Virtual School Administration

Gaye Lang
U.S. Department of Education, USA

DEVELOPING A MIDDLE SCHOOL VIRTUAL SCHOOL

HISD and its Virtual Computer Program

The Houston Independent School District (HISD) is the largest district in Texas and has often served as a model in the implementation of new methods, materials, and strategies to enhance learning. The district has often utilized input from a number of higher educational institutions in the city to assist not only in the training of employees, but in the research to implement and measure the effectiveness of teachers and programs on various levels. Therefore, a number of professionals from colleges and universities—not only from the Houston area, but also in various parts of the country— provided consultation during the planning process for the HISD Virtual School.

Rationale for Virtual Schools and Mission of Our Virtual Program

The rationale for the virtual school project arose from the need to address the shortage of teachers that school districts experience from time to time, especially in the area of advance placement (AP) classes. Also, HISD was interested in providing a cost-effective mode of instructional delivery that would positively affect student transportation issues and related expenses. In addition to this, there was a need to improve middle school students' academic skills in preparation for high school and college. Reclaiming the home school market in the greater Houston area was another benefit that was anticipated.

The reason for the major emphasis on middle school is the fact that research findings document many middle school student skills are deficient. Too many students are leaving the middle grades intellectually unprepared; deficient in basic academic and critical reasoning skills; and lacking the strong sense of social and ethical obligation essential to their own growth, let alone to a viable democracy (Lipsitz, Mizell, Hayes, Jackson, & Austin,1997).

Related Literature

Nieto (1992) expressed the belief that traditionally, in most schools and in particular secondary schools, subject matter dominates pedagogy, and there is a need for making learning more fun and interesting. Pedagogy refers to how teachers perceive the nature of learning and what they do to create conditions that motivate students to learn and become critical thinkers. This belief of Nieto was kept in mind as other research concerning new technologies to enhance learning was reviewed for the HISD Virtual School Program.

In schools, computers and online resources offer a new and powerful tool for teaching most skills and academic subjects. How best to use this tool is still a matter of debate. To rely too heavily on a new and unproven technology may work against the best interests of students who, regardless of the excitement over the new technology, still need a well-rounded education to succeed. To ignore this new technology, on the other hand, or to waste it on outdated ideas about teaching, is to assure that students will be unprepared for their futures.

Winters (1998) identified the following advantages of computer environments:

1. They have the potential to stimulate learning.
2. They are pervasive in society.
3. Computer-based skills must be taught to children.
4. The speed at which the computer can support change is significant.
5. The expanded vision that the computer gives to students and teachers is important.

Gay (1996, p.2) reported on the findings of the President's National Information Infrastructure Advisory Council (NIIAC) as provided by Bonnie Bracey,

Education Representative of the Council. The findings revealed the following:

1. The digital pathway to the future is more than the Internet. It is a series of components, including the collection of private and public high-speed interactive, narrow and broadband networks that exist today and will emerge tomorrow.
2. The digital pathway is the satellite, terrestrial, and wireless technologies that deliver content to homes, businesses, and other public and private institutions.
3. It is the information and content that flow over the infrastructure, whether in the form of a database, the written word, a film, a piece of music, a sound recording, a picture, or computer software.
4. It is computers, televisions, telephones, radios, and other products that people will employ to access the infrastructure.
5. It is the people who will provide, manage, and generate new information and those who will help others to do the same.
6. It is the individual Americans who will use and benefit from the information superhighway.

Information Superhighway is a term that encompasses all of these components and captures the visions of a nationwide, invisible, dynamic Web learner, and the source of information. The most effective distance-learning professionals are working not only to provide highly interesting and effective courses and programs, but also to help their colleagues, learners, and society in general re-conceptualize education and training.

Winters (1998, pp 22-23) identifies the following list of negatives concerning the information revolution:

1. Having much more information is bad for our heads because it leads to information overload. It has been estimated that scientific information doubles every twelve years and general information doubles every two and a half years. Ironically, the most important knowledge that should steer society, communities, enterprises, and individual lives is increasingly in short supply relative to other information devoted to entertainment and commercial interests.
2. It is bad for the future. There seems to be a decline in the quantity and quality of serious future thinking.
3. It is bad for law and order. Computer crime is a major cost for business and government, and much of it is not recorded.
4. It is bad for national security.
5. It is bad for jobs. As the new software becomes more widespread, we can expect more unemployment and under-employment.
6. It is bad for the environment. The information society is a distraction from the necessity of building a sustainable society.
7. It is bad for democracy. As a society becomes more complex, people are turned off to politics and turned on to an expanding variety of electronic entertainment.
8. It is bad for privacy. Interlinked databases have individual's names, numbers, and much more personal information.
9. It is bad for quality of life. It speeds the pace of life and makes time increasingly scarce.
10. The information revolution is bad for equality, creating ever-greater social gaps within and between gaps.

In today's world, the idea of a traditional "little red schoolhouse" is quickly becoming antiquated. Projections have been made that by the year 2010 nearly 65% of all students (young and adult) will take some part, if not all, of their courses online. This being the case, it is important for educators to form partnerships with high-tech businesses, universities, and governmental entities that will work with them to continuously improve courseware delivered via the Internet. With these partners, educators can more fully explore the potential of "online distance learning."

Development of the HISD Virtual Program

After an extensive review of related literature, communicating with professionals and experts in the computer technology field, and visits to sites, the time had come to acquire an advisory board to begin our monumental task of developing and implementing our Virtual School Program. The Virtual School Advisory Board is a group of professionals drawn from the community in the areas of business, government, and education. This board is tasked with oversight and guidance responsibilities for the Virtual School. At first, the board met on a monthly basis to help assure that the Virtual School