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A K-12 Leadership Series

Virtual Education.  
Established Momentum.  
New Opportunities.



# Virtual Education. Established Momentum. New Opportunities.

In the span of just a decade, online learning has established remarkable velocity. Educators, students, policy makers, and parents have recognized the vast potential of the Internet to engage learners and answer a spectrum of needs arising from the challenges of geography, scheduling, and students' unique personal learning. As the education community has sharpened its focus more intently on student-centered teaching and learning, educators have embraced the need to build curriculum and strategies to bolster students who struggle to stay on track and provide accelerated learning opportunities for learners who are ready to tackle additional challenges. Today, online learning, in multiple models and formats, has grown and evolved at an unprecedented pace to meet an expanding set of educational needs and opportunities.

This *eduvIEWS* report looks at successful models of 100 percent online or virtual educational programs, in which instruction is delivered exclusively in the online environment. Its purpose is to provide new insights into successful models in virtual education and provide practical examples to educators who see the potential to evolve their virtual education programs farther and faster, as well as those in the initial planning or early development stages for virtual education initiatives. We recognize that many schools and districts use blended learning models in which classroom teachers use online resources to supplement or extend instruction and have focused on this type of online instruction in the *Improving Classroom Learning eduvIEW*.

## Virtual Education: An Update

In the late 1990s, states throughout the U.S. began to establish state-wide virtual schools. State virtual schools are created by legislation or a state-level agency. In many cases, these schools are funded by a state appropriation or grant for the purpose of providing online learning opportunities across that state. According to the Keeping Pace 2009 report, twenty-seven states had state virtual schools, with an additional six offering state-led online learning initiatives that provide tools and resources to school districts across their state.<sup>1</sup> Together, these state virtual education programs provided approximately 320,000 course enrollments (one student taking one semester-long course) in for-credit courses in the 2008-09 school year. In the April 28, 2010 Education Week Special Report entitled *E-Learning 2010: Assessing the Agenda for Change*, the article "E-Learning in all Shapes and Sizes" reports that the number of states currently operating state-sponsored virtual schools is now thirty-five ... evidence that the growth is ongoing.<sup>2</sup>

District-developed and managed virtual schools have also been established to meet the disparate needs that are part of the fabric of localized education. District virtual schools are typically closer to their students and can better meet needs through proximity and their long-term experience in understanding and responding to local conditions. Effective practices in virtual school settings are facilitated and enhanced by specific learning management system technologies created to address a wide variety of student, teacher, and school/district needs. These needs typically include:

Together, state virtual education programs provided approximately 320,000 course enrollments in for-credit courses in the 2008-09 school year.

- credit recovery and acceleration programs
- serving students who need alternatives based on schedules, health, or other personal circumstances
- providing specific courses for which districts may not have available faculty, facilities, or funding

Regional education service centers and universities have also jumped into the mix, and are providing virtual education, such as the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Independent Study High School and Kirkwood High School Distance Learning.

## The Benefits of Virtual Education

Virtual education in its many and evolving forms offers significant advantages to students, educators, and educational institutions. Students who are unable to attend traditional schools due to health, athletics, or arts commitments often find full-time online or virtual education to be an effective answer. Similarly, students who need credit recovery opportunities (to continue their education) to accumulate additional credits during the summer to progress to the next grade, or to accumulate credits for graduation find virtual education provides options that work effectively for them. Students who need to combine virtual education with traditional in-school enrollment because of family, employment, or health are also well served by new virtual options.

Virtual education is a highly promising route for students who need an expanded catalog of offerings to accelerate their educational progress, earn college-level credit, or who may want to take supplemental courses that are not offered at their institution. Virtual education is also helping students in more remote geographical locations who want and need the opportunities that are more readily available to urban and suburban students.

Districts are benefitting as well from virtual education's momentum. In cases where it's difficult to find highly qualified teachers, virtual options often allow districts to access the skills and services of teachers with specialized subject matter expertise. Many districts are turning to virtual education to improve their competitive position and their ability to attract and retain students. The virtual option has also proven effective in helping districts expand their course offerings without commensurate increases in full-time staff or facilities. Additionally, as districts seek to respond to 21<sup>st</sup> century student needs and learning preferences, the virtual education model provides a viable option for students who may simply perform better in an online learning environment.

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## New Perspectives on Quality in Virtual Education: The Cobb Virtual Academy Story

The Cobb County school district in Georgia operates Cobb Virtual Academy, a program now serving 1500 students. The Academy offers full course instruction in which students can receive credits for taking courses. According to the program's representatives, typically students take courses with the Virtual Academy to make room in their schedules for a special subject such as an AP class or a music or art class. Additionally, the program serves students new to the district who need additional credits to graduate, students who fail a course and still need credits, 5th year students, and students who are "move-on ready" and want to take courses at a local college.

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"Success needs to be judged not just at the time, but as students move forward into careers or further education."

Cheryl Rowley, District Administrator for the Cobb County School District, Georgia

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When asked how they define quality in their virtual education program, Cheryl Rowley, District Administrator with the Cobb County School District said, "In all regards, quality is defined by student success. Students are coming back to us time and time again and schools are continuing to send students to us. Success needs to be judged not just at the time, but as students move forward into careers or further education. We judge our quality by student retention, completion/passage, and re-enrollment."<sup>3</sup>

Becky Nunnally, an Administrator with Cobb County, added, "Quality is high quality courses, highly trained instructors, support provided for students, aligned governance, parental resources, data to inform change/improvement, and reporting and communication with all stakeholders."

Both Rowley and Ryan Fuller, an Online Learning Specialist at the Academy, also addressed the importance of quality instruction, noting that the Virtual Academy trains new teachers who then go through mentorship with a small class. This training period lasts approximately a year and includes ongoing observation and evaluation.

Cobb Virtual Academy emphasizes aligned governance, so that the virtual program's policies and procedures align with the district's policies. According to Rowley, this alignment is helpful to both students and parents and also allows for program growth. And because the program is in synch with district goals, it can utilize district resources which adds efficiencies as well.

When asked about providing parental resources, Rowley noted that the Academy puts an emphasis on helping parents know how to help their students when they are enrolled in an online course. For example, during the Academy's mid-term adjustment, administrators identified that some 5<sup>th</sup> year students were failing. The Academy expanded its open lab, added tutoring and then let parents know that these services were available so parents could help and encourage their children.

Rowley noted that the Academy uses data to drive changes and that they are committed to remaining flexible to meet specific student needs. Again, she cited an example in which 5th year seniors can get partial credit from the Virtual Academy and then earn their diplomas from their local high school. She also stressed that an important quality component is the reporting and communication with students, parents, online teachers, and students' home institutions.

## Cobb Virtual Academy Shares Insights...

When asked to offer advice to districts or other organizations that are now beginning to develop or expand their virtual programs to plan for and assure quality teaching and learning experiences, Ryan Fuller, Online Learning Specialist at the Academy, and Cheryl Rowley, District Administrator with Cobb County, offered these helpful insights:

- Focus time and resources on understanding the needs of the students and how the platform, curriculum content, and instructional model intersect to meet those needs. Determine the type of platform that you want to deliver your curriculum. For example, if the LMS you choose provides you with a modular approach then you can start with the modular approach. Become a student of the ins and outs of that system. Understand its functionality and limitations. As additional needs present themselves, address them by adding functionality to the system. Don't bite off more than you can chew. Think 'Scalability.'
- Give yourself plenty of planning, development, and implementation time: Everything takes longer than you think including developing courses, training teachers, establishing governance, and more.
- Build courses (purchase