Online Learning in the School Reform Movement

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INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1980s a school reform movement has been underway that has led to new standards, new choices for students, and new forms of accountability. In the last few years, online learning has become a significant factor in this school reform and school choice landscape, and its influence is expected to continue to grow (Edwards, Chronister & Bushweller, 2002).

Standards, school choice, and accountability are three facets of school reform that are inextricably linked together. The logic goes something like this: start by defining what students should know and be able to do at various grade levels. These learner expectations have gone by several names, most of which have developed political connotations that flavor our perceptions: outcomes, objectives, or standards. For the purposes of this article, I will use the currently favored term "standards."

After standards are established at the national, state, or local levels, choices can be created that allow students to achieve these standards in a way that is most suitable for them. This has led to a large increase in options for students in curriculum, instruction, and school type. The increase in choices has in turn led to the need for greater accountability. More rigorous evaluation needs for students, teachers, and schools have led to new forms of assessment, more standardized tests, and greater scrutiny of schools (Elmore, 2000).

The latest formalized, nationwide, legislated attempt at school reform, the update to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), encourages charter schools, distance education options, and other educational choices, while attempting to set up a strong accountability system (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). The rigor of the accountability system, combined with the emphasis on school choice, has led numerous critics to charge that NCLB is an attempt to destroy the public schools (Mathis, 2003; Novak & Fuller, 2003).

At the same time, public schools themselves are expanding to include more choices within them. Although available options vary from state to state, charter schools, vouchers, post-secondary enrollment options, the ability for students to attend schools in districts other than their district of residence - and now online learning—are all part of the national public school landscape. Enrollments in such school choice programs have increased dramatically in the last decade. Minnesota, for example, saw a 1,300% increase in public school choice enrollments in the period from 1988 to 2001. By the end of that period, 17% of Minnesota public school students were involved in charter schools, alternative learning programs, or post-secondary enrollment options. This figure does not include students in district-run magnet schools, immersion schools, or other locally developed options (Boyd, Hare & Nathan, 2002). Neither does it include the students in private schools or home schools, which in Minnesota now comprise 10% of the school-aged population (Minnesota Department of Education, 2004).

Online learning entered the K-12 scene in the mid-1990s, most notably in the form of the Florida Virtual School (FLVS) and the Virtual High School (VHS) in Massachusetts. Since then, enrollments in such schools have skyrocketed. Enrollments in FLVS went from 77 in 1996 to over 10,000 in the 2003-2004 school year (FLVS, 2003). The growth is expanding into other states as well. According to *Education Week,* 17 states now have or are developing statewide, state-run virtual schools (Edwards, Chronister & Bushweller, 2002). Furthermore, the statewide virtual schools are only a part of the K-12 online learning landscape. K12.com, for example, is the largest for-profit virtual school management company and now has 14 virtual schools in 11 states

serving over 10,000 students (Molnar, Wilson & Allen, 2004).

In order to make sense of the complexity of the school choice/school reform movement and the role of online learning in it, I will address the movement from two angles:

- Finance and governance models, which control how school is paid for, how the money is distributed, or how it is shared (or fought over), and who controls the school system.
- Curriculum and instruction models, which describe what is taught and how it is taught.

Finance and Governance

Traditional core funding models are usually based on average daily attendance (ADA) or average daily membership (ADM), and are limited to the particular school district in which a student resides. By contrast, reform-minded, choice-based funding models typically create programs that allow students to share funding between school districts and with colleges or non-public schools. These models include open enrollment, post-secondary enrollment options, and vouchers.

In Minnesota's open enrollment program, for example, students can opt to enroll in Minnesota school districts other than their own resident district. Funding is calculated according to the same basic formula that is used for all students, and all general education funding follows the student to the district of enrollment (Enrollment Options Act, 2003). Approximately 45 states have this sort of option (Ziebarth, 2003).

Through its flexibility, online learning expands this option significantly. No longer are students limited to using open enrollment merely for neighboring districts. Students can now enroll in other school districts without concerns about distance—and the transportation issues that necessarily follow. The number of districts into which a student might enroll has increased to include any district in the state that offers online courses. States like Minnesota and Wisconsin have been called "the Wild West" of online learning because open enrollment and the lack of a statewide online learning program has led districts to compete over students—and the money that follows them (eSchool News, 2002). Some

districts now seem to be feeling a great deal of pressure to keep their money and their students by offering a wider range of educational opportunities through online learning.

Minnesota's Post-Secondary Enrollment Option (PSEO) allows the money generated by the student to be split between the college and the high school of enrollment. The split is done according to a legislated formula that sends the bulk of the dollars to the college and some to the local school district (Post-Secondary Enrollment Options Act, 2003). Thirty states have similar programs in which the state or district pays tuition for the student, and nearly all states allow high school students to take college courses (Education Commission of the States, 2001).

As it has done for open enrollment, online learning has greatly expanded the PSEO program, although Minnesota's PSEO law, like most states' laws, limits the options to colleges or universities within the state (Post-Secondary Enrollment Options Act, 2003). However, within those limitations, students can now exercise their PSEO options at any of the colleges and universities in the state while still living at home. By replacing travel time with online experiences, students can more effectively blend a high school program with their post-secondary program, or blend courses from a variety of colleges or universities.

Cyber charter schools brought the voucher debate to online learning. As states struggle in this era of reform to define who should pay for what kind of school, cyber charter schools seem to challenge many assumptions. If the parent is providing most of the instruction, is that a home-school situation? If the student is getting their instruction from a teacher over the Internet, does it matter whether the student is sitting in a public school building or at home? Can the funding of education really be defined by and dependent upon "the length of the wire?" Funding these schools - and providing the accountability that must follow such funding - has become a significant issue in states such as California and Pennsylvania, two states that, like Minnesota and Wisconsin, do not have a statewide online learning program (Huerta & Gonzalez, 2004).

When PSEO and open enrollment options were first presented in Minnesota, some feared that such options would siphon money away from traditional public schools and opportunities from public school

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