



Collaborative to the core

An innovative, public online
high school puts technology to
work for students and teachers

BY GAYLA MARTY

IT'S A STORMY WEEK IN MARCH, but it doesn't matter much to the students and staff of Minnesota Online High School. From towns near the Canadian border to farms near Iowa, most of them log in to their online classrooms from home.

Bonnie Rosenfield, B.S. '72—"Mrs. R" online—teaches physical education and health. An energetic professional with a bubbly laugh, she is accustomed to hearing one of the school's most frequently asked questions, "How does online PE work?"

"There's a lot more reading and writing, detailed journaling of physical activity, and recording things like your heart rate," she explains. "That's how I can see what they've learned and whether they are applying it to their fitness goals. People are surprised!"

This semester Rosenfield has 16 students—10 in physical education and 6 in health—from Marshall to Oakdale. Her classroom is her house in Burnsville, not far from the Minnesota River. Some MNOHS teachers post videos of

Minnesota Online High School at a glance

Opened: fall 2005

Enrollment: 175

Comprehensive (MNOHS-only): 132
(Receive special education services): 21

Supplemental: 43

Staff: 20 teachers, 7 support
MNOHS is a state-certified online learning provider, a public charter school authorized through Pillsbury United Communities, accountable to the Minnesota Department of Education. It was national accredited by NCA/AdvancED in 2012.



Bonnie Rosenfield, left, works with each physical education student to write a fitness plan and shows them how to do things like use a smart phone as a heart-rate monitor. From their home locations, such as the one above, they complete an online activity journal through the Blackboard interface.

themselves for students, but Rosenfield teaches without it. The athletic equipment is in her students' lives, whether yoga mat or hockey uniform or a local Y.

First thing in the morning, Rosenfield logs in to the school site and checks for questions from students. Under the "Needs grading" tab she checks for homework submitted. She views her physical education students' activity logs, where each one records data like the number of repetitions and sets completed while lifting weights, and their heart rate during the cardio-respiratory activities they've chosen.

"They get to choose what they like to do, from Wii Fit to competitive athletics," Rosenfield says. "My emphasis is on lifetime fitness. If you enjoy doing an activity, you should be able to carry on with it your whole life."

That has been true for Rosenfield. Growing up before Title IX opened school athletics to girls, she loved to ski and dance and was supported by an athletic family. After high school she started at Itasca Community College, transferred to the

U to major in health and physical education, and then taught for most of her career in Minneapolis, where she pioneered the public schools' online health program. To this day she's an avid walker, works out at home, and loves to dance socially.

She also loves to teach. Her load now is highest in the summers, with a range of interests and abilities. Some are students in competitive sports in their home districts who need flexibility and register at MNOHS for a class or two. Some are full-time MNOHS students who arrive thinking that they are not good at anything athletic.

"I'm kind of old school—classes for boys and girls were separate in phy ed and health in my time!" Rosenfield says with a laugh. "But a lot of young people are still intimidated by co-ed. Here they excel. They're enjoying what they do."

Her students have included a hockey player, a horseback rider, club gymnasts, and teens schooled at home. One had a weight-loss goal, who reported how much the class helped him learn healthy ways to reach it. Another started a yoga club at her school based on what she learned in her MNOHS course. Rosenfield hears from many who have encouraged their parents to start working out with them.

She begins by working with each student on an individual fitness plan.

"Even though you're not face to face," she says, "what students get is a lot more one-to-one interaction."

Rosenfield is continually doing research to stay current and design the best options for individual needs. She likes it that way.

"I just love what I am learning from my students," she says.

Exceptional commitment

Rosenfield is one of 20 teachers and 7 staff members working with 175 students enrolled in Minnesota Online High School across the state. She is among those who spent many years in a bricks-and-mortar school before entering an online classroom.

MNOHS, known affectionately to students and staff as "Minnows," is one of two nationally accredited online public high schools in Minnesota. Now in its eighth year, the charter school achieved its accreditation in 2012 with several commendations, most notably for "exceptional commitment to help each student succeed as an individual." Such commendations are rarely given to schools that are small, young, or online, and MNOHS is all three.

How did the school do it?

Executive director Elissa Raffa, B.S. '84, licensed as a secondary physical science teacher and also as a district

superintendent, has focused on hiring excellent staff. She has kept the student-to-teacher ratio low at 13 to 1, including three special education teachers. The staff currently includes two counselors, an office manager, and a tech manager.

Preparation is a priority. All MNOHS teachers hold Minnesota licenses for the content areas in which they teach, and every person hired receives training to work in an online environment. MNOHS teachers design their own courses and continually adapt them to individual students' needs and goals. Students commonly meet with them one-to-one online as well as assembling in small-group digital classrooms.

"It's not about content delivery but about what we ask our students to do," Raffa explains. "We try to focus on authentic assessment—on what students create and how they share it with others."

The way the school works is also distinctive. Presence means attention and responsiveness, not location. In addition to creating new learning opportunities for students, the school was organized to provide new professional opportunities for teachers. Faculty members live in locations around the state and have taught from abroad without interruption.

