



The Realities of K-12 Virtual Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In a decade, virtual education in its contemporary form of asynchronous, computer-mediated interaction between a teacher and students over the Internet has grown from a novelty to an established mode of education that may provide all or part of formal schooling for nearly one in every 50 students in the US. In a non-random 2007 survey of school districts, as many as three out of every four public K-12 school districts responding reported offering full or partial online courses.

There can be little question that virtual courses in certain areas (e.g., math, English, social studies) produce tested achievement results on a par with those of their conventionally taught counterparts. Nor is it debatable that more complex areas of the curriculum (e.g., the arts) are beyond the reach of these new arrangements. Nevertheless, the rapid growth of this new form of schooling raises questions of cost, funding, and variable quality that require the immediate attention of policymakers.

Virtual education presents policy challenges to governments at all levels, from local school boards to the federal government. Therefore, it is recommended that legislatures, state-level education officials, and school boards:

- **Adopt new regulations governing the provision of online K-12 schooling.** The regulation of K-12 virtual education is a complex issue that governs not just the revenues of private providers and the costs of public schools offering this alternative but the quality of this mode of schooling itself. Legislators will have to grapple with a host of issues that bear on the costs and effectiveness of online instruction. Among these issues are the following: the level and extent of teacher involvement; the certification status of cyber-teachers; the role of tests and grades in the awarding of online credits; reciprocity of teacher certification across state lines; and traditional accounting practices, such as 100-day enrollments or average daily membership, used to fund conventional schools. The substantial variation in how states currently regulate virtual education speaks less to the differing circumstances across the country than it does to the alacrity with which some states have confronted the problems posed.
- **Call for audits of providers of virtual education.** States should conduct audits to determine actual costs incurred by private firms providing courses and programs that receive state funds, and by public school districts claiming membership by students earning credits online. Pegging reimbursements at

some arbitrary level, say, 75% of the state's average contribution, ignores the reality of actual cost savings afforded by online instruction. Virtual education costs will obviously depend on the subject being taught, whether it is an isolated course as opposed to a complete academic program, and how many students are being taught.

- **Recognize legitimate accrediting agencies.** Government at some level or some other credible public body should create a list of legitimate accrediting agencies involved in the accrediting of providers of K-12 online courses and programs. To avoid abuses such as those encountered with proprietary schools (truck driving, cosmetology, and the like) and online diploma mills, the traditional high school accrediting agencies or some state or federal governmental agencies must address more vigorously the accreditation of commercial online providers of both courses and entire programs leading to a high school diploma.
- **Require credible assessment and evaluation.** The legitimacy of the credits earned via virtual schooling will depend in large part on the legitimacy of the process by which assignments and tests are known to be the work of the individual receiving the credit or diploma. This issue is so important that it has found its way into the enabling legislation for the South Carolina Virtual School Program: "Students enrolled in an online course for a unit of credit must be administered final exams and appropriate state assessments in a proctored environment."