



Students with Special Needs Improve Grades and Graduate with Wimba

from the William Penn School District Cyber Academy

"Wimba allows me to reach those students that otherwise we'd lose."

-Cynthia Hyland, MEd, Distance Educator, William Penn School District Cyber Academy

It's a gray October morning in Lansdowne, Pennsylvania, just across the border from the rough-and-tumble neighborhood of West Philadelphia, when Cynthia Hyland, MEd., sits down at her laptop in the Ninth Grade Academy building of the William Penn School District. As she prepares to start the homeroom period, there's one element notably missing from the classroom in which she sits – the students. Hyland, the Distance Education Facilitator for the William Penn School District Cyber Academy, will monitor and teach the entire day to students who are all logging in from their homes. While the rest of the study body shuffles into the traditional brick and mortar buildings located throughout the district, Hyland's 27 students are attending from their bedroom, kitchen, and basement home offices as they take part in one of the country's most innovative – and needed – distance education programs. And after only two years since its inception, the Cyber Academy has already proven so successful that several students have already been able to graduate when, before the program was available, the likelihood of them completing school was a long shot at best.

Some of Hyland's students have circumstances which require them to take all of their courses at home, away from the traditional face-to-face classroom. Some of her students have attention problems, some have social issues limiting their learning, some suffer from severe allergies or other medical conditions, and are others, despite being extremely bright, are so shy that they simply crumple under the pressure of being around their classmates. Many more students have found themselves a credit or two short and need a class to graduate, while others use online courses for credit recovery or for enrichment to get ahead in their studies. To help these students meet their diverse educational objectives, the Cyber Academy began offering courses live online via Wimba Classroom in 2005 in order to create an alternative learning environment for these unique students. Now, instead of having to study amid the pressure of aggressive classmates, crowded hallways, or other personal issues, these students can take their entire state-approved curriculum online in the safety and comfort of their own homes.



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WIMBA PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

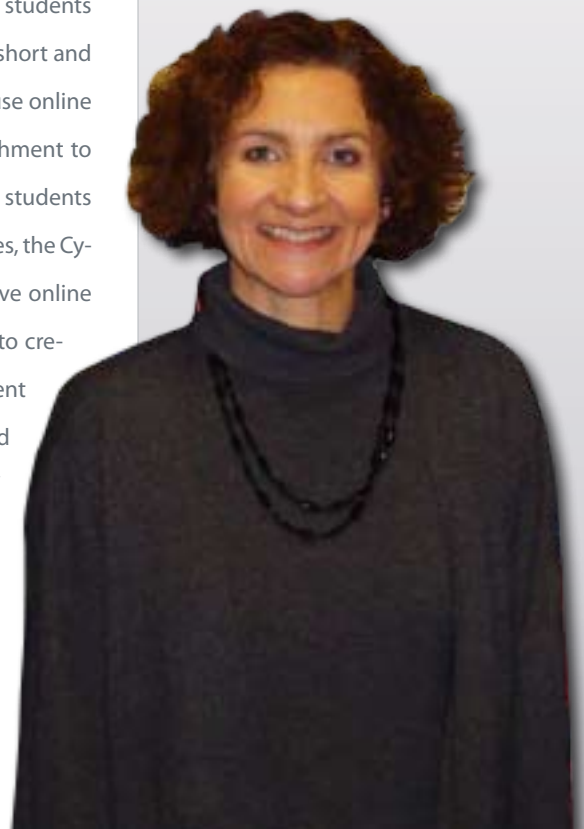
- Wimba Classroom
- Wimba Voice
- Wimba Pronto

KEY BENEFITS

Wimba allows at-risk and disadvantaged students to improve their grades, re-enroll after they drop out, and even graduate.

Cynthia Hyland, MEd

Distance Educator, William Penn School District Cyber Academy, IT Specialist





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STUDENTS LAUD WIMBA

"Wimba attacks all your senses; you can hear, see, and feel what you're learning. Wimba is a foolproof classroom."

-Richard Giffins, 12th-grader, William Penn School District Cyber Academy

The William Penn School District Cyber Academy started in August 2005 under the guidance of the district's superintendent and Ursula Willis, the Cyber Academy's Director of Instructional Technology & Data Management. At that time, the Cyber Academy had already implemented the Blackboard Learning System as the foundation of its online courses, but Willis understood that Wimba was a sorely needed solution as it would enable the Cyber Academy to succeed by adding vital elements of collaboration that K-12 students need to thrive. After all, the more a student interacts with his or her teacher, the better that student will learn.

Throughout that gray October day, Hyland's students progressed through a varied array of classes such as Algebra II and Social Studies. Hyland took full advantage of Wimba Classroom's collaborative features during the Algebra II class, as she had her students work in small groups on a math problem using the interactive whiteboard and breakout rooms. By having her students interact with each other via chat, voice, and whiteboarding, her students felt as if they were practically seated next to each other.

"My grades definitely improved," said Richard Giffins, a 12th grader enrolled in the Cyber Academy who contemplates joining the Army or attending college after he graduates in June 2008. "I like Wimba because it gives me different ways to learn. I'm more of an audio guy – I'd rather hear it than read it. Hearing my teacher gives me more of an explanation and a better feel for what I'm learning. Wimba attacks all your senses; you can hear, see, and feel what you're learning. Wimba is a foolproof classroom."

Cynthia Gaines, a fellow senior in her second year at the Cyber Academy who hopes to attend ei-

ther Temple University of Norfolk State to study to study physical therapy, added, "Today we did an activity in Algebra and I got to work with all my classmates. I don't feel isolated."