"MNOHS is collaborative to its core," says Raffa. "We have almost zero percent faculty turnover. Teachers and staff come and they stay. We solve complex problems effectively together, we give students our best, and we have fun. It's phenomenal."

A vision of what online education can be

Elissa Raffa's résumé ranges from chemistry to creative writing. After teaching science at the secondary level in a Minneapolis alternative school for 12 years, she was writing a book in 1997 when she answered an ad for a part-time job. An online adult diploma-completion program, Mindquest Learning Network, was looking for teachers.

Raffa's part-time job grew from 11 hours to 20, 30, and then 40 hours per week. But after cuts to state funding for adult education, Mindquest closed its doors in 2004.

At that point, Raffa and three colleagues applied to start an online charter school. They had witnessed the potential of online learning and were motivated by students whose needs were not being met in other school settings.

The first thing Raffa did was seek out resources to develop her and her colleagues' ability to teach well in an online environment. She found them through the School Technology Leadership Initiative then in CEHD.

Bob Blomeyer, now CEO of Online Teaching Associates of Illinois, was the project manager for her professional



Britt Pennington is the counselor for 75 students and communicates with them as many as three times a week—mostly by phone and email.

development course at the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory.

"Elissa stood out," he says. "She was completely engaged. Interaction online with students can be every bit as engaging and effective as an eyeball-to-eyeball class environment, and she knew it. She devoted more overall time into staff development. She had a vision of what online education can be that was outside the mainstream. It was real teaching with real teachers."

U talent at work

Six alumni and a doctoral student from CEHD currently serve on the MNOHS faculty and staff.

Scott Fodness, B.S., English education, '73; LD/ED certification, '79

Julie Lindholm, M.A., social and philosophical foundations of education, '94

Britt Pennington, M.A., counseling and student personnel psychology, '10

Elissa Raffa, B.S., science education, '84; district superintendent licensure, '11

Lynn Randazzo, B.S., elementary education, '88

Bonnie Rosenfield, B.S., physical education/health education, '72

Stephanie Hammerschmidt-Snidarich, doctoral student, educational psychology

Meanwhile, the group chose what was then the U Tech Center in Dinkytown (and Marshall U High School before that) as their first home. The enterprise incubator proved useful when tech-savvy colleagues on site helped to solve more than one digital puzzle. MNOHS bought liquidated office furniture and reconditioned computers for staff, saving the big bucks for servers to house their systems. The staff worked so hard together that Raffa says it felt like a barn raising.

Julie Williams, once the Mindquest coordinator, became the first MNOHS director of operations. That meant responsibility for all the technology, systems (from registration to learning plans), contracts (from hiring to health care), and state and federal reporting—everything except curriculum and counseling.

"You're on the bleeding edge," Williams remembers. "You're thinking, 'We've got the chance to develop something really good.' At the time, there were almost no models for what we were trying to do—a statewide, public, online high school."

The state approved the charter application in March 2005. MNOHS hired teachers who joined in building the school from the ground up; several were CEHD alumni. Minnesota Online High School opened its doors—digitally and physically—that fall with 79 students.

"It has one of the most dedicated teams I've ever seen," says Gary Langer, executive director of the Minnesota Learning

Commons, who serves with Raffa on the Minnesota Online Learning Council. "I really laud them on not growing too fast. Developing curriculum took time."

The 98-percent rate of completion for supplemental students, he says, shows the difference made by such solid footing.

Today MNOHS provides a broad range of courses, a talented and gifted program, honors options, special education services, a comprehensive counseling program, services for students whose first language is not English, and a student leadership program. Most courses are NCAA approved.

Langer sees MNOHS filling an important role in the growing community of online learning providers. For one thing, it gives teachers an opportunity to try out teaching online—they can offer to teach one class, and training is provided.

For another, it fills a gap for students.

