



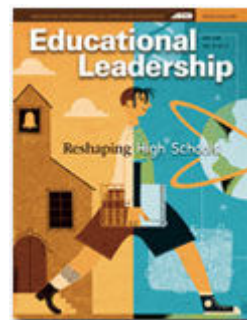
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Reshaping High Schools

Online Learning: Pure Potential

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Online courses expand options for thousands of high school students, but the possibilities are far from tapped.



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Online learning through virtual schools is bringing much-needed change to the K-12 education landscape. Online courses have the potential to greatly expand high school students' exposure to curriculum choices and to make their learning experiences more relevant and personalized. That potential is likely to expand significantly; school leaders need to be ready to seize the possibilities if online learning is to truly improve our students' learning lives.

Until recently, discussions on redesigning U.S. high schools have rarely focused on the potential for online learning to aid in these efforts. But that's changing. In August 2007, the National Governors Association called on Congress and the federal government to partner with it to create new high school models and expanded learning opportunities:

A one-size-fits-all approach to high school learning is outdated. ... Governors encourage Congress to support state and local policies and programs that expand the availability of learning opportunities ... including, but not limited to, virtual school options. (2007, p. 1)

What Exactly *Is* Online Learning?

To understand the potential of online learning to reshape high schools, let's look at how online learning is used creatively in schools now.

Online Courses

Online learning is a type of distance education in which teachers and learners are physically separate and instruction and content are delivered primarily through the Internet. Definitions differ, but I define an *online course* as one in which 51 percent or more of the course is delivered online. Primary instruction online is often supplemented by face-to-face meetings or supervision (sometimes called *blended learning*).

Online courses are one facet of *e-learning*, which might be broadly defined as the use of digital technologies to support teaching and learning in elementary and secondary education (Clark & Berge, 2005a). For example, students using a multiplayer online game to learn about the electoral process as part of a traditional high school U.S. government class are engaging in e-learning but are not taking an online course.

Virtual Schools

The term *virtual school* usually refers to any educational organization that offers K-12 courses

through Internet or Web-based methods (Clark, 2001). Confusion often arises because people assume a "virtual school" is an institution that a student enrolls in full-time and from which that student receives a diploma—a "school of record." More often, a virtual school is essentially a course provider that offers its services to established educational institutions so those institutions can expand learning opportunities. The course provider may be the state education department, a for-profit corporation, or even another school district.

State-led virtual schools emerged in the mid-1990s. Most state-led virtual schools are not schools of record; they provide supplemental offerings that complement local school curriculums. Educational consortia, postsecondary institutions, and local education agencies are also major supplemental course providers.

Virtual charter schools are tuition-free public schools that operate under state charter school laws and provide full-time online learning opportunities. As public education entities, virtual charter schools act as schools of record. The operation, funding, and potential student body of such schools depend on state laws. Although they have a high profile, virtual charter schools serve far fewer students than do supplemental course providers. They focus more on the K–8 population than on the high school population and often serve students with special circumstances, such as medical issues.

Privately operated virtual schools charge tuition for full-time or supplemental online learning. Like virtual charter schools, these private schools may be schools of record, but local school districts frequently contract to use their services.

The Online Learning Difference

Online courses can expand learning options for high school students in scenarios like these:

- Cesario has passed Precalculus, but his high school won't have enough students to "make" an Advanced Placement Calculus course next year. So Cesario plans to take AP Calculus through a university-based online college-preparatory program. His high school counselor has been pleased with how well-prepared students have fared in previous online AP courses through this program, so she keeps track of its curricular offerings and recommends them to students when they appear a good fit.
- Angela dropped out of high school last year when she became pregnant, even though she needed less than a semester's worth of courses to graduate. She subsequently enrolled in her school's new program for school leavers who are close to graduating. After completing her final credits online, Angela received her diploma and began attending a local college part-time. Her high school's graduation rate also increased because of the program, which was established through a partnership with her state's virtual school.
- Ashley dreams of a career in oceanography, a subject her suburban high school doesn't offer. Luckily, Ashley's school belongs to a national online course collaborative. This collaborative coordinates online course-sharing among high schools, with each school receiving a set amount of "course seats" in return for each trained teacher it provides to teach other online courses through the collaborative. Ashley is currently embarked on a "virtual semester at sea," an online arrangement simulating what a person would experience while engaged in oceanographic research.

