

# Michigan's Schools of Innovation

// OXFORD COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

THE GREAT RECESSION —  
AND THE 'GREATEST GIFT'





## The Great Recession — and the ‘Greatest Gift’

### Oxford Community Schools

In July 2007, when William Skilling became superintendent of Oxford Community Schools, the district was cutting budgets and educational programs. Oxford wasn’t alone. Michigan’s school enrollment had been declining for years, and tax revenues were beginning to flat-line. Cost pressures were on the rise. The state was in what a Mackinac Center analyst described as a “one-state recession.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet at the end of August, Skilling went out on a limb. He told his staff that Michigan’s economic woes were “the greatest gift ever given this school district.”

His timing couldn’t have been worse. A few months later, the Great Recession set in. Its impact on Michigan was brutal. Home values plummeted, and much of the state’s auto industry headed for Chapter 11.

If 2007 was a “gift,” 2008 would be Christmas.

### More Than Infrastructure

But Skilling was right. Oxford used the fiscal turmoil to reinvent itself as a leader in digital learning, leveraging the Internet to deliver and enhance student instruction. Just when district leaders might have turned inward and focused on their misfortunes, Oxford looked outward and tapped the energy and innovation of the World Wide Web.



#### OXFORD, MICHIGAN

Population: 3,436

The town was founded the same year

Michigan gained its statehood — 1837.

It was named Oxford because many early settlers used oxen to break the ground.



## Edupreneur

Dr. William Skilling has been leading Oxford Community Schools since July 2007. He was recently awarded the “Tech-Savvy Superintendent Award,” which is given to 10 superintendents nationwide each year by eSchool News.

The results can be seen in more than the cutting-edge programs that Skilling eagerly displays as he escorts a visitor through the district’s facilities; Oxford’s unusual offerings have attracted new students. According to data from the Michigan Department of Education, the district’s enrollment has increased every year since 2007, and in the 2011-2012 school year, Oxford grew by 250 students — more than a 5 percent increase in a single year. Oxford is the only district in Oakland County projected by the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments to be larger in 2015 than it was in 2005.<sup>2</sup>

The new students mean Oxford is collecting more state revenue, and it has used the cash infusion to enhance its brick-and-mortar programs. Oxford has added new boys and girls athletic teams in middle school and high school — lacrosse, swimming, tennis and downhill skiing, among others. It nearly doubled the size of its fine arts program, hiring eight new visual and performing arts teachers and tripling the size of its choral program. Preschool through third-grade students can now take violin, cello or classical guitar classes, and more than 400 students in grades four through 12 have enrolled in a district orchestra program that started in 2008. Oxford also added an International Baccalaureate program and world language classes that are available to all students.

These programs certainly cost money, but with the per-pupil state aid spurred by increased enrollment, they did not break the bank. In fact, the district is more stable financially: Its fund balance leapt from 5.7 percent to 16.2 percent of the operating budget between 2006 and 2011.<sup>3</sup>

True, Oxford had advantages. In terms of per-capita personal income, Oakland is Michigan’s wealthiest county, according to data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis, and the district’s enrollment was growing before the Great Recession, a time when many districts were stacking up empty chairs.<sup>4</sup>

Yet Oakland County took a direct hit with the staggering blows to General Motors, Chrysler and so many of their suppliers. And Oxford is just a



## Good teachers are essential

Classrooms may look different, and teachers' day-to-day duties may change, but the guidance, mentoring and support that good teachers add to digital learning programs are vital.

midsize district compared to the 27 others in Oakland County. Its per-pupil foundation allowance is just 3 percent above the state minimum and is fully 40 percent below those of the best-funded districts in the county. The state Department of Education reports that nearly a quarter of Oxford's enrollment is low-income students who qualify for a federally subsidized free or reduced-price lunch.<sup>5</sup>

Oxford had reasons to look at the impending recession and plan for an orderly retreat. It chose to go on the offensive. "This is the kind of counter-intuitive thinking that we've been going through, breaking the conventional wisdom," Skilling says. "Instead of cutting programs, we've been adding and improving."

### In the 'Virtual' Vanguard

The critical addition has been digital learning, and central to that was the Oxford Virtual Academy, which uses student-paced instruction that is accessible online, anywhere, anytime. Students can choose from a wide variety of course providers, including e2020, Aventa Learning, PowerSpeak, Lincoln Interactive and K12 Inc. Altogether, the OVA provides more than 180 different courses for first- through 12th-graders.<sup>6</sup>

The range of the OVA's offerings is reflected in the variety of students signing up for classes. About 400 students took at least one OVA course in 2011-2012, with 300 of them enrolling from another district or through the district's homeschool partnership.

