



## Three rural school districts team up to offer college-level courses via telepresence

*Shelby Anderson*

**A**t the beginning of this school year, only four freshmen in the Albany School District elected to take physical science. The rest of the freshman class signed up for biology to satisfy their science requirement. Normally, this would mean the district would have to devote one teacher to a class of just four students. But, because of collaboration with the Monticello and Juda school districts, those four freshmen students took physical science via telepresence and the district was able to offer college-level chemistry for the first time with its freed-up schedule.

Telepresence is a high-definition, real-time, interactive video technology that allows students to take classes from teachers that aren't

physically in their school. In the case of the Albany, Juda and Monticello partnership, the three districts are pooling their resources and teachers to offer classes that have never been available before in their schools. The districts have achieved this without hiring extra teachers.

“Through telepresence, we can do more for our students,” said Traci Davis, superintendent of the Juda School District. “We can increase their options and opportunities.”

### ■ Working Together

As small, rural school districts, school board members and superintendents in these districts knew they had to do something to compete with larger school districts in the area. Albany, Juda and Monticello

teamed up and began developing a way to share teachers. The school leaders quickly decided that telepresence would be the best option to share teachers across all three districts.

In 2009, Albany and Monticello received grants from the Wisconsin Technology Initiative to purchase telepresence equipment (high-definition screens, SmartBoards, etc.). Soon after, the state encouraged universities and colleges to work with K-12 school districts, which made them much more eager to connect with school districts.

Juda, Monticello, and Albany are working with UW-Oshkosh through its Cooperative Academic Partnership Program (CAPP). The program allows high school teachers with

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master's degrees to teach college-level courses. This gives students the opportunity to take college-level courses without leaving their school.

A handful of teachers from Juda, Monticello, and Albany are teaching through the CAPP program. By combining eligible teachers from the three districts, the school districts have been able to build a respectable offering of courses. For example, Steve Guenther, superintendent of the Albany School District, said his district has a strong English teacher who teaches college-level English and literature and Juda has a teacher who is eligible to teach college-level physics.

"Everyone has strengths in their districts," Guenther said. "We've built off of those pockets of strengths and shared them with the



other districts."

As of this school year, the three districts offer eight college-level courses through the UW-Oshkosh CAPP program. In turn, these courses are shared between the three districts via telepresence.

"In 2012, we offered no AP (Advanced Placement) or college-credit course in the three districts," said Allen Brokopp, superintendent of the Monticello School District. "Now, we offer

eight classes and it's growing."

The class listing includes: calculus, pre-calculus, physics (lab course), video game design, physical sciences (not college credit), statistics, English, and literature.

Unlike Advanced Placement classes, which require students to pass a test at the completion of the course to earn college credit, students who successfully complete a CAPP course immediately earn college credit for any school in the UW system.

"We have students who will graduate with 26 college credits," said Mike Marean, Albany School Board president.

### Technology Disappears

Each of the three school districts has a room devoted to telepresence. It is fitted with a large 80-inch high-definition screen and a SmartBoard. When students have a class via telepresence, they enter the telepresence classroom, turn on the technology and connect to a classroom outside of their district.

"The picture and sound are so real, and there is no delay," said Davis. "It's like a window into another classroom."





“It is live, it is interactive,” added Brokopp. “Our teachers can see a stu-

dent’s facial expression, teachers can zoom in on a student’s homework. After a while, it becomes like a normal classroom. The technology really disappears.”

Scott Anderson, a Juda High School teacher who teaches physics via telepresence, said the teaching is really the same and that the telepresence unit is now a regular part of the classroom. However, as a teacher, he said, planning is essential.

“The challenge is the planning — you cannot just photocopy a worksheet at lunch and get it to the class that day. It takes a commitment to having things completely laid out days ahead of time,” Anderson said.

In addition, formative assessment

is more challenging — it’s harder to see students work during the hour.

“In the end, teaching with telepresence is still teaching and the telepresence does allow you to see how students are reacting to material,” Anderson said. “You can see the moments where they don’t understand and the ‘a-ha’ moments are visible too.”

