

Virtual Schools and eLearning: Planning for Success

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Virtual schools are a rapidly growing phenomenon in American elementary and secondary (K-12) education. They are the latest and potentially the most controversial manifestation of the elearning revolution in schools. The terms “virtual high school” or “virtual school” are generally applied to any educational organization that offers K-12 courses through Internet- or Web-based methods (Clark, 2001). Virtual Schooling can be seen as part of a larger phenomenon, eLearning, a concept that is increasingly used in the K-12 environment to describe not only distance teaching and learning, but also the general use of educational and information technology in support of teaching and learning.

The virtual schooling phenomenon is cresting several years after the maturation of eLearning in higher education, where there have been several highly publicized failures. Schools differ considerably from colleges in their funding mechanisms, student characteristics, policies, and other aspects. Excellent information about policy aspects of K-12 online schools has been provided by Blomeyer and his colleagues in sessions at the 2002 and 2003 *Distance Teaching and Learning* conferences.

Based upon research and conversations with virtual schools, the first author developed a framework for describing virtual school initiatives through an initial study focusing on state-level efforts (Clark, 2000), and a second study looking at the full range of programs (Clark, 2001). The second study featured the first publicly available national survey of leading virtual schools. These studies and their frameworks have informed the planning efforts of several state-level virtual school efforts.

Coming full circle, the presenters are co-editing a forthcoming book that will present the views of leading virtual school educators and experts in the field. A key question is how the leaders of successful virtual schools have planned for and achieved that success, within their unique context. Many of the organizations represented on the newly formed North American Council on Online Learning, a nonprofit virtual school association, are contributing a chapter or will be profiled in the book.

This book will highlight findings across eight key components of virtual school operations and six types of virtual schools. Through the book project, the presenters will seek to describe those elements that are common to successful efforts, and those that are unique, with the intent of encouraging more informed planning for virtual school efforts. They will conclude their work with a brief "road map" for success in virtual school and eLearning efforts.

In the next few sections, we provide a little context on virtual schools, by looking briefly at their emergence, their benefits and some issues surrounding them. We then consider who offers virtual school options, and pose some questions that might be asked by planners about key components of virtual schools.

Emergence of Virtual Schools

The virtual school represents a natural evolution from several traditions of distance learning and technology use in schools. Computer conferencing, computer based instruction, electronic distance learning systems and most importantly the development of the Internet and World Wide Web have all

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contributed to the emergence of the virtual school. Many of the administrative structures now common to virtual schools have their origins in the independent study traditions of distance learning. The independent study high school, the earliest forerunner of the virtual school, emerged in the early 1920s when Michigan school superintendent Sydney Mitchell integrated home study vocational courses into the regular school curriculum, thereby creating the first distance learning program designed for K-12 learners (Mitchell, 1923). Seven decades later, the University of Nebraska took its independent study high school "virtual" when it received federal funding in 1996 to create an online, accredited high school diploma program. Since the early 1990s, many virtual schools have been developed that serve K-12 students.

What Are Some Benefits of Virtual Schools?

A survey of 33 virtual schools by Clark (2001) found that access to an expanded curriculum was one of the most frequently stated objectives of virtual school programs. Like previous forms of distance education, virtual schools make courses accessible to students that they could not otherwise take. Some virtual school courses enrich the curriculum through their high quality and/or challenging nature, and help students meet measurable state and national standards of learning. Virtual schools can extend equitable access to high quality education to students from high-need urban and rural schools, low achieving students, and students with special needs. Some virtual schools, such as the Florida Virtual School and the University of California College Prep initiative, have made minority and low-income student recruitment a priority and had substantial success in these efforts.

Virtual school students can potentially participate anywhere, anytime via Internet-capable computers. However "for some students, 'any-time learning' becomes 'no-time learning' because they have not developed the skills to structure and manage their own time" (Berge, 2001). Online courses can allow students to select their pace of interaction and fulfill grade or diploma requirements more quickly. Methods and interaction can be individualized to best meet learner needs.

A key benefit for some students involved in virtual schools and their parents is the expansion of educational choice. In spring 1999, an estimated 850,000 students nationwide were being home-schooled, or about 1.7 percent of students nationwide (Bielick, Chandler, & Broughman, 2001) and the number appears to be growing. In large scale surveys of home schoolers enrolled in virtual schools and their parents both cited dissatisfaction with public schools as a key reason for participation in virtual schooling (Optimal Performance, 2001; Barker and Wendel, 2001).

The role of virtual schools in the educational choice movement has brought controversy and confusion to the public debate over their role in American education. Based on enrollments reported by leading virtual schools, it appears that most virtual school students are regularly enrolled public school students taking a course or two from an online school during the school day. While the participation of public school students is less well publicized, the participation of former home schoolers in virtual charter schools is well covered by the mass media. Only 30% of U. S. adults say they would approve charter schools in their communities that offer all instruction online over the Internet (Rose and Gallup, 2002). It is hoped that a new national survey of schools by the U. S. Department of Education, to be released in 2004, will provide more accurate estimates of the number and types of students enrolled in virtual schools.