Some of these students are seeking credit recovery — that is, a chance to pass a class they'd failed to complete earlier. Others are taking advantage of the scheduling flexibility offered by online classes. Yet others are pursuing upper-level coursework, such as an Advanced Placement course not offered in the district's traditional classrooms. Some students are pursuing the OVA's unique elective offerings, such as art history, solar technologies, Java programming and introduction to screenwriting.



## Can we afford it?

Superintendent Skilling suggests starting with these questions instead: "What capacity do we have as humans? ... How much wisdom do we have among our employees — innovation, creativity?"

The answers provide a vision that tells a district how to spend its money.



The results are  
entirely human



The OVA's technology may involve wires, boxes and circuits, but the results are entirely human. One student writes that the OVA gave her a "new outlook on my future." She had dropped out of school three times, but she eventually found the OVA and finished two-and-a-half-years' worth of course work in just one year. She'll be able to graduate on time.

Another student shares a similar story: She was behind her peers and had enrolled in an "alternative school" before trying the OVA. She was able to catch up and move slightly ahead of her peers in just one year.

A visiting parent explains that she enrolled her son in the OVA over the summer so he could catch up on some of the material he struggled with during the school year. Her son appreciated it, because it meant staying current on his school work without having to sacrifice one of his summertime passions: baseball, with its out-of-town tournaments.

Janet Schell, a teacher at the OVA, says she has witnessed several success stories first-hand. She adds that she enjoys the variety of tools she can use to facilitate student learning in an online setting. "What I'm finding is kids thrive in an environment where we have lots of ways of learning," she says.

Schell seems to thrive in it, too. She says she appreciates the personal interaction she can maintain with each student, whether she's emailing them, Skyping them or leaning over their shoulders to help them solve a problem on the computer.<sup>7</sup>

The OVA's courses and Schell's work there reflect the diversity of digital learning programs now available. Depending on the type of course, instruction is provided either through Internet-based software or through teachers' lectures, live or recorded, streamed via the Internet from remote locations. On-site instructors like Schell often help facilitate that digital instruction through tutoring or personal supervision, though some

of the digital instruction may be "full-time online," requiring little to no face-to-face interaction. Ultimately, the educational model and degree of on-site teacher involvement is chosen by the students and their parents when they select among the courses the OVA offers.

In addition to the OVA, Oxford has received state approval to launch a virtual Early College Program specifically for accelerated learners. These students can take online courses through Lawrence Technological University, Rochester College or Oakland Community College, and they can earn college credits up to an associate degree by the end of high school.

Similarly, beginning in the sixth grade, students can start accumulating credits, some of which are earned in online courses, toward a high school diploma. This approach, like the OVA, helps customize instruction to an individual student's needs and learning pace.

Interestingly, Oxford's teacher professional development program is also going digital; Skilling says that just like students, teachers want the benefits of digital instruction. In response, the district created the CatsCast Educator Academy & Repository. This teacher professional development program uses an online, digital curriculum that is self-paced and available for teachers to access anytime, anywhere.

## Trust and the Future

Skilling insists that Oxford's success is a direct result of trust built between district employees and school board members through a shared vision that was consistently communicated throughout the administration, the schools and the community. The district also went a long way toward earning the trust of parents and the rest of the community by eliminating activity participation fees and student admission fees for school events.

*(text continued on next page)*

This shared trust between the school board, educators, parents and the community emboldened Skilling to transform the district's educational delivery. Once such trust is built, Skilling says, "It opens up innovation exponentially."

In the end, just as he'd hoped before the Great Recession set in, Skilling was able to "leverage this economy to create Oxford's finest hour." But he and Oxford Community Schools remain focused on the future.

By 2013, all Oxford teachers will use a blended learning instructional model, where the instruction is delivered both by the on-site classroom teacher and by computer-based software, Internet-based software or teachers educating remotely via the Internet. By 2015, most face-to-face learning, especially in the upper grades, will be in "flipped classrooms." Students will receive instruction outside of the classroom (often via recorded lectures online), and teachers will devote classroom time to practice, application, mentoring, discussion and collaboration, among other things. Oxford also aims to digitize all of its curriculum and instructional material, replacing traditional textbooks.

Spurred in part by the OVA's success, the district plans to create the Oxford International Virtual High School. This program will connect students to teachers and peers around the world. Some classes in the program will use a blended learning model, while others will be full-time online. The goal is to provide students opportunities to work in a globally diverse environment.

