

POLICY PAPER

Volume 4, Issue 4

July 24, 2007

VIRTUAL SCHOOLS: FOR SOME, THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For every online class taught five years ago, there are 20 today. National estimates of the number of online classes reach up to one million. Some students take one or two online classes while attending a traditional school. Others, however, take all their classes at a new school—the virtual school—in which few if any classrooms are used.

Virtual schools can benefit students who need more time on a lesson as well as those who outpace their peers. Students also benefit from the individual attention and lesson plans that virtual classes can offer. Virtual schools and online classes also give rural communities opportunities—such as access to advanced coursework—previously offered only in metropolitan areas. For some teachers, meanwhile, the alternative to online schools is leaving the teaching profession altogether.

A recent report by the Legislative Division of Post Audit (LPA) questioned the performance of the state's virtual schools. In the words of one newspaper, the audit showed that "students in virtual schools scored lower on standardized math tests than students in traditional schools." The data offered in the audit, however, are too limited to be of statistical value, and national data show that virtual schools perform at least as well as traditional schools.

The LPA audit concluded that policies regarding virtual schools were largely adequate, but poorly enforced, especially at the state level. The ultimate form of accountability, though, comes from the families who willingly choose (or not) to use virtual schools.

As they respond to the LPA audit, legislators should resist the urge to impose even more regulations. Further, the Legislature should not put an artificial limit on the number of virtual schools in the state. Combined with changes to the state's overly restrictive law on charter schools, online learning and virtual schooling could improve public education.



The Legislative Division of Post Audit (LPA) recently drew attention to virtual schools with a report on the subject.¹ It laid out several problems with the governance of virtual schools in the state and offered some options for policymakers. The Flint Hills Center for Public Policy, which advocates a variety of means of producing a well-educated population, offers this policy brief as an introduction to online classes and virtual schools.

VARIETY OF REASONS, TOOLS

Virtual schooling, also known as e-learning or online schooling, relies on Internet-based tools that have become more widely available as more people use the Internet. *Synchronous* tools, such as chats, web seminars, and simulations, allow students and teachers to interact at the same time. Others tools, such as e-mail or discussion forums, do not require teacher and student to use them at the same time. These are *asynchronous* tools.

Depending on the particular tool and method of instruction, an online student may interact with a teacher on a fixed or flexible schedule. Interaction among students taking online courses, meanwhile, can vary from little to extensive. All of these interactions can come through synchronous or asynchronous tools.

Virtual schools can offer benefits to students, families, communities, and schools. Many students find that virtual schools provide several advantages: increased flexibility of scheduling, access to specialized material not otherwise available, and individualized attention. Some students use online learning to have access to a greater range of advanced placement classes, for instance, while others use it to catch up on classes they previously failed. In other words, online learning can benefit both students with a stellar academic history and those with a spotted one.

Virtual schools can also be of great assistance to families in rural areas. Ed Olson chairs the education committee in the Senate of the South Dakota legislature. According to him, “a virtual school will have the potential to address that ranch family who's 25 miles away from anybody.”²

Educators can benefit, too. At the Georgia Virtual School, one in five teachers has a doctoral degree. Administrators there report that the option to teach in the virtual environment kept many of the staff from leaving the teaching profession.³



POSSIBLE ADVANTAGES OF VIRTUAL SCHOOLS

- Students can take classes for which the local school lacks qualified instructors.
- Students can take classes for which there are not enough students to justify hiring a local teacher.
- Students can take advanced placement or college-level courses.
- Students can review material that is causing them difficulty without slowing down anyone else, and students who have mastered one lesson can easily move to another without waiting for anyone else to catch up.
- Flexible scheduling can help schools retain students at risk for dropping out. These students often have work or family responsibilities that interfere with a standard school day.
- One-on-one interaction between student and teacher is an integral part of virtual schools.
- Programs can be tailored to the way that a student learns.
- Flexible scheduling helps students fulfill family obligations and pursue extra-curricular and co-curricular activities.
- Night owls can learn better when they're awake and more alert, since they can study into the evening rather than struggle with early-morning classes.
- The ability to lead a virtual class attracts skilled teachers who might not otherwise remain in teaching.
- Administrators can review teacher performance on a daily basis. Lesson plans, course materials, and student-teacher interaction are available for review.
- Home-schooling parents who use virtual schools have a built-in support network with a curriculum that meets state standards.
- Small communities benefit when their families don't have to leave to pursue educational opportunities for their children.
- Virtual schools do not make demands on school transportation systems.
- Virtual schools can expand without the expense of constructing new buildings that become obsolete and expensive to maintain.