Organizational Types

Virtual schools can also be organized by organizational or funding type, curricula, instructional methods, technology, pacing, interaction methods, and other factors. It can be helpful to determine who is being successful in similar circumstances, and this begins by identifying virtual school types. Clark (2000, 2001) identifies six virtual school types based upon who operates the virtual school program:

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- *University-based.* Most of these university-based virtual schools are independent study high schools or gifted and talented programs that offer online options. At least seven independent study high schools offer an online high school diploma that is regionally accredited.
- *State-sanctioned, state-level.* The state education agency, Governor, or legislature has designated a specific entity as “the” state-level virtual school in at least 14 states. Many states support online Advanced Placement programs. Most virtual charter schools are not endorsed as “the” statewide school.
- *Consortium or collaborative.* Some virtual school consortia combine schools, universities, state government agencies, and/or private entities. In the collaborative model pioneered by VHS, Inc., a local school trains an instructor and delivers a course in return for a class of seats in the virtual school.
- *Local education agency.* Public school districts and schools operate most virtual school programs in the nation, primarily for students living in the district
- *Charter school.* Entities designated by the state to operate charter schools exempt from some rules and regulations that normally apply to public schools. Legislation in each state has a major impact on how and where these virtual charter schools operate and how they are funded.
- *Private school.* There are many organizations that offer virtual school programs outside the public school sector. Many are programs of on-site private schools.

While they are not usually virtual schools themselves, *eLearning solutions providers* also play an important role. They provide courses, training, instructors, and infrastructure that can be used as “turnkey” solutions to all or part of the key components needed to operate a virtual school of any size.

Those seeking to create a virtual school program have many options, based on needs, resources, and desired level of involvement. A local school may create their own virtual school “from scratch,” join a consortium or cooperative, or co-create a school. Most local virtual schools offer a mix of self developed and external provider courses.

External Web-based resources that will be developed in association with the book include an update of the Virtual School List (Clark, 2001) arranged by organizational type. It is hoped that others will consider creating new lists, especially in specific curricular or school type areas, to meet the needs of particular audiences.

Some Questions to Consider

Clark (2000, 2001) identifies nine key components or factors to consider in building or operating virtual schools. The planners of several virtual school efforts have found this general framework to be a useful frame of reference or starting point for their planning work. Examples of questions a virtual school planner might ask are provided for each component.

- *Technology.* Does our technology infrastructure have the hardware, software and connectivity needed to support a virtual school? How do we choose an appropriate learning management system? Do our intended students have the needed technology and skills?
- *Funding.* Is a virtual school the most cost-effective way to meet our needs? Is there a clear funding mechanism or combination of funding sources? Is funding reliable and sustainable for the purposes of the program as we envision it? Does our funding approach align well with policies?
- *Curriculum and instruction.* Is a virtual school an appropriate way to meet curricular needs indicated for school improvement? What instructional models and methods will work best?

- *Student services.* Do we have adequate staffing to provide comprehensive services to students participating in a virtual school? How will we provide library and instructional resources? What levels and kinds of services do students in our schools need to be successful in online courses?
- *Professional development.* How can we prepare and support virtual school instructors and staff? Do we have a “critical mass” of teachers certified in content areas and ready to participate?
- *Access/equity.* This is a factor that should run through all virtual school planning. Can we plan proactively to ensure equitable access? How will underserved students be recruited and supported in their virtual school courses? Are special strategies needed to ensure these learners succeed?
- *Assessment.* How will we assess the quality of online instruction and student outcomes in the virtual school program? How will we engage in continuous improvement of our efforts?
- *Policy and administration.* What internal and external policies impact or are relevant to our proposed virtual school program? How well does our approach align with policies regulating state aid? Who will operate the school, and how? How will we develop policies and procedures?
- *Marketing and public relations.* Who are the key internal and external stakeholders in the success of our virtual school program? How do we bring them on board and keep them informed over time? How will we inform internal and external audiences about the program?

Summary

In this paper we have explored a few of the current issues surrounding virtual schools, and briefly reviewed some key factors in planning for virtual school success. More specific information from the book project will be included in our August 2003 presentation at the conference.

What are some implications of our findings in process for virtual school planners? In general, those planning virtual schools should conduct a self-directed search for information on the range of solutions, before committing to a particular virtual school approach, provider or product. While it is easier to get into virtual schooling these days than a few years ago, such a self-directed learning process can help planners best meet their needs, and succeed in meeting their goals.

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Biographical Sketches

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