Based on his experience at Oxford, Superintendent Skilling bluntly advises other school leaders to embrace digital learning: "If the magnetism of your vision is not greater than your current assets, your district's in a state of decline, decay, heading towards mediocrity and possible extinction. If you don't get on board with virtual, you're on your way to extinction." //

## Students take responsibility

One student at the OVA praises the academy's teachers, but stresses the importance of students' commitment. "In this program," she writes, "unlike any other program, your individuality and independence is the key to your success. The more time you dedicate to your classes, the sooner you can get done. There is literally no limit to your success."



## Endnotes

1 For school enrollment, see “Pupil Membership History: FY 1994-95 to FY 2012-13,” (Michigan Senate Fiscal Agency, 2012), <http://goo.gl/xOCx3> (accessed April 27, 2012). For education-related tax revenues, see “Sources of Local School Operating Revenue: School Years 1968-69 to FY 2009-10,” (Michigan Senate Fiscal Agency, 2011), <http://goo.gl/SOiz2> (accessed April 27, 2012). Cost pressures depended on numerous factors that varied by district, but all conventional public school districts were subject to the increased contributions required for the Michigan Public School Employees’ Retirement System. These contributions were already equivalent to 12.17 percent of a district’s payroll in fiscal 2002, and they had risen to 17.74 percent by fiscal 2007.

“Employer Information: Office of Retirement Services: Public School Employees Retirement System: FY 2001-02,” (Michigan Office of Retirement Services, 2012), <http://goo.gl/l4wWh> (accessed April 26, 2012); “Employer Information: Office of Retirement Services: Public School Employees Retirement System: FY 2006-07,” (Michigan Office of Retirement Services, 2012), <http://goo.gl/l6Q6L> (accessed April 26, 2012). The phrase “one-state recession” was used more than once; see, for instance, Michael LaFaive, “Municipal Finance Expert Louis Schimmel Joins Mackinac Center,” (Mackinac Center for Public Policy, 2006), <http://www.mackinac.org/7706> (accessed April 30, 2012).

2 Author’s calculations based on “State Aid Status Reports - Prior Year,” (Michigan Department of Education, 2003), <http://goo.gl/NACDx> (accessed April 26, 2012). For school population projections, see “SEMCOG 2035 Forecast Population by Age Group by School District,” (Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, 2009), <http://goo.gl/K2528> (accessed March 20, 2012).

3 “Oxford Community Schools: Annual Financial Statements and Auditors’ Report,” (Oxford Community Schools, 2006), <http://goo.gl/BeJ1Q> (accessed May 3, 2012); “Oxford Community Schools: Annual Financial Statements and Auditors’ Report,” (Oxford Community Schools, 2012), <http://goo.gl/bHKYx> (accessed May 3, 2012).

4 For wealth by Michigan county, see per-capita personal income in “Regional Economic Accounts: Data: Local Area Personal Income & Employment,” (U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2012), <http://bea.gov/regional/> (accessed May 3, 2012). For Oxford enrollment growth, see “Bulletin 1014-Michigan Public Schools Ranked by Select Financial Information,” (Michigan Department of Education, 2012), <http://goo.gl/WJezO> (accessed May 2, 2012).

5 For the difficulties in Oakland County, see Robert Daddow, “A Perfect Storm: Oakland County Budget Symposium,” (Oakland County, Michigan, 2010), <http://goo.gl/mBuuL> (accessed April 27, 2012). For Oakland County foundation allowance figures, see “Per-Pupil Foundation Allowance Ten-Year History for Schools: FYs 2002-03 through 2011-12,” (Michigan Senate Fiscal Agency, 2011), <http://goo.gl/L9JL0> (accessed April 27, 2012). For state minimum foundation allowance, see “Effective Foundation Allowance Changes Since Proposal A, Fiscal Years 1993-94 through 2010-12,” (Michigan Senate Fiscal Agency, 2012), <http://goo.gl/69Cgy> (accessed May 2, 2012). For free and reduced lunch counts, see “Free and Reduced Lunch Counts: District, Fall, School Year 2011-12,” (Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2012), <http://goo.gl/NkBP1> (accessed April 27, 2012).

6 For a complete list of courses offered at the OVA, see “Course Catalog 2012-2013,” (Oxford Virtual Academy, 2012), <http://goo.gl/IgY58> (accessed April 27, 2012).

7 Skype is a computer program that allows videoconferencing on the Internet.



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The Michigan Schools of Innovation Series  
A NEW GENERATION OF LEARNING

A young man with dark, spiky hair is looking upwards and to the right with a thoughtful expression. Behind him is a poster of Bob Dylan with the text "THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN' BOB DYLAN". In the foreground, a blurred image of a young man wearing a headset is looking down at a laptop. The background features a window with blinds and a decorative overlay of binary code and network diagrams.

**THE TIMES  
THEY ARE  
A-CHANGIN'  
BOB  
DYLAN**