USE OF VIRTUAL SCHOOLS IS INCREASING

Online learning can either supplement or replace learning in traditional brick-and-mortar schools. In a 2002-2003 survey of school districts, the National Center for Education Statistics found that one-third of the country's school districts use some form of distance education. (Distance education includes not only online classes, but also two-way video conferences and other technologies that might be called "off-line.")⁴ In the literature on virtual schools, such arrangements are called *hybrid schools*.

The most interesting growth of online learning, however, comes in *virtual schools*, which make little or no use of brick-and-mortar facilities. In 2004, 21 states had virtual schools; today, the number is up to 23. Through schools such as the Lawrence Virtual School, a student can take an entire curriculum online. (As is the case with some virtual schools in the country, and all



virtual schools in Kansas, the Lawrence Virtual School falls under the legal and fiscal control of a traditional school system; in this case, USD 497.)

An even more unusual use of online learning is the *cyber charter school*. A number of states now combine online learning with the charter school, to make the virtual charter school. Pennsylvania, for example, boasts 11 cyber charter schools. Nationally, over 170 cyber charter schools enroll over 92,000 students.⁵ In Kansas, the distinction between cyber charter schools and other forms of virtual schooling is muted, as all are ultimately controlled by a local school district. In any case, the LPA report referred to all forms of online learning as “virtual schools,” regardless of how they are governed.

Thanks to increased interest from parents, students, teachers, and public officials, student enrollment in virtual schooling is on the rise. Five years ago, the number of “enrollments” was somewhere from 40,000 to 50,000. (An enrollment is a single class registration. A student who takes five classes online would count as five enrollments.) Today the number stands at 750,000 to 1 million.⁶ Virtual schools have made their way to Kansas, too.

REACHING BEYOND BOUNDARIES

Since communication and learning occur outside the confines of a classroom, an organization offering virtual schooling can reach students across town or across the state. Some virtual schools in Kansas draw from within 30 miles of the host district. Wichita, Shawnee Mission, Leavenworth and Cherryvale all stand out, with 90 percent or more of their virtual students enrolling from within 30 miles. But some online programs draw a substantial portion of their students from beyond 30 miles.⁷ Lawrence and Emporia schools fall into this category, with 44 and 45 percent of their students, respectively, living more than 30 miles away. Though this dispersion of students challenges the common understanding of a school, it reminds us that learning takes many forms.

Families with adequate means can choose a district (and often a school) by moving to a particular district. By “voting with modems” parents have another—and less far less expensive—way of selecting a school. Some districts have benefited from this, as several virtual schooling programs have contributed significantly to their host district’s enrollment growth. The virtual school enrollment of the Lawrence Virtual School, for example, “accounts for essentially all of the Lawrence school district’s growth since 2005-06.”⁸

ACADEMIC RESULTS

Can online schooling be as effective as traditional schooling? The two have obvious differences, so skepticism is inevitable. It was no surprise, then, that one part of the LPA’s report that drew significant media attention was the conclusion that “virtual students scored lower on state assessments than traditional students in 2005-06.”⁹ *The Wichita Eagle* observed that the “audit also said students in virtual schools scored lower on standardized math tests than students in traditional schools.” A few days later, the paper published an editorial repeating that claim and called for increased scrutiny of virtual schools.



Almost completely neglected by the *Eagle*, however, were several cautions issued in the report, including this very simple but important one: “the data are limited.” Indeed. While 28 virtual schools are mentioned in the report, only 11 were included in the calculations.

Further, say the auditors, “We could only collect about 700 assessment outcomes from virtual schools, compared to about 466,000 test outcomes at the statewide level.” The auditors also noted that some virtual schools “target students who are struggling or have dropped out of school.” In the words of the report, the student populations in virtual and brick-and-mortar schools “may not be comparable.” Finally, the auditors concluded “We don’t know if [the lower scores are] a function of the quality of education being provided through virtual schools, the types of students enrolling in those schools, or some other factors.”¹⁰ In other words, the LPA offers no explanation for the lower scores found in virtual schools, and suggests that the difference may simply be statistically random and not real.

