



VOISE Academy
Chicago, Illinois
School Town Success Story

**Engaging Students, Differentiating Instruction,
and Improving Communication**

VOISE Academy provides low-income African American students on the west side of Chicago with a unique online learning environment in a traditional high school setting. VOISE stands for Virtual Opportunities Inside a School Environment. Chicago Public Schools designed VOISE around online learning to increase student engagement, differentiate instruction for individual student needs, and foster 21st century skills. In order to realize this vision, VOISE needed an online learning platform designed specifically for K-12 education. School Town provided a solution that enables teachers to manage individual student learning in highly differentiated and dynamic 21st century classrooms.

VOISE students have access to a variety of digital curriculum resources including APEX Learning and SAFARI Montage. “We’re not a credit recovery school,” explains Principal Todd Yarch. “This is the curriculum.” School Town helps teachers maximize the value of digital curriculum resources by enabling students to work on the specific knowledge and skills they need to gain at an individual pace. Now in its second year, VOISE has already demonstrated impressive improvement in the academic achievement of its first class

of students. “We didn’t lose kids,” observes Yarch. “It’s not about getting to the end of the curriculum. It’s about really learning and remembering.”

School Town provides the tools that VOISE teachers need to implement a hybrid model of face-to-face instruction with best practices in online learning. School Town features make it easy to differentiate assignments and simplify communication among teachers and students, whether one-to-one, one-to-many, or many-to-many. After one day

of training, VOISE teachers were ready for implementation. “It’s really easy to get started and then the more you use School Town the more you learn about what it can do,” says social studies teacher Patrick Staley. School Town’s ease of use is also important because students enter VOISE with many different levels of technological literacy.

As an educator, I strongly believe this will be the school of the future, but it should be the school of today!

**Todd Yarch, Principal
VOISE Academy**

School Town’s secure chat rooms and discussion forums enable richer classroom conversations than traditional whole-class instruction. Teachers may pose a question for the class, either orally or online, and monitor student responses in the chat room. According to Staley, “about 90% of what we’re discussing is going to be on the computer.” This strategy involves many students, especially those with special needs, who normally shy away from speaking in class.

Literacy coach Greg Bonsignore says that chat rooms and discussion forums

help guide students toward higher-order thinking. “We start the chat by recalling what happened and then get into more complex questions about meaning and theme.” Posting to the discussion forum is often given as homework to make sure that all students understand the material. This strategy also encourages students to develop 21st century communication and self-direction skills and nurtures a lifelong love of learning as they master the core curriculum.

VOISE also uses School Town to increase parent involvement and strengthen home-school connections. Although all students receive a laptop to use inside the school building, the high crime rate in the surrounding neighborhood makes it dangerous for students to take laptops home. Instead, VOISE provides each family with a refurbished desktop computer from PC Rebuilders and Recyclers. Parents participate in a training session at the beginning of the school year to learn how to use the School Town parent portal and take home the same computer they use in the training session. Students can use the home computers to complete their homework assignments. Because not all families have Internet access, VOISE is open to students after school and on Saturdays.