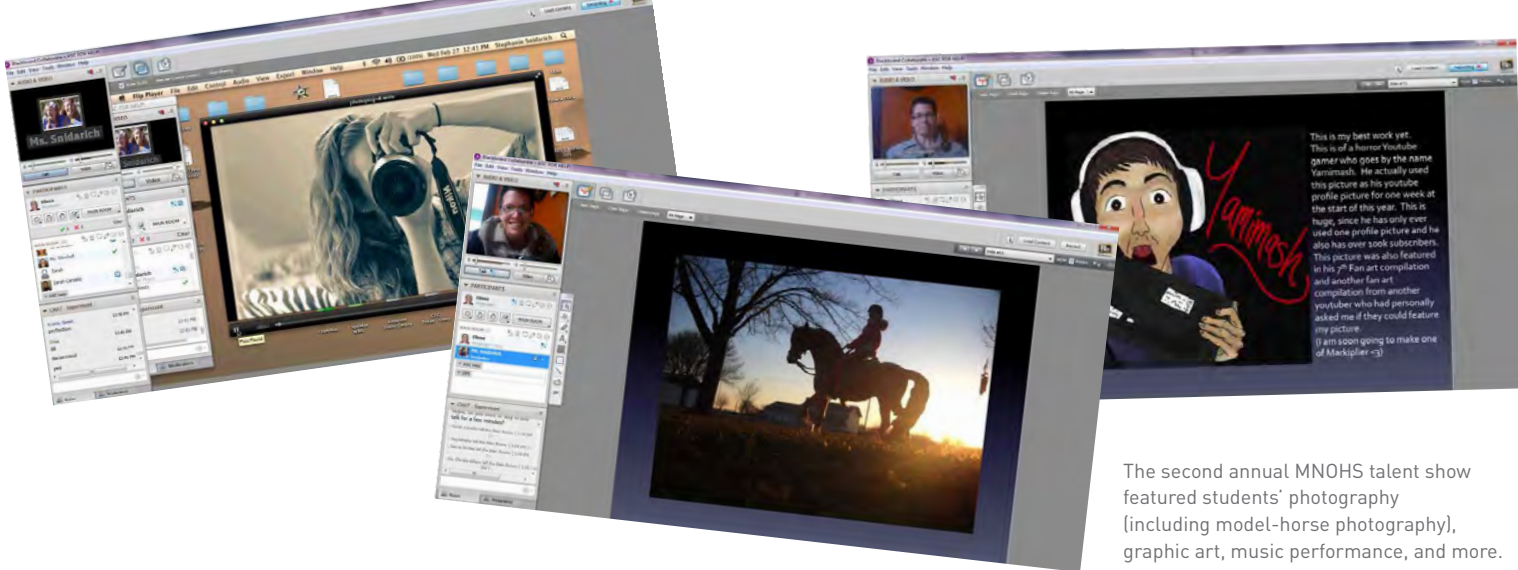
"There are other choices out there," he says, "but none have the personal care that this one does."

Meeting students' needs

Competitive athletes are not the only students who need personal care in the form of a flexible schedule and a supportive school community. Some MNOHS students are young parents or work to support themselves. Others have special education needs addressed more effectively in an online environment. Some experienced bullying or felt that they just didn't fit in at their local school. Serious health issues occasionally bring students to MNOHS. And many students are simply looking for

Executive director Elissa Raffa congratulated Kushinda Zeleke at commencement, held during an in-person series of weekend events each year.





The second annual MNOHS talent show featured students' photography (including model-horse photography), graphic art, music performance, and more.

an academic challenge and fewer classroom distractions so they can focus on learning.

Britt Pennington, M.A. '10, is one of the two school counselors at MNOHS. After her bachelor's degree from Augsburg in 2006, she worked in the nonprofit sector for two years, then came to the U for a general counseling degree. She joined the counseling and student personnel psychology program with the goal of ultimately working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth. At MNOHS, she is the designated counselor for 75 students and communicates with them often, sometimes up to three times a week.

"Building a relationship with a student over the phone is the biggest difference," she says about working at an online high school. "You also have to be a good writer. Humor is important, and I spend a lot of time on email."

Staff members who live in the metro area take turns staffing the MNOHS office, now in St. Paul, and Pennington is one of them. Whatever her location, over the course of a typical day she meets with students for online appointments, emails or calls students listed on her schedule or referred by a colleague, and responds to questions as they come in. Occasionally a student stops in person, but Pennington rarely sees her students or knows what they look like until graduation weekend.

Pennington and her colleague, Monica Potter, are an integral part of the team that helps each student progress to graduation. About 35 are aiming for that goal in June, and she looks forward to seeing many of them in their caps and gowns. One of the most moving things, she says, is seeing those who have overcome great odds walk across the stage. But Pennington and Potter don't stop there.

"Monica and I are working hard to create a college-going culture here," she says.

Part of Pennington's job includes representing MNOHS on

the Safe Schools for All Coalition and the Minnesota School OUTreach Coalition. It's one of the ways that the experience of students with difficulties in their local schools can indirectly but profoundly influence change.


Stephanie Hammerschmidt-Snidarich was living in St. Cloud when she saw an ad for a job teaching art at MNOHS.

"I thought it must be a hoax, or something really new and cool," she says with a laugh. Eight years later, she has served for two years as the school's board president and also teaches special education. Recently she enjoyed acting as emcee for the online talent show, raising and lowering a virtual red curtain on each act, from rap music to model-horse photography.

In the meantime, her middle son is now a MNOHS graduate.

As a U doctoral student in educational psychology since 2011, Hammerschmidt-Snidarich is particularly interested in behavioral principles tied to learning reading and other academic skills. She is also interested in how parents perceive their children's educational needs and respond to support them.

"Most parents want to help but have limited access to what their children are learning," she observes. She knew her son learned differently than the rest of her children, and MNOHS was a good fit. "It allows students to work asynchronously, and I could also see what my son saw and monitor his learning."

Hammerschmidt-Snidarich wants to see more and better research on online learning, especially to inform policy. She sees MNOHS leading the way. If it was a pioneer in 2005, today the school is a model of what creative, connected online learning can be. 

Read more about Minnesota Online High School at www.mnohs.org.