Chapter XI
Planning Staff Training for Virtual High Schools

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ABSTRACT

This chapter briefly profiles three virtual schools, each at a different stage of development, yet each dependent upon a successful and sustained distance education program for its professional staff in order to remain viable long into the future. As virtual schools become more accepted by the public and the attention given to the online schools shifts from their sources of funding to their standardized test scores, a model for sustained distance training and education must be in place to deliver quality professional development that can positively impact students' achievement scores on standardized tests for each school's online student population.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual schools are a rapidly growing phenomenon in American elementary and secondary (K-12) education (Berge & Clark, 2005). They are the latest and potentially the most controversial manifestation of the e-learning revolution in schools. As Clark and Else noted, "For the foreseeable future, the World Wide Web is likely to serve as an umbrella technology uniting distance education media for distributed learning…Virtual schooling is the next wave" (Clark & Else, 2003, p. 35-36).

Distance education in today's virtual schools describes not only the education of the students enrolled, but also the professional development programs used to train the faculty and support staff working for each online school.

The three virtual schools used here to explore improvements to staff development includes the *Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow.* This is the largest K-12, electronic school in the United States, servicing almost 7,000 students. The second school is the *iQ Academies* high school, which is in its fourth year of operation at the time of this writing, and claims its 589 (2005-06 school year) students a success. The third school is entirely virtual, and to date imaginary, but ideal in its delivery of distance training and education to its staff and faculty. The first two schools provide examples which collectively will serve as the foundation for a successful professional development program. The *Virtual I.D.E.A.L.* school will serve as a model for future management consideration. Taking into consideration what is known about barriers to online learning, best practices in virtual schools, and how to sustain virtual schools, success of schools that take into account the *Virtual I.D.E.A.L.* program will ultimately have a positive impact on the long-term status and its ability to service each of its students' needs.

The ECOT

The *Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow* (ECOT) was founded in 2000, and today serves as the largest online K-12 school provider in the United States, serving almost 7,000 students (ECOT, 2006). Based in Columbus, Ohio, this school enrolls only Ohio residents, drawing from a student and teacher population that is geographically spread across the state. Like most public, state-sponsored chartered schools, the ECOT high school provides a workstation and internet access for each student and partners with course content providers to offer curriculum through a course management system. Each teacher begins with the provided course content and is able to adapt it to meet the needs of his or her class. Special education teachers are also available, modifying the course content and classroom activities for the

students identified with special needs (Hartge, 2005). Like traditional classrooms, each special education student has an Individualized Education Program (IEP), which is meant to guide and document specially designed instruction for each student with a disability based on his or her unique academic, social, and behavioral needs (IEP, 2007). While serving the needs of a very diverse student population and growing at an incredibly rapid rate in its seven years, the ECOT approaches each school year as a work-in-progress, tweaking the system to better serve the changing needs of its online student population.

iQ Academies

The Waukesha *iQ Academies* (*iQ*) was the first virtual high school in the State of Wisconsin, opening its doors September 1, 2004. Wisconsin's open enrollment laws require students wishing to attend a school district other than their home district, to apply to those districts during a three-week window in February of each year. While a student has until August 31st to decide if he/she will attend another district, if the student does not apply in February, the opportunity to enroll somewhere other than the home district is lost (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2006). The Waukesha *iQ Academies*, a public charter school affiliated with the 13,000 student Waukesha School District (Waukesha School District, 2007) located 20 miles west of Milwaukee, has nearly 500 students apply during the open enrollment process, with 220 enrolling by September 1st (Diener, Interview, 2005).

The *iQ Academies* was created to better meet the needs of students that, for a variety of reasons, did not believe their needs were being adequately addressed. Students requiring an alternative education, traveling the United States, or who were traditionally home-schooled, did not have an educational system that was working for them. The Waukesha School District recognized these

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