

Trends and Issues of Virtual K–12 Schools

Belinda Davis Lazarus

University of Michigan-Dearborn, USA

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, K-12 schools are delivering instruction via Internet courses that allow students to access course content and complete assignments from home. According to a recent survey conducted by *Education Week*, 27 states in the United States have spent public monies to establish virtual public or charter schools. For example, over the past 5 years, the Florida Virtual School has spent \$23 million and offered 62 online courses to over 8,000 students. Kentucky Virtual High School, which offers approximately 40 courses and enrolls approximately 750 students annually, has a budget of about \$400,000 per. The Michigan Virtual High School is funded for \$15 million for start-up costs with \$1.5 million allocated annually for operational costs. And the Virtual High School International, a nonprofit collaborative of 200 national and international schools with a budget of \$10 million, offers 160 courses to students in 16 countries. In spite of declining budgets, the growth of K-12 virtual schools continues at a rapid pace (Park & Staresina, 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. Several other provinces in Canada such as Quebec and Alberta are planning to launch online schools in the near future.

Although virtual K-12 schools are not the norm, the trend is expected to grow worldwide (Bonk, 2001; Clark, 2000; Park & Staresina, 2004). The convenience and accessibility of online courses of-

fer 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.

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 course work is offered in the home, the potential for parent involvement is increased. 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 nontraditional 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 courses' content and then hire teams of high school students who are enrolled in a special project to develop the Web pages and graphics. In 1 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. For example, the students in Colorado's Monte Vista Online Academy are dropouts and students who have been expelled. Finally, the wealth of free Internet resources help stretch school districts' budgets while providing students with an ever growing library.

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 rethink 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 students' 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 redesign lessons and utilize the most appropriate technology to teach each academic domain and subsequent skills.

Fourth, some students lack the parent-supported 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 keyboarding, e-mail, and browsing, and age-appropriate study and self-management skills. Parents must be able to provide structured study periods and to monitor their child's engagement in academic tasks.

Finally, teachers are not prepared to be virtual teachers. Currently, few postsecondary teacher-training programs address the specific skills needed by virtual teachers. Training on skills such as interacting with and facilitating student learning online is not addressed in teacher-training programs. Furthermore, state teacher-certification standards do not address the skills that are needed by virtual teachers. Most virtual schools provide limited in-service training to prepare teachers to teach online; however, consistent standards are lacking.

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