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VIRTUAL SCHOOLS IN THE U.S. 2013: POLITICS, PERFORMANCE, POLICY, AND RESEARCH EVIDENCE

*Alex Molnar, University of Colorado Boulder, Editor
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Executive Summary

In the past decade, virtual education has moved quickly to the top of the K-12 public education reform agenda. Proponents, including business leaders, school reform organizations, foundations, and for-profit and non-profit service providers, argue that virtual technology will revolutionize teaching and learning, dramatically reducing the cost and increasing the availability of high-quality education.

Virtual education takes many forms and serves many purposes. Formats include full-time online K-12 schools as well as single courses that allow students to explore a subject not available in their brick-and-mortar schools. Virtual education is also sometimes used by students to make up credits for a required course they earlier failed. Some virtual education programs require students and teachers to be online at the same time (synchronous education); others allow students and teachers to visit online courses at their own convenience (asynchronous education). Others combine online work with

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traditional, in-person classroom instruction (blended instruction). Providers include public entities, non-profit and for-profit organizations.

At this point, technological and business model innovations have far outpaced research on the impact of virtual teaching and learning. Yet even though little is known about the efficacy of online education generally or about individual approaches specifically, states are moving quickly to expand taxpayer-funded virtual education programs.

Virtual Schools in the U.S. 2013: Politics, Performance, Policy, and Research Evidence is the first in a planned series of annual reports from NEPC. These reports will analyze the performance of full-time, publicly funded K-12 virtual schools; describe key policy issues raised by virtual education; assess the research evidence that bears on K-12 virtual teaching and learning; and provide research-based recommendations to help guide policymaking.

Introduction

Alex Molnar, University of Colorado Boulder

Discusses the context for virtual education reform; provides an overview of state legislative activity; describes the influences on policymakers; and surveys media reports of emerging political and policy issues associated with the implementation of virtual school policies.

Data from the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) database as well as the information compiled by the Evergreen Group and by the Foundation for Excellence in Education detail considerable state level legislative activity associated with virtual education in 2012. A review of media reports illustrates the competing claims, conflicting goals, financial uncertainty, questionable political and business relationships, and lack of systematic data that characterize the current political and policy environment of virtual education.

Section I: Full-Time Virtual Schools: Enrollment, Student Characteristics, and Performance

Gary Miron, Western Michigan University
Brian Horvitz, Western Michigan University
Charisse Gulosino, University of Memphis

A total of 311 full-time virtual schools enrolling an estimated 200,000 students are identified; 67% of the identified students are enrolled in charters operated by Education Management Organizations (EMOs). In 2011-12, the largest for-profit operator of virtual schools, K12 Inc., alone enrolled 77,000 students.

Compared with conventional public schools, researchers found that full-time virtual schools serve relatively few Black and Hispanic students, students who are poor, and

special education students. In addition, on the common metrics of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), state performance rankings, and graduation rates, full-time virtual schools lag significantly behind traditional brick-and-mortar schools.

Recommendations arising from Section I:

- Policymakers should slow or stop growth of virtual schools until the reasons for their relatively poor performance have been identified and addressed.
- Given that some for-profit companies now enroll more than 10,000 students, policymakers should impose caps on student enrollment at schools run by such companies until evidence of satisfactory performance for a provider is available.
- State education agencies and the federal National Center for Education Statistics should clearly identify full-time virtual-schools in their datasets, distinguishing them other instructional models.
- State agencies should ensure that virtual schools fully report data related to the population of students they serve.
- State and federal policymakers should promote efforts to design new outcome measures appropriate to the unique characteristics of full-time virtual schools.

Section II—Key Policy Issues in Virtual Schools: Finance and Governance, Instructional Quality and Teacher Quality

Luis Huerta, Teachers College - Columbia University

Jennifer King Rice, University of Maryland

Sheryl Rankin Shafer

Identifies the key challenges faced by policymakers as: funding and governance; instructional program quality; and recruitment and retention of high quality teachers.

Significant issues associated with funding and governance include linking funding to actual costs, identifying accountability structures, delineating enrollment boundaries and funding responsibilities, and limiting profiteering by EMOs.

Significant issues associated with instructional program quality include ensuring the quality and quantity of curricula and instruction, as well as monitoring student achievement.

Significant issues associated with the recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers include identification of appropriate skills for online teaching, designing and providing appropriate professional development, and designing appropriate teacher evaluation.

Recommendations arising from Section II:

- Policymakers should develop new funding formulas based on the actual costs of operating virtual schools.
- Policymakers should develop new accountability structures for virtual schools, calculate the revenue needed to sustain such structures, and provide adequate support for them.
- Policymakers should establish geographic boundaries and manageable enrollment zones for virtual schools by implementing a state-centered funding and accountability system.
- Policymakers should develop guidelines and governance mechanisms to ensure that virtual schools do not prioritize profit over student learning.
- Policymakers should require high-quality curricula, aligned with applicable state and district standards, and monitor changes to digital content.
- Policymakers should develop a comprehensive system of summative and formative assessments of student achievement, shifting assessment from a focus on time- and place-related requirements to a focus on student mastery of curricular objectives.
- Policymakers should assess the contributions of various providers to student achievement, and close virtual schools and programs that do not contribute to student growth.
- Policymakers should define certification training and relevant teacher licensure requirements and continually improve online teaching models through comprehensive professional development.
- Policymakers should address retention issues by developing guidelines for appropriate student-teacher ratios.
- Policymakers should use emerging research to create effective and comprehensive teacher evaluation rubrics.

Section III—Claims and Evidence: The Virtual Schools Research Base

Larry Cuban, Stanford University

Details common claims made by proponents of virtual education, and assesses the extent to which those claims are supported by sound research evidence.

To date, claims made in support of expanding virtual education are largely unsupported by high quality research evidence. The role of political considerations in driving the expansion of virtual technologies in public education despite a manifest lack of research

support is examined. Suggestions for the kind of research that policy makers need are offered.

Recommendations arising from Section III:

- Policymakers should suspend requirements that students take online courses in order to graduate from high school.
- Policymakers should slow or stop growth of virtual schools until there is research evidence on their performance that supports their expansion.
- Policymakers should create long-term programs to support independent research and evaluation of specific student learning outcomes for cyber schools, blended learning schools, and similar ventures.

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