Overall, the collaborative online curriculum via Wimba spans subjects such as Geometry, English, Biology, Chemistry, Spanish, and even SAT Test Prep and Senior Projects, all of which are highly interactive and engaging. And thanks in large part to a statewide umbrella non-profit organization, the William Penn School District Cyber Academy isn't alone in its online offerings.

Enter Blendedschools.net.

Blendedschools.net is a "non-profit organization dedicated to optimizing technology to enhance student learning by delivering an expansive list of products and services to its member school districts and their students." In other words, Blendedschools.net works with K-12 districts throughout the state of Pennsylvania to help them offer a complete K-12 online core curriculum created by Pennsylvania teachers that is aligned to national standards and the Pennsylvania Academic Standards. Blendedschools.net leads a consortium of 126 schools across the state, providing them with online curriculum, training and technology for these schools.

While the Cyber Academy's main objective is to offer educational opportunities for children who need a self-paced learning environment, are behind in their credits, or who are faced with social challenges that make the traditional school setting difficult for them, other schools throughout the state of Pennsylvania are simply so small and under-funded that they cannot offer as broad a spectrum of classes as other schools. This is where Blendedschools.net steps in.



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WIMBA GETS RESULTS

"With Wimba we can confirm that our students have mastered their subjects and we can ensure a consistency of rigor across all courses."

-Ursulla Willis, Director of Instructional Technology and Data Management, William Penn School District Cyber Academy

There are 500 school districts in state of Pennsylvania, yet only 46 have an enrollment of 7,500 or more. And if the goliath Philadelphia and Pittsburgh school districts are removed, the average Pennsylvania district has a mere 2,100 students – fewer students than are typically enrolled in a single Philadelphia public high school. Therefore, there are lots of inequities in Pennsylvania schools. Mark Gensimore, Project Manager of Blendedschools.net, says that states like Virginia have county-wide school districts that are practically run like corporations, his Pennsylvania school districts are run by small school boards that depend on revenue only from their equally diminutive communities. While elite districts such as Loudon County or Fairfax County in Virginia might have a few poor towns but also affluent suburbs to support their schools, many Pennsylvania districts rely exclusively on only one or other. Therefore, the poor districts have almost no means to dig themselves out, while the lavish suburban districts revel in their lofty community tax dollars. It is these inequities between Pennsylvania schools in both funding and curriculum offerings which lead to challenging situations; situations that Blendedschools.net can solve.

Blendedschools.net provides online technologies that small – and large – districts with shallow pockets cannot afford to purchase on their own. This purchasing power allows Blendedschools.net to buy large licenses of technologies such as Blackboard and Wimba which can then be distributed to any district that requests these technologies.

For example, a small, rural school in Pennsylvania's Appalachian Mountains can now extend the breadth of its curriculum by allowing its students to take classes either asynchronously via Blackboard or fully live online with Wimba. Classes

offered via Blackboard from Blendedschools.net run the gamut from basic Math and English to AP US and World History. In fact, though only two years young, the Cyber Academy now offers more than 120 synchronous and asynchronous courses taught by state certified instructors from the William Penn School District and partner institutions through Blendedschools.net.

"It's been exciting to see the difference education technologies are making in the lives of students at the schools we serve," said Blendedschools.net Project Manager Mark Gensimore. "We've been able to examine and assemble the best tools to create turnkey technical solutions so the schools can stay focused on helping students succeed."

In K-12, it goes without saying that parents play a pivotal role in their children's education. "When we first launched Cyber Academy our informational meetings attracted four or five parents," said Willis, "but after only a few weeks, we had five times that many. The idea of blended instruction has caught on very quickly." Beyond holding these informational Webcasts about the Cyber Academy, the Academy now offers quarterly online Parent Forums. These forums – also held live online via Wimba Classroom – vary from introducing parents to the Cyber Academy and the technology, to focusing on specific topics such as tips and tricks for helping students study, to instructing parents about how to ensure they help set up a proper home learning environment for their children. The Cyber Academy also offers parents courses about Internet safety, how to access and use many educational sites, and even teaches them how to use a browser's history files to track what websites their children visited.

Cyber Academy instructors have seen the benefits as well. For instance, Spanish teacher Lisa Landrum said, "With [Wimba], I'm a much better,



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well-rounded instructor. Most students' grades improved over time; they got more confident and participated more."

But the proof comes back to creating successful students.

Willis noted that two students who dropped out of William Penn High School re-enrolled in the Cyber Academy and subsequently graduated.

"We see that our 11th and 12th graders are highly motivated by our cyber program," Hyland said.

"We had higher levels of mastery of content and our students finished their courses faster during our summer Cyber Program," Willis said. "Students who finished their class work in only three

weeks and had 80% mastery were released from the program and didn't have to spend the full six weeks in the program. With Wimba we can confirm they've mastered their subjects and we can ensure a consistency of rigor across all courses."

"I feel more connect with my teachers and can take my time and work at my own pace," said Gaines, "I can focus more."

But no matter how satisfied the students say they are with using Wimba, Hyland sums it best when she discusses the fact that making a difference in the lives of students is what motivates her every day. "Wimba allows me to reach those students that otherwise we'd lose."

About Wimba

Wimba develops web-based collaboration software designed for online education, language learning and live interactive communications. Our collaborative applications enable learning professionals to fully embrace the new wave of teaching and learning opportunities afforded by the Internet; regardless of geographic location, bandwidth or operating system. Our classroom collaboration solutions enable educators to conduct live, online classes, meetings, office hours and other collaborations, and our language learning tools add oral interaction directly into course content, webpages, study groups and assessments. With simplicity and power, Wimba adds new dimensions to online, accessible education, enhancing the learning experience for both students and instructors.

