

# Trends and Issues of Virtual K-12 Schools

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## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Increasingly, *K-12 schools* are delivering instruction via Internet courses that allow students to access course content and complete assignments from home. Although a decade ago, online courses for public school students were not available, a growing number of countries have discovered that online instruction offers schools the opportunity to provide a wider variety of courses and experiences for students with a variety of skills and abilities. In fact, the Governor of Michigan just signed legislation that will require all high school students to take at least one online course prior to graduation (Carnevale, 2006; Moser, 2006). Educators have learned to adapt courses for online instruction and several universities are partnering with public schools to share expertise in the virtual education arena.

In the United States and worldwide, funding and approvals have increased for virtual schools. According to the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, as of July 1, 2005, nearly every state offers online learning programs (Watson, 2005) with funding from state appropriations, course fees, and/or the use of some type of full-time equivalent (FTE) funding formula. For example, in 2004-2005, the University of California College Prep Online schools received \$3.4 million in state appropriations with 2,106 course registrations. In 2004-2005, the Florida Virtual School (FLVS), one of the oldest online schools in the United States, enrolled 21,425 students in grades 6-12 for a total of 33,767 enrollments. Currently, the FLVS receives FTE public education funding, however, prior to 2004, the school received \$20 million in state appropriations. In 2005, state funding for the Michigan *Virtual High School*, a privately operated school, was increased from \$1.5 to \$1,750,000. And, the *Virtual High School International*, a non-profit collaborative of 200 national and international schools lists a budget of \$10 million and offers 160 course to students in 16 countries. In spite of declining budgets, the funding and growth of K-12 *virtual schools* continues at a rapid pace (Park and Staesina, 2004).

Although the United States dominates the market in *virtual K-12 schools*, Canada has also developed several online schools that are approved by the Canadian Ministry of Education. The Open School based in British Columbia offers courses and content to K-12 students in 14 subject areas ranging from agriculture to mathematics. The Toronto District School Board launched its *virtual high school* in 2004 with 20 course offerings. The Kitchener-Waterloo Private School based in Ontario is a parochial school that offers teacher-designed, interactive high school courses online in dozens of content areas. And, a unique *virtual school*, the Keewaytinook Okimakanak Internet High School provides online courses to enable First Nation students in remote and isolated parts of the Ontario's far north to obtain a high school diploma (Walmark, 2005). Several other provinces in Canada such as Quebec and Alberta are planning to launch online schools in the near future.

*Virtual K-12 schools* are not the norm but the trend is expected to grow, worldwide (eSchools, 2006; Mayadas, 2005; Park and Staesina, 2004). The convenience and accessibility of online courses offer many benefits to students, parents, and school districts. Several challenges face districts and educators, however, online courses may be designed to provide a wealth of educational opportunities for youngsters and maximize opportunities for districts to offer a more extensive curriculum.

## MAIN FOCUS: BENEFITS OF ONLINE COURSES

*Internet courses* offer many advantages to parents, students, and educators. Advocates contend that online courses offer variety, flexibility, and convenience that the traditional classroom cannot match. Many believe that online courses have the potential to equalize educational opportunities for all students. For example, Tom Layton, a teacher in Eugene, Oregon's *virtual school* maintains that:

*Distance education finally brings democracy to education. It gives the student in East L.A. or Brentwood, or Martha's Vineyard, or Harlem, or Pakistan an equal opportunity to content curriculum and to people with many perspectives. Until now, the single biggest factor influencing the quality of education was where you live. If you don't believe me, ask any real estate agent. For the 21st Century it is not going to be where you live, but how you are connected.* (Chaika, 1999)

Although Layton's position conveys the magnificent potential of distance learning, students and parents cite more practical advantages. Online courses allow students in small, rural, school districts to take a wide variety of courses that small schools usually do not have the resources to offer. Students may work at an individualized pace and advance or repeat a lesson without affecting the rest of the class. They receive more individualized attention from their teacher and may discuss concepts, problems, and ideas privately with teachers via e-mail. Many students also feel that they avoid the embarrassment of guessing the wrong answer or failing a course. Since the coursework may be completed at home, parents may monitor their child's activities, time on-task, and growth on a daily basis.

Finally, school districts view online courses as a potentially cost effective method of operating and a way to serve non-traditional students. As the bricks and mortar of school buildings deteriorate, state funds for repairs have steadily decreased. *Virtual schools* certainly cost money; however, many districts have found creative ways to offset the costs. For example, in Utah's Electronic High School (UEHS), teachers develop the course content and then hire teams of high school students who are enrolled in a special project to develop the Web pages and graphics. In one year, 12,000 students earned at least one credit from UEHS. Many schools also use online courses to serve adjudicated youth, students who are on home schooling because of illness, or dropouts who wish to earn a high school diploma. The students in Colorado's Monte Vista Online Academy are dropouts and students who have been expelled. Finally, the wealth of free Internet resources helps stretch school districts' budgets while providing students with an ever growing library.

## **FUTURE TRENDS: CHALLENGES FACED BY VIRTUAL SCHOOLS**

Like most new advances, *virtual schools* face numerous challenges. In a survey commissioned by the University of California, Freeman, Darrow, and Watson (2002) identified five challenges. First, weak content, curricular standards, and online pedagogy often result from poor planning and conceptualization of online courses. The delivery of live lectures, activities, and interactions does not translate entirely to a virtual environment. As a result, educators must re-think their approach to developing and delivering content in a virtual world. Teachers must share the expected outcomes of each lesson. Presentations such as lectures, demonstrations, and diagrams need to be more detailed, directions need to be more specific and directive, and concepts need to be explained in greater depth with more examples.

Second, poor use of assessment to evaluate student learning troubles many of the critics of *virtual schools*. Traditional, in-class tests and quizzes may be delivered via the Internet, however, schools usually must rely on parents to monitor the student's test-taking to determine their mastery of skills. Some schools rely entirely on essay-type exams and research papers to evaluate student progress. And, some schools require students to come to campus to take tests. Regardless of the method, educators agree that assessment must occur frequently, provide immediate corrective and reinforcing feedback, and relate directly to the stated outcomes (Ryan, 2000).

Third, a lack of technology skills may prevent educators from developing content that is appropriate for online courses. Live courses remain heavily text-based, with the occasional use of multimedia to supplement lessons. However, online courses usually rely on a wide variety of multimedia that educators often do not understand. Instead of merely uploading textual lectures and activities, educators need to collaborate with technicians to re-design lessons and utilize the most appropriate technology to teach each academic domain and subsequent skills.

Fourth, some students lack the parent support, study skills, and technological skills needed to succeed in online courses. Although many states' laws do not allow school districts to prevent students from enrolling in online courses, most districts issue guidelines to help students and parents assess the appropriateness of virtual courses. Students need basic computer skills such as

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