Nationally, the record suggests that online learning is at least as useful as schooling in traditional settings. The think tank Education Sector, for example, says that online education “can be as effective as traditional classroom learning.”¹¹

In other words, the benefits of virtual schooling are evident, and the case against it is hardly proven.

ADEQUACY OF POLICIES

How well does Kansas govern virtual schools? In theory, very well. According to a third-party evaluation of all the states, “The Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) has perhaps the most-developed and well-documented system for tracking online programs of any state in the country.”¹²

To receive state funding, online classes must, like all public school classes, be taught by state certified teachers and aligned with state standards. In addition, final exams in each online class must be proctored, and students in virtual schools must take state assessments.

But the LPA observes “Kansas’ *actual* oversight of virtual schools is weak” (emphasis added).¹³ The most serious problem in oversight cited by the LPA is that the KSDE does not always have adequate data about virtual schools. While “the department lost track” of some information, other information was apparently never submitted by the districts running the schools.

The report also notes that either the KSDE, local districts, or both, have provided inadequate oversight in eight different “risk areas” that poorly designed and run virtual schools may face. The report concluded that “the Department hasn’t provided sufficient oversight to help ensure that districts address the inherent risks”¹⁴ of virtual schools. This does not mean, however, that oversight is totally absent. Even if *state* oversight has been lacking, there is no indication in the LPA report that district personnel or equally important, parents of virtual school students, were deficient in their oversight.



GAMING THE SYSTEM

In addition to the concern over academic performance, the LPA report was notable for its discovery of financial irregularities in southwest Kansas.

Officials in USD 424 Mullinville “gave” some of the district’s virtual school students to other districts for financial purposes. While the problem with this practice is obvious, a further discussion tells us a few things about school governance and finance.

Generally, state law calls for students to be counted by the district that educates them. With this in mind, Mullinville should have reported to the state all students attending its virtual school, and received the state funds for them. Instead, the district “shared” some of these students, letting other districts claim state funds to which they were not entitled. These other districts, the LPA said, “had essentially no role in educating the virtual students they received; they simply added them to their enrollment counts.” They got paid for work they did not do.

It would have been bad enough if those districts were the home districts of the virtual school students. At least they would have had some connection with the students, even if it was a geographical and not academic one. But most of those “shared” students had no connection to those districts. A blunt but perhaps accurate definition of what happened might be “fraud.”

Why did the Mullinville superintendent “share” the students? According to the LPA auditors, he wanted to avoid the “problem” of having attracted too many virtual students.

The superintendent reported that KSDE officials encouraged him to keep the number of virtual school students below the number of students in the district’s brick-and-mortar classrooms. Due to Mullinville’s very small size (the 2001-02 FTE enrollment was 85.0), a popular virtual school program could easily result in an “imbalance.”

Why is the fact that a school has more virtual students than in-classroom students a problem? *Whether* students are learning should be much more important than *where* they are learning. This is one lesson that policymakers should take from the audit.

The Mullinville superintendent has also said that he wanted to compensate neighboring districts for not having their own virtual programs. This line of thought is troubling. It suggests a kind of “cooperation” between districts that, if done by private businesses, would violate anti-trust law. Granted, units of government are not bound by anti-trust laws. But when the various districts cooperated in this way, they denied students the opportunities that might have come from having more programs to choose from.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The LPA report gave a number of suggestions for making the state’s regulatory oversight of virtual schooling more vigorous. Many of those recommendations sound reasonable. In fact, many are. But policymakers must act with caution, lest they smother this important new part of the education landscape. So we offer some principles for them to consider.



Don't Over-Regulate Virtual Schools.

If there is any single principle that policymakers should observe, it is to resist the urge to over-regulate. Though enrollment in virtual schooling has risen some 200 percent since 2001-2002, it is still a very modest portion (one half of one percent) of Kansas's student population.¹⁵ Despite the miniscule presence of e-learning in the state, the LPA suggests that the Legislature might want to "control the growth of virtual schools by limiting the number of virtual schools that can receive State funding (e.g., in total, by region, by type of school, etc.)."¹⁶ This idea should be rejected. If implemented, it would deny students some vital opportunities by artificially restricting the supply of virtual schools. Caps and other limits also run contrary to ethos of customization and student choice that are inherent in virtual schooling.

