



Special Report: E-Learning Reality Check

March 2003

Today's cyber schools might look very different than what we had imagined, but they hold great promise for the future

By Mickey Revenaugh

The 21st-century promise for education was quite literally "anytime, anywhere" learning, with world-class scholars beaming out to two-way wristwatch screens and 3-D digital algebra books cooler than any videogame. It was the George Jetson-version of virtual schools.

In 2003, virtual schools are a reality, but they look and act very little like what education visionaries imagined. Still, certain myths about virtual schools persist; four in particular are dear to educators and policy makers alike. I confess that I take these myths personally, because—after almost 20 years in the education technology field—I find myself directly involved in virtual school issues. I am part of a small team working to launch a unique virtual school model, called Connections Academy, in partnership with districts and states across the country.

What follows, then, is what it looks like from inside this booming trend—a trend that is bound to touch your schools soon.

MYTH #1:

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE TECHNOLOGY

There's no question that the evolution of virtual education is tied to the progress of technology. From the earliest correspondence courses, progress in virtual education has been driving toward interactivity and multimedia. Instructional TV (ITV), satellite-enabled distance-learning labs, high-speed Web streaming—each advance has been key to making the remote learning experience as much like a face-to-face experience as possible. The dream is of a teacher-student interaction as rich and intimate as the best day in a bricks-and-mortar classroom.

Additional Resources	
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However, if we buy into the idea that a core value of virtual education is that it allows learning to be tailored to the learner's needs, the logical extension should be that the product comes in a variety of shapes and sizes. Thus we have some virtual schools in which the curriculum is primarily print-based (with technology reserved for learning management and communication), others in which everything happens online, and a

range of variations in between. Ideally, the mode of delivery is determined by what works best for the student.

Educators and policy-makers struggle with this. During recent legislative debates in Ohio on standards for the state's "cyber charter" movement, lawmakers grappled with the definition of "virtual school," finally settling on "Internet- or computer-based." They further defined it as one in which "enrolled students work primarily from their residences on assignments provided via an Internet- or other computer-based instructional method that does not rely on regular classroom instruction."

A Virtual Evolution in Florida

A trailblazer among virtual high schools, Florida Virtual School has undergone several name changes and explosive growth since its early days as the Florida Online High School. It dropped "High" to signal its expansion into eighth grade, and now offers students multiple modes of interaction with teachers. And in addition to serving students in the state, it also markets courses to students and school systems around the world.

Florida Virtual School

Grades: 8-12

Launched: 1997

Enrollment: 8,000-10,000

For more info: www.flvs.net

In compiling an update of his *Virtual High Schools: State of the States Report* (see [Virtual Learning Bookshelf](#)), author Tom Clark defines virtual school as "an educational organization offering courses designed for K-12 learners through distance learning methods that include Web-based delivery." The problem with definitions like these, though, is that they'll inevitably run into the limits of their technological shelf life—just as did definitions of distance learning that relied on ITV—and therefore will inspire less than productive debates about how much of which kind of technology counts.

A more useful definition is a radically simple one: A virtual school is one in which the students and the teachers are in different locations. The technology that connects them is only a tool, not the main event.

MYTH #2: IT'S CHEAPER

With no buildings, buses, or cafeteria, a virtual school should be much less costly to run than one made of bricks and concrete, right? Think again. As states and districts dedicated to providing high-quality virtual programs are discovering, that's not necessarily the case.

In keeping with the idea that the learner's needs and circumstances should drive the virtual program, it's conceivable that some students would be well-served by bare-minimum kinds of programs. But most students require rich curriculum materials in a variety of media, fairly robust tools for managing their learning day, and—most important—an ongoing, two-way relationship with a teacher. However high- or low-tech

the program is, there's infrastructure to think of—on the school side as well as for the students. All of this costs money.

North Carolina, for example, estimated that it might take a minimum of \$150,000 per course to develop an original, online high-school offering for use statewide. And that didn't include paying teachers to deliver the course or providing for technology so students can take it—particularly if those students participate from somewhere other than a school computer lab.

In Texas, a study of e-learning programs in the state's Virtual School Pilot beginning in Fall 2001 revealed a broad range in recurring per-pupil costs, from \$1,216 per student (based primarily on purchased courseware) to \$7,770 per student (including curriculum development). The state is in the process of devising a funding model that will work for everything from credits for individual e-courses to full-time enrollment in virtual schools.

For virtual school operators such as Connections Academy—which provides print and electronic curriculum, computers for families, school management, teachers, and student support services—the initial cost per pupil of providing these services can easily top \$10,000, significantly more than the typical per-pupil funding stream, a difference the companies cover through such schools' start-up years.

As these schools grow, some per-pupil costs diminish. But their operators argue that significant savings over brick-and-mortar operations can only come as the result of cutting corners on quality—particularly related to standards alignment and individualization of instruction. The idea that virtual schools can be moneymakers for cash-strapped districts by bringing in students from across a state and educating them for far less than the dollars that follow them is particularly suspect.

**MYTH #3:
THERE'S AN AGE LIMIT**

By the late 1990s, the virtual high school bug had started catching on. Utah launched its electronic high school initiative in 1994, but the acknowledged trailblazer is the Florida Virtual School, which launched as the Florida Online High School in 1997.

