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A School House for the 21st Century

Virtual education in the United States

By Justin Tuskan

A decade ago, the idea of a child attending school miles from an actual school building was met with skepticism. In recent years, however, online K-12 education has grown rapidly throughout the country and is fast becoming a natural alternative to traditional school for some students.

Like many innovations in education, online learning has been met with some resistance. Yet, at a time when technology is revolutionizing every industry and traditional schools are failing to meet the academic needs of all students, virtual education is providing a strong alternative that gives our education system a much needed boost.

Broadband Internet access, rich media, and live instruction via Web cams are just some of the factors influencing the expansion of online classrooms. So is consumer choice; parents value the ability to pursue the educational options that best fit their child's needs, and are turning to virtual schools more and more.

According to the 2007 *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning* report published by Evergreen Consulting Associates, 42 states currently have significant online learning programs, up from 38 states at the end of 2006. Of the eight states that do not offer virtual learning alternatives, several are in the process of developing their own programs. At the same time, the number of students using online learning programs is growing. Forty percent of programs responding to a recent survey reported annual growth of more than 25 percent in the 2006-2007 school year, and half of those with growth of 50 percent or higher.

Virtual learning may not be for everyone, but for many it is the best way to meet their educational needs. It can serve to supplement the traditional classroom experience for students who are looking for extra help or who simply want to take a course not offered at their school. For example, students who wish to go beyond



their required classes can access a wide selection of elective courses, including advanced languages such as Mandarin Chinese. In school districts where highly qualified teachers are scarce, full-time online classrooms have brought the best and brightest to those in need, creating a more level playing field for struggling students. Overall, online learning opens up new opportunities for any child, anywhere.

When it comes to any education program, parents and policymakers alike are always most concerned with student performance, and virtual schools do not disappoint. Students who attend an online classroom fulltime are held accountable through the same state

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tests as any other child, and supplemental programs are usually monitored by the “brick and mortar” schools that offer them. Test results vary state to state, but illustrate the important fact that virtual schools produce students who score as well if not better than traditional classroom students on standardized assessments. In Florida, for example, both virtual K-8 programs received an “A” on the 2007 statewide school report card, while Ohio’s top-performing e-schools were at or above the state average for reading in 2006. Arizona’s virtual schools rated “Performing” and “Performing Plus” in their 2006 evaluation.

But what about college readiness? Are virtual students as prepared? If scores on Advanced Placement exams are any indication, the answer is “yes.” A 2005 study conducted by the Center for Education Reform compared AP exam data from three online programs (Apex Learning, Florida Virtual School, and Virtual High School) against the national average of all students taking AP exams. The pass rate for the students in virtual schools was a strong 65 to 79 percent, compared to the national rate of only 60 percent. Since AP classes

are designed to cover material at the same level as a college freshman class, it is clear these students are ready for the academic challenges of university life.

Education is nothing without teachers, and those working in virtual classrooms are professional, state-licensed, and meet the highly qualified teacher definition of No Child Left Behind. As with all K-12 education, parents play an important role, but only a supporting one, and make no decisions regarding curriculum. According to Mickey Revenaugh of Connections Academy, a leading provider of virtual education resources and a valued member of ALEC’s Education Task Force, many teachers actually believe that the virtual setting is better than the traditional classroom. They enjoy the ability to focus all their energy on the main objective of educating students, rather than juggling other responsibilities like lunchroom monitoring and frequent meetings. Teachers also report knowing their online students as well or even more than students they have taught in face-to-face settings.

Continued on page 17



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AMERICAN LEGISLATIVE EXCHANGE COUNCIL

A School House for the 21st Century

Continued from page 8

In spite of the myths about online classrooms, virtual education organizations continue to grow and thrive. A great example of this is ALEC newcomer Insight Schools, who joined the Education Task Force in late 2007. Headquartered in Portland, Oregon, Insight Schools focuses on providing virtual school programs to high school-aged students. According to their estimates, nearly five million children ages 14-18 do not attend high school. Insight Schools is committed to helping these children, and “provides a choice within the system that offers the benefits of a ‘home school’ (flexible daily schedule, individualized placement, one-on-one instructional model), the privileges of a private school (low class sizes, high quality curriculum, strong support systems) while giving every student an advantage by staying within the supervision and support of the public school system,” according to Lisa Gillis, Insight’s Director of Government Affairs and School Development.

The outlook for virtual schools over the next few years is definitely bright. In the minds of professionals like Gillis, “Virtual education, as measured by student enrollments, will grow by over 100 percent in the next five years. The effectiveness of virtual education will also experience a dramatic improvement in quality, as ongoing growth continues

to power investment in new technologies and curriculum that is optimized for online learning.”

In the future, parents may find their children completing lessons on the go, as advancements in handheld and wireless technology will push the boundaries of what we call the “classroom” even further. Without a doubt, virtual education programs are truly positioning themselves as the school house for the 21st century.

Eighty-four percent of all employers say that K-12 schools are not doing a good job of preparing students for the workforce. Fortunately, there are alternatives like virtual education, which provides an environment where students can gain the skills necessary for success. Whether it is with Insight Schools, or any of the other ALEC members that are leaders in virtual education—including K-12, Inc. and Connections Academy—the online classroom is bringing a more personalized brand of education to more students than ever.

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Published by
American Legislative Exchange Council
1101 Vermont Avenue, NW, 11th Floor
Washington, D.C. 20005

Advances in Health IT

No government needed

By Kate Campaigne

Health and Human Services Department Secretary Mike Leavitt has taken a special interest in Health IT (health information technology). He advocates requiring Medicare providers to use e-prescribing and e-records.

The national government has already set a deadline for implementing electronic records by 2014. Leavitt and others suggest the government should take the lead in Health IT, set the standards, and drive the market and movement toward full electronic implementation in the health care industry.

Leavitt and his colleagues are wrong about the need for government to drive the Health IT market. More legislation and major government initiatives are not needed to push Health IT forward. Private industry has made significant progress on its own and will continue to improve its response to consumer demand for personal health records (PHRs) and electronic health records (EHRs).

As Diana Ernst, public policy fellow in health care studies at the Pacific Research Institute, argues, "Thriving incentives for voluntary enterprise in Health IT are already expanding outside of government edict, and are likely to operate more effectively than blanket, government-issued programs, including heavy-handed national legislation on the private sector. We must allow Health IT to materialize freely from innovative entrepreneurship, and preserve competition in the health care industry, for the maximum protection of privacy, and the best quality of care for all Americans."

Ernst makes four main points in her article, "America's Consumers Will Beat Government to (Health) IT:"

- Americans appear to be gaining interest in health records containing their medical information and history. Personal health records (PHRs) and



electronic health records (EHRs) are both part of the emerging Health Information Technology (IT) initiative;

- The Bush administration has invested time and taxpayer money in developing a hefty Health IT proposal, and Capitol Hill is teeming with Health IT bills to establish a nationwide electronic health system;
- Despite the complexity of such an initiative, private entities are responding to patients far more efficiently; and
- Americans should support this private, decentralized movement to develop and expand Health IT if they want truly effective, patient-focused products.

In 2003, President George W. Bush created a Health IT initiative to turn paper-managed health care records into a more transparent and efficient system using computers. Since then, government has spent more than \$1 billion to expand health information technology. Not only wasteful, the government's involvement in Health IT creates expensive and hindering mandates on private industry. Twelve different national agencies overlap on Health IT research.