Let Students Enroll in Any Qualified Virtual School, Without Geographic Limits.

By its nature, virtual schooling need not be confined to a specific location. Different students will flourish with different virtual school providers, some of which may be based on the other side of the state from the student.

Let Virtual Schools Accept and Recruit Any Student From Across Kansas.

The concept of virtual schooling works best when schools are free to attract students from a wide geographic area.

Students Should Secure the Permission of Schools They Wish to Attend, but None Other.

Students should not have to petition their home school district to receive an education that is suitable to them.

Make the Receiving School Accountable for State Tests.

Online schooling raises the question of "which school will be held accountable for the virtual student's scores?" The rule should be a simple one. The school that educates the student should be held accountable for academic performance.

Per-Student Funding Should Go Directly to the Virtual School.

The school that actually incurs the expense of and bears the responsibility for student performance should receive most of the public money allocated for that student.

The State May Wish to Expand the Use of Virtual Learning by Establishing a Statewide Authority for Operating a Virtual School or Encouraging the Growth of Cyber Charter Schools.

Twenty-four states have a statewide organization for providing e-learning. Kansas is not one of them. To create yet further opportunities for students, Kansas might wish to borrow from their examples. The Iowa Online AP Academy, for instance, offers Advanced Placement classes to students throughout the state, especially those in rural areas. The Illinois Virtual School has another focus, targeting math and science.



The Florida Virtual High School was the nation's first statewide virtual high school, created in 1997. Today it has its own funding source, based on FTE counts, and has the largest enrollment of any virtual school in the country. It delivers 68,000 courses to 31,000 students.¹⁷ It has proven so successful that schools and families in other states enroll students and pay tuition to the school.

Use Reciprocity in Certifying Teachers.

Virtual learning opens up opportunities to match students with excellent teachers, regardless of geographic barriers. Retaining old attitudes about credentials can be a barrier to the full potential of online learning. The National Education Association says that for teachers who are certified in their state of residence, "failure to be certified in a specific [different] state should not block their authority to teach online in that state."¹⁸ This principle could be of particular use to Kansas children living in sparsely populated areas.

CONCLUSION

Virtual learning can lessen the demands on schools to transport students, feed them, maintain a physical plant, and fulfill the other responsibilities of running a facility. They offer education in a different way from traditional classrooms, and serve students in a variety of capacities. Virtual learning is different from classroom-based learning, which means that old regulations should not be applied wholesale. These innovations should not be squashed with a moratorium or cap or tied too closely with traditional models of schooling. With its ability to customize education, virtual learning can improve the academic performance of students. It deserves some time to grow to its potential.

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Notes:

- ¹ Legislative Division of Post Audit, "Reviewing Issues Related to Virtual Schools," 07PA09, April 2007, available online at http://www.kslegislature.org/postaudit/audits_perform/07pa09a.pdf.
- ² Jane Carroll Andrade, "Clicking through Classes," *State Legislatures*, September 2005.
- ³ Bill Tucker, *Laboratories of Reform*, Education Sector, p. 4
http://www.educationsector.org/usr_doc/Virtual_Schools.pdf.
- ⁴ National Center for Education Statistics, "Distance Education Courses for Public Elementary and Secondary School Students,"
<http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/frss/publications/2005010/index.asp?sectionID=1>.
- ⁵ Tucker, *Laboratories of Reform*.
- ⁶ Erik W. Robelen, "E-Learning Curve," *Education Week*, March 29, 2007.
- ⁷ Legislative Division of Post Audit, p. 8.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- ⁹ Legislative Division of Post Audit., p. 12.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- ¹¹ Tucker, p. 2.
- ¹² Evergreen Consulting Associates, *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning*, October 2006. Available online at <http://www.evergreenassoc.com/documents/KeepingPace2006.pdf>.
- ¹³ Legislative Division of Post Audit, p. 17.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 20
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.* According to page Appendix B, virtual school enrollment in Kansas during the 2006-2007 school year was 2,056.2 FTE. According to the Kansas Education Comparative Performance & Fiscal System (www.ksde.org), the FTE enrollment was 44,5263.6.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30
- ¹⁷ Florida Virtual High School, "Accreditation and History,"
http://www.flvs.net/general/accreditation_information.php.
- ¹⁸ National Education Association, *Guide to Teaching Online Courses*, quoted by Tucker, p. 12.

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