Testing the Turf in Houston

Houston ISD (HISD) is growing its own catalog of online middle school courses to provide enrichment in the core subject areas. As of Summer 2002, 12 courses aligned to state standards had been developed. HISD students take part in these virtual classes at their brick-and-mortar schools under the supervision of a face-to-face teacher. Courses are free to HISD students and available on a tuition basis to students outside the district; the online program is part of a statewide pilot to determine appropriate funding models for virtual learning.

HISD Virtual Middle School

Grades: 6-8

Launched: Fall 2001

Enrollment: 400-440

For more info: <http://virtualschool.houstonisd.org/>

What was then the Florida Online High School raised a set of questions that have since become familiar, including: Is it developmentally appropriate for students below the college level to attend a virtual school? How self-directed do they need to be to succeed? How much teacher interaction do they need and where should it come from? What about socialization? Florida and the other online innovators handled these questions by partnering with bricks-and-mortar high schools; students either took their virtual classes on campus as part of a hybrid education, or were required to spend a certain amount of time on campus. These arrangements also helped ease worries about finances and competition.

Making Connections in Wisconsin

The Wisconsin Connections Academy, chartered by the Appleton Area School District, serves students throughout the state. Students are taught outside the traditional classroom—most often at home—and work with a learning coach following a personalized learning plan. The school provides a computer, a print-rich curriculum aligned to state standards, and a Wisconsin-certified teacher who works with both the learning coach and the student via telephone, e-mail, and online chat groups. Educational and school management services are provided under contract with Connections Academy, Inc., a subsidiary of Sylvan Ventures.

Wisconsin Connections Academy

Grades: K-8

Launched: Fall 2002

Enrollment: 200-250

For more info: www.connectionsacademy.com

Now that the list of virtual high schools is growing into the double digits, however, the pacesetters like Florida Virtual School are beginning to look at the world below grade nine. Why? Because they see a growing K–8 population with all the same needs that have driven virtual high schools: rural isolation, different learning styles, demand for a flexible schedule, health concerns that keep kids homebound, and many more. In fact, some might argue that providing an alternative to the conventional classroom for a younger student who needs it is even more crucial to that child's educational success than the chance to make up a few credits on the way out of high school.

The question then becomes what kind of virtual school experience makes most sense for younger kids? The emerging model for K–8 is a mixed-media curriculum (including plenty of print); a face-to-face learning coach who is either a parent or another designated individual; and a professional teacher who works closely with coach and student from a distance. In the K–8 space, virtual schools are more virtual and less "online" or "cyber," yet technology plays a major role in connecting all the players (including students with one another), keeping track of learning progress, and adjusting the curriculum to meet the learner's needs.

The concept of virtual schooling for elementary- and middle-school students is in its controversial infancy. But few predict that the virtual school train, having left the station, will stop in its tracks or back up, which leads to the next myth.

**MYTH #4:
WE KNOW WHO IT'S FOR**

Ask most educators about who needs virtual schooling, and they'll rattle off the usual suspects: students in very small or remote communities, homebound kids, Olympic hopefuls, kids a few credits short of graduation, teen parents, and so on. Educators who are particularly broad-minded—or particularly suspicious—may add homeschoolers to the list.

In reality, the portion of the homeschool community that may choose a virtual public school is relatively small (from 10 percent to just over 40 percent in Connections Academy schools, for instance). It's also typically drawn from the fastest-growing portion of the homeschool population: those for whom the choice is a practical and often temporary solution for their child.

What virtual school operators and their district partners are discovering is that the demand for virtual school is more varied and more insistent than they ever could have predicted. Kids who often benefit from virtual schooling, even for a year or two, are those who are ahead of their peers or behind or both, in different subjects; and those who suffer from school phobia, are bully magnets, or are struggling with a school transition (from elementary to middle school, for example). Students whose learning styles or interests are very different from the mainstream may benefit too. More important, the parents of these children often respond passionately to the virtual school opportunity.

The promise (or threat, depending on how you look at it) of technology has always been that it would revolutionize education, and virtual schools certainly contain some of the most potent potential to do that.

One of the hallmarks of public education today is the power of parental choice, reinforced by provisions of No Child Left Behind that allow families to opt out of failing schools—and force districts to accommodate them elsewhere. Under these circumstances, a virtual school option is beginning to seem like a smart choice for many districts.

We can't know what virtual schools will ultimately mean for education. The best we can do is to keep our minds focused on children's learning and, at the same time, open to the possibilities. ■

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VIRTUAL LEARNING BOOKSHELF

- *Any Time, Any Place, Any Path, Any Pace: Taking the Lead on e-Learning Policy*

National Association of State Boards of Education, October 2001.

Examines the needs for and barriers to effective virtual education.

www.nasbe.org/e_Learning.html

- *Virtual Schools Across America: Trends in K-12 Online Education 2002*

The Peak Group, 2002.

Statistics and projections about the growth of the online market.

www.peakgroup.net

- *Considerations for Planning a State Virtual School*

William R. Thomas, Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), March 2002

Discusses the necessary policy choices states must make when launching a statewide virtual school effort.

www.sreb.org/programs/EdTech/pubs/PDF/StateVirtualSchool.asp

- *Technology Counts 2002: E-Defining Education*

Education Week's special report on the current state of virtual education.

www.edweek.org/sreports/tc02/

- *Virtual High Schools: State of the States, A Study of Virtual High School Planning and Operation in the U.S.*

Tom Clark, Ph.D., Transformational Associates for the Center for the Application of Information Technologies, Western Illinois University, 2000

Discusses statewide, state-sponsored virtual high school programs in various states.

www.cait.org/shared_resource_docs/vhs_files/vhs_study.pdf