Chapter 5
Blended and Online Learning in Virtual K–12 Schools

Alex Kumi-Yeboah
Dalton State College, USA

ABSTRACT

Since 2000, there has been an increasing rate of online learning directed toward K-12 schools in the United States. The need for online courses has become evident as schools are searching for ways to meet student's learning needs. Online and blended courses provide options for schools with limited curricular offerings, scheduling conflicts, or find it difficult to provide highly qualified teachers. In the 2010/2011 school year, it was estimated that approximately 1.5 million students in K-12 schools across the United States were enrolled in an online course (Wicks, 2010). However, a literature search indicates that not much is known about K-12 blended and online learning instruction in virtual K-12 schools. Various issues such as types of instructional delivery, optional management skills, current trend of blended learning, the academic impact on K-12 education are critical areas for teachers and administrators to consider (iNACOL, 2011). This chapter seeks to demonstrate the growing trend of blended and online learning in the United States, analyze instructional implications of blended and online learning to students, discuss major obstacles to blended and online learning in K-12 schools, address possible solutions, and provide recommendations for further studies.

INTRODUCTION

Blended learning is a type of online learning that includes the use of learning tools such as virtual teaching, self-paced Web-based courses, electronic performance support systems, and knowledge management systems (Singh, 2003). Virtual online learning in K-12 school(s) is a form of distance learning, where teachers and students are separated by geographical distance and the class is conducted using different electronic communication methods such as video conferencing, online chat, synchronous conferencing, web conferencing, blogs, emails, and social networks (Wicks, 2010). According to Watson (2010), the millennial generation students in K-12 schools today are children of a digital age and are typically far more comfortable with technology than their parents and teachers. K-12 online learning is another

branch of instructional delivery that is growing rapidly and evolving in many different directions. It is merging with face-to-face instruction to augment time as well meet the needs of all students (Watson, 2010). The International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) 2012 annual report indicates that students enrolled in K-12 virtual online schools have increased significantly and in addition 39 states offers state-led blended and online education programs at the K-12 level (see Table 1 and Table 2) (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2010). For example, Florida has the largest number of virtual students with over 220,000 course enrollments in 2009/2010 academic year (Watson et al., 2010). The current trend of social media and increased use of technology among the youth makes online learning an option for teachers to consider using to support the teaching learning process (iNACOL, 2011). It is estimated that 44 states offer blended and online education opportunities for K-12 students through either state supplemental program, full-time online programs or both (Watson, Gemin, & Ryan, 2008).

According to iNACOL (2012) annual report, the main reasons why many school districts provide fully online learning or blended (hybrid) learning to their students is to provide courses that are not available at their schools as well as provide opportunities for students to recover course credits from classes missed or failed. In most urban schools, blended learning and online learning become an alternative option to increase student graduation rate and credit recovery for students in the adult education and drop-out prevention programs (Watson, 2010). Watson (2011) reports that the increasing growth of K-12 online schools are attributed to: (a) provide opportunities for students to take credit recovery classes especially

Table 1. A Sampling of States with a Prominent Virtual School in 2012

State Virtual School	Course Enrollments	Annual Growth	Ratio to State Population
Florida Virtual School	303,329	+17%	38.7
New Hampshire Virtual Learning Academy	15,558	+35%	24.2
North Carolina Virtual Public School	97,170	+10%	22.6
Idaho Digital Learning	17,627	+22%	21.6
Alabama ACCESS	44,332	+31%	20.2
Montana Digital Academy	6,797	+49%	15.5
South Carolina Virtual School	15,831	+41%	7.5
Georgia Virtual School	20,876	+45%	4.4
Michigan Virtual School	19,822	+12%	3.7

Source: State high school population, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/statesprofile/

Table 2. Sample of States with State Virtual Schools that have Remained or Become Small in 2012

State Virtual School	Course Enrollments	Annual Growth	Ratio to State Population
Connecticut Virtual Learning Center	2,049	-7%	1.2
Illinois Virtual School	2,795	-7%	.4
Texas Virtual School Network	12,419	-27%	.9
Kentucky Virtual Schools	1,700	-1%	.9

Source: State high school population, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/statesprofile/

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