying exam scores
- Program expansion from 24 schools to over 400 statewide



## Challenge

### **FOR RURAL YOUTH, IT WASN'T A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD**

The major issue came down to dollars available to fund education. Alabama's rural areas didn't have the robust population necessary to create a strong tax base that would fund anything beyond basic school programs. There were fewer resources available to keep students engaged and heading toward graduation.

In many cases, students in rural areas who were interested in attending college had no access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses. "AP courses are college-level courses in subjects like Government and Economics that give high school students a chance to experience what they will face when they go to college and even earn college credit," explains Larry Raines, ACCESS Program Administrator.

Are AP courses important to future success? "Absolutely," says Raines. "They give students confidence that they can succeed. That has a great deal of importance when they make that big jump from high school to college."

### **WITHOUT THE RIGHT TEACHERS, THERE WAS LESS OPPORTUNITY**

Schools in rural Alabama and impoverished areas also had problems attracting and retaining teachers, especially teachers for AP courses. Sometimes there simply weren't enough students to justify the expense of a teacher.

"Back when I worked in a small rural high school, I could not afford to dedicate a teacher to an AP course for just three or four students," he says. "That was the problem. Those three or four students missed out."



“One of the most useful things about the Brightspace platform is the information it provides when students have been inactive. We are able to tell their schools and the schools can take action sooner to encourage better participation and student success.”

Larry Raines, ACCESS Program Administrator, State of Alabama



### **BEING ONLINE HELPS KEEP STUDENTS IN SCHOOL**

A team dedicated to addressing the matter led to the creation of the ACCESS (Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators, and Students Statewide) Distance Learning Initiative.

In 2006, ACCESS partnered with D2L to provide innovative online learning to high school students throughout the state. Now, students in rural and impoverished areas have access to enriched resources—including the valuable AP courses. Discussion and Dropbox tools allow for improved student interaction, and online quizzes help ensure students are progressing. They can even fulfill most of the requirements for graduation online.

“Students are also more likely to communicate with the online teacher using the email tool than they are to ask questions in a bricks-and-mortar school because the intimidation factor between the teacher and student is not as strong,” says Raines. “That helps to increase the student-teacher communication that’s vital to success in all courses.”

He adds, “In the past, students sometimes dropped out of school to work and support their families. Using the Brightspace platform they can work at a job and do some of their course work too, so we are seeing how that is helping students continue towards graduation.”

### **MONITORING STUDENTS KEEPS THEM FROM FALLING BEHIND**

Before ACCESS, it was easy for high school students to drop off the radar, especially in areas without enough faculty support. The Brightspace platform enables educators to pull students back in when they fall behind.

“D2L helped us create a report that allows us to monitor student activity,” says Raines. “We are dealing with more than 27,000 students taking courses, the majority of whom are scheduled to go to their high school computer lab or video conferencing lab sometime during the day. The report allows us to monitor students statewide so we know who has not been participating for more than a week.”

## Solution continued



### EXTENDING THE REACH OF GREAT TEACHERS

Thanks to the Brightspace platform, all high school students in the state now have equal access to courses—and great teachers. Videoconferencing allows teachers to inspire and motivate students in rural and impoverished areas. Since the teacher can't be onsite, local schools employ facilitators who monitor students, help with technical issues and provide assistance to the teacher.

“The Brightspace platform has been very helpful in terms of student interaction,” says Raines. “We have certified, highly-qualified high school teachers assigned to each course using communication tools such as Discussion or Dropbox, and that's been very helpful. For a while we were struggling to keep and recruit teachers. Now, with the ease of use of the Brightspace platform, we actually have an abundance.”

### CONSTANT COMMUNICATION IMPROVES ACCESS AS IT GROWS

The success of ACCESS has created additional demand. More and more schools want to go online and, in fact, ACCESS will soon be expanding its course offerings to grade eight students. Raines credits D2L with helping his organization keep up with growth. “We have lengthy discussions on how they can help us improve. They glean as much from us as possible so that they can be sure they're giving us what we need. They're very good at communicating.”

D2L is also providing the necessary training to get teachers onboard. “They've been very helpful in preparing our teachers to use the Brightspace platform. They made it easy for teachers to make the move,” he says.

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“A lot of times we use the term ‘user friendly’ as a joke, but with Brightspace it's very true. We are constantly requiring our teachers to be involved in training to help them better use Brightspace and keep up with best practices, but they enjoy using it—that's the difference.”

John Halbrooks, ACCESS Registration Administrator,  
State of Alabama

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## **BIGGEST GROWTH IN ADVANCED PLACEMENT PARTICIPATION IN THE US**

ACCESS on the Brightspace platform is changing the face of education in Alabama.

“In the last couple of years Alabama has shown the biggest growth in Advanced Placement participation in the nation. We feel that’s due in large part to the fact that ACCESS has made AP courses available to students throughout our state in multiple situations that would not have been possible before,” says Raines.

“We’re better preparing students for college and their careers, whatever they might be,” he says. “And we know that in the long run that’s going to come back to the state as a big plus in terms of their potential for earning income.”

## **ACCESS GIVES MINORITY GROUPS THE CHANCE TO COMPETE**

Since 2004, the number of AP exam takers in Alabama public schools has almost doubled. What’s more, the number of African-American students taking those exams has more than quadrupled and the number of qualifying exam scores has more than doubled. Five times more low-income students are taking Advanced Placement exams.<sup>3</sup>

Raines has seen the change firsthand: “After the very first AP course was offered on Brightspace at my small rural high school, I had five senior girls who took the course come back individually the following year and express how much that one course prepared them for the first year of college. They learned that they could compete with students from affluent areas.”

## **ACCESS GAINS RECOGNITION—AND SUPPORT**

ACCESS has grown significantly since its inception. When it began, it served 450 students in 24 schools and now it serves more than 27,700 students in over 400 schools. Some milestones and highlights include:<sup>4</sup>

- Over \$18 million in state funding
- Over \$1 million in federal grant dollars from the Appalachian Regional Commission
- More than 92 ACCESS courses now available, including five foreign languages, eleven AP courses, and nineteen credit recovery courses
- Positive reports from the International Society for Technology in Education showing that over 75% of students and 82% of teachers involved in ACCESS felt that their virtual school experience was as good as or better than that of traditional courses
- More than 1,000 teachers trained in eLearning course delivery

<sup>3</sup>Results provided by ACCESS Distance Learning  
<sup>4</sup>Information provided by ACCESS Distance Learning

# 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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