Another key part of the telepresence experience is the SmartBoard. Students who take a class via telepresence have a SmartBoard in front of them that is linked to one in the classroom where the course is being taught. This allows students and teachers to interact live. Everyone can write on the board at the same time.

“They can see and work just like we do in our room in Juda,”



Anderson said. “That coupled with the telepresence unit allows a class that can be more than effective — nearly a ‘normal’ class.”

### ■ Unlimited Possibilities

In a small district like Monticello, there is often only one art teacher or one Spanish teacher. This can be challenging because there is no colleague to bounce ideas off or to share best practices. Telepresence has allowed teachers in the three

## TELEPRESENCE in Janesville

**T**he use of telepresence in Wisconsin school districts is expanding. The Janesville School District has been using the technology to increase course offerings, connect with experts and classrooms from around the world, and increase professional development and collaboration among staff.

“Telepresence creates opportunities, allowing students to participate in classes that would otherwise not be available to them,” said Robert Smiley, chief information officer for the Janesville School District. “Some classes are too small to run, others don’t have a qualified instructor. Telepresence allows us to combine small sections with one instructor, or to provide an instructor at one high school where one wouldn’t have been available.”

The district also uses the technology to help its students “travel” all over the world. Recently at Franklin Middle School, a paleopathologist connected to the students from Switzerland and talked about mummies. Smiley said the students were fascinated by the live, interactive presentation.

In the first few weeks of using telepresence, the district found that it helped key staff connect with each other. For instance, the district’s instructional managers meet regularly through telepresence.

“In the past, they wouldn’t have had the opportunity to connect with peers either due to time or travel constraints,” Smiley said.

The district also uses the technology to connect with its partners in China, Russia and Argentina. The Janesville School District has developed relationships and partnerships with communities and schools in these countries in an effort to bring students from foreign countries to Janesville to attend school —staying in contact with these partners via telepresence helps keep these partnerships strong.

In addition to all of these benefits, next school year, the district looks to offer more courses to its students via telepresence.

“Telepresence is playing a key role in the courses we are able to offer,” Smiley said. “We are now able to expand the opportunities for students that weren’t available in the past.” □

**Want to learn more?** Catch the Janesville School District’s session at the upcoming State Education Convention.

*“Creating a Culture of Achievement — Improving Student Learning Results in a Large School District”*

**Thursday, Jan. 22, 1:45-2:45pm | Wisconsin Center - 102C**

districts to connect with each other. “They can hop on telepresence and now they’re a PLN (Professional Learning Network) of three,” Brokopp said. “My art teacher can get ideas, and bounce ideas off of other teachers.”

Telepresence has opened the door to other exciting opportunities including live field trips to places like the Shedd Aquarium or watching a live theater performance from New York. Classes are using the technology to connect with classrooms all over the world. A math teacher in the Monticello School District regularly connects his classroom to one in Italy and the students work on geometry problems together. A Spanish teacher is working on getting her class connected to a classroom in Puerto Rico.

Post-secondary institutions are also interested in connecting with the Juda, Albany, and Monticello

telepresence consortium in order to better train graduates. Guenther said opportunities exist for education students to do their student-teaching at one of the districts. College professors could monitor the student-teachers via telepresence.

The districts are looking at other exciting opportunities — such as developing a statewide network of school districts that offer classes via telepresence.

All of these options and more are being developed by the three school districts. The goal, in the end, is to continue to work together and provide effective learning experiences for their students.

“We’re all passionate about rural education and seeing our students succeed,” Marean said. “We’re all in this together and it’s exciting to see opportunities that are available for our students.” ■

## Learn More About Telepresence at Convention

School leaders from the Monticello, Albany, and Juda School Districts will present a session on telepresence learning at the State Education Convention. Attend this session to learn more about how these three districts worked together to develop telepresence in their schools and how it is providing more opportunities for students.

### Telepresence – An Alternative Classroom Environment Solution for Rural Schools

Wednesday, Jan. 21  
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