

Virtual Learning: A 21st Century Imperative?

Using online education to expand access and even respond to crises

BY MICKEY REVENAUGH

It gives the student in a one-room Montana schoolhouse access to a world-class Calculus II course. It lets the child with autism in inner-city Philadelphia flourish in a personalized classroom of one. And now it may be the answer to ensuring students can continue learning should a flu pandemic strike such communities this fall.

“It” is virtual schooling (also referred to as distance learning or online education), and it is strategically and urgently important for K-12 education and our country.

The number of students currently using online courses is estimated to be more than a million, a 47 percent increase since 2006, according to the Sloan Consortium. The number of students enrolled in full-time virtual learning – although much smaller – is growing even faster. An estimated 200,000 K-12 students got their complete education last year in virtual schools, many of them charters, up from less than half that number two years ago. In his landmark 2008 book *Disrupting Class*, Harvard business professor Clayton Christensen predicts that half of all high school courses will be online just 10 years from now.

Despite this growth, the United States lags behind the global curve when it comes to online learning. Nations such as Mexico, Singapore, and Turkey have seized on virtual instruction to provide universal K-12 education, while China has begun digitizing its entire curriculum and investing in powerful wireless Internet infrastructure to bring online capabilities to its most remote villages.

Unlike their counterparts in China



More than 4,500 Ohioans, including My School, My Choice, rallied at the Ohio state capitol in defense of virtual schools. The event, held May 13, 2009, even welcomed news helicopters, which covered the assembly that marched through Columbus.

or Mexico, students in the United States face a patchwork of online learning opportunities. A ninth-grader in Idaho can choose from among several full-time virtual charter schools or pick one of hundreds of online courses to supplement her brick-and-mortar high school program. A ninth-grader in New York has neither of those options. According to the annual *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning* report, 44 states offered some form of online learning in 2008, but only 17 provided both full-time and supplemental virtual options for students. Although one of the benefits

of online learning is that it transcends geography, for American students online opportunity is purely an accident of ZIP code.

A quick review of online-related activity in state legislatures during the 2009 session reveals some of the barriers and tensions restricting K-12 online learning in the United States:

- In Oregon, lawmakers intent on reining in virtual charter schools heard testimony from hundreds of tearful families and went through 56 amendments before settling on a



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moratorium and a task force to study Oregon's virtual education options. Meanwhile, the state's largest virtual charter school served 2,500 diverse students and matched the traditional public schools on state test scores.

- In Ohio, an effort by the governor and the House of Representatives to cut funding for the state's e-schools to just \$1,500 per student – less than 25 percent of what students in traditional schools receive – was beaten back by the Senate after more than 4,000 students and parents demonstrated on the Capitol lawn.
- In Arizona, legislative supporters of virtual education finally were able to open the state's 10-year-old "pilot" program to allow new full- and

part-time online programs to start up around the state and remove restrictions on who can attend. But the expansion came at a cost: a 5-15 percent cut in per pupil funding for virtual learning in a state that's already shaved education spending close to the bone.

- In Indiana, lawmakers battled over a prohibition on funding for virtual charter schools put in place during the last budget biennium. The compromise: a very small pilot program that supporters hope to nurture into a real full-time online option for Hoosier students.

All these starts and stops in U.S. online learning may soon be rendered moot by the imperative of planning for a pos-

sible pandemic. The prospect of massive school closings and dislocations as early as this fall because of the H1N1 flu virus is now bringing e-learning practitioners and education leaders together on a national level to discuss online learning as a strategy for academic continuity. For inspiration, they are looking to places like Singapore, where online learning was identified as a strategic response to the SARS epidemic of the early 2000s and where all schools are required to have multiple "online only" days each year as a drill for future emergencies.

There is much work to be done – and many barriers to clear away – before students in the United States can count on online learning to sustain their education during a crisis. They will need the help of policymakers across the nation to get there. ||

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