Growing Options and Growing Enrollments

The available options for K–12 online courses and virtual schools have expanded dramatically in the United States in this century, as have student enrollments. Research by Watson and Ryan (2007) revealed that

- At least 30 states now have state-led virtual school programs. In the last two years, new programs have been established in North Carolina, Mississippi, Missouri, South Carolina,

and South Dakota.

- About 87 new virtual charter schools have opened since 2005.
- The number of online learning providers—whether state education departments, regional bodies, or private companies—is continually increasing, although no precise count is available.
- K–12 online learning opportunities are available in most states. Hundreds, if not thousands, of public schools now include an online learning program through which a local facilitator supports students at "brick and mortar" schools who take courses offered by outside online learning providers. Thirty-eight states report that many of their schools offer supplemental online learning for their students. The following data reflect a dramatic growth in just the last few years:
 - A survey I conducted of program providers in 2000 estimated that 40,000–50,000 U.S. students were enrolled in online courses (Clark, 2001). Picianno and Seaman (2007) estimated that 700,000 K–12 students were enrolled in either online or blended learning courses in 2006. About two-thirds of those enrolled were high school students.
 - The Center for Education Reform estimated that 100,000 students attended 173 virtual charter schools in 18 states in 2007–08. Three years earlier, this same group reported 31,000 enrollments in 86 virtual charter schools in 16 states (Chute, 2005; Center for Education Reform, 2007).

Three Misconceptions—and the Real Picture

Although well-delivered online courses clearly appeal to learners and have the potential to energize high schoolers, some educators harbor negative misconceptions about online courses. Researcher John Watson (2007) has identified the following common misconceptions about online learning—all of which are refuted by a closer look.

Online learning is essentially "teacher-less." In fact, the vast majority of online courses include a teacher who regularly checks in and interacts with students online and sometimes face-to-face as well. No reputable virtual school offers an online course without ensuring that the course is taught by a qualified teacher. Some virtual schools offer an online curriculum but require that local schools using that curriculum provide a teacher.

Just as in a conventional course, the teaching methods online instructors use vary depending on the teacher's subject area and instructional philosophy. But in an online course, teaching and learning are more transparent. Teachers can thoroughly review a student's progress by analyzing online learning activities either in real time or later. A teacher can track clicks and monitor online assessments and threaded discussions to see whether students are participating productively—and receive an automated alert if a student is not actively contributing.

Virtual schools recognize that the quality of teaching is the most important variable in the process of providing instruction online. Most virtual schools require teachers to complete a multiweek course in online teaching, and many provide mentoring by experienced online teachers. In an online classroom, showing up and sitting in the back of the class is not enough. Good online teachers interact regularly with their students, provide feedback, and keep in touch with parents. Good online teachers adjust their teaching styles to fit the delivery method, providing an online presence and structure that keeps students engaged. Teachers who rely on personal charisma to motivate students will need new skills to teach online.

The Teacher Education Goes into Virtual Schooling project at Iowa State University seeks to infuse skills needed to support K–12 virtual schooling into teacher education programs nationwide (Davis & Rose, 2007). The Southern Regional Education Board's publication *Standards for Quality Online Teaching and Online Teaching Evaluation for State Virtual Schools* (2006) and the National

Education Association's *Guide to Teaching Online Courses* (2006) are useful resources for teachers and administrators.

Online learning is just high-tech correspondence study, and courses are easy. In fact, most established virtual schools seek to meet state and national standards and offer rigorous, interactive courses led by state-certified teachers. Many virtual schools have sought to create courses that meet the criteria for high-quality online learning set by such bodies like the Southern Regional Education Board. They use local support structures and parental supervision to help students stay on track and engaged. Such support often helps less motivated students and remedial learners succeed online even when they have failed in conventional classrooms. However, students often *expect* online courses to be easy, which may contribute to course dropout rates.

Online students are isolated and shortchanged on socialization. Most K–12 online learners take supplemental courses online while still attending their local public high school, where they interact daily with peers. Online peers add new opportunities for social interaction.

Steps to Capture the Potential

There is evidence that the public's attitudes toward online learning and virtual schools are becoming more favorable. The 2007 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll of the public's attitudes toward the public schools found that 41 percent of respondents approved of the practice of earning high school credits over the Internet (compared with 30 percent in 2001). Because the exact wording for this survey item referred to approval of "opportunities for students to earn high school credits online over the Internet without attending a regular school," respondents may have thought this question was only about *full-time* online learning. I suspect a majority of U.S. citizens would express approval on this survey item if the question clearly referred to supplemental rather than full-time online schooling. The U.S. public does seem to harbor negative attitudes toward full-time online learning, however. In the same 2007 poll, 73 percent of respondents said they would *not* be willing to have their own child take most high school courses online.

If the potential for online learning to expand secondary students' learning choices is to bear fruit, practitioners and policymakers must work to improve public confidence. They must also ensure that online programs are used conscientiously.

Educators: Consider Your Needs First

High schools and districts that are considering offering their students supplemental or full-time online learning options should do their homework. Clark and Berge (2005b) suggest that before making "build or buy" decisions, each local school should form a planning group. This group should identify school improvement needs, desired student outcomes, student groups most in need of help, and courses or curriculums that would most benefit from an online component.

In determining whether a prospective online course provider is reliable and effective, you might use the *National Standards of Quality for Online Learning* issued by the North American Council for Online Learning in 2007. Contact other school districts the provider is already serving and ask about its performance. In addition, ask questions such as these:

- Does the course provider hold regional accreditation status? Remember that accreditation is not a complete measure of quality, however, and some well-regarded virtual schools don't pursue it.
- How does the provider align curriculum? Most will have at least a general alignment available. If any concerns arise, ask to review a course or two.
- How does the provider recruit qualified teachers and train them to teach effectively online? What are this provider's quality standards for online teaching, and how does the program monitor and support teachers?

- How does the provider support students and participating schools? Look at the registration and course management systems: Could your school easily monitor enrollees' progress and interact with the provider and its teachers?

Policymakers and Providers: Push for Acceptance

States should provide more effective oversight for online learning providers and full-time virtual schools. The federal government also needs to supply guidance. The reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act, for example, should include consideration of the productive roles online learning can play in improving education and expanding educational choice. Federal leadership could catalyze new ideas in using online learning. Bill Tucker (2007) of Education Sector has suggested a virtual schooling innovation fund to spur innovative methods and technologies at the high school level.

Virtual schools should better document their key performance metrics—such as enrollments, course completion rates, grades, and assessment results—in a transparent way to demonstrate the benefits of these schools. They should set up procedures to ensure that underserved students participate and succeed online (Rose & Blomeyer, 2007). For example, when course seats are limited in Florida Virtual School—the nation's largest virtual school—the institution gives priority to students who attend a low-performing public school, a rural public school, or a high-minority school. Florida Virtual School is state-funded, with funding based on numbers of successful course *completions*, not enrollments. It maintains a completion rate of around 85 percent (Clark, 2008). The school publishes the results of its annual surveys of students, parents, and schools on its Web site and periodically undergoes a full-scale evaluation.

Online courses and virtual schools are two of the most significant tools in the e-learning tool kit for reshaping individual high schoolers' experiences. As the National Governors Association (2007) noted, these tools can also play a unique role in high school reform, helping schools develop new models and expand learning opportunities. Let's use these tools creatively to give all our students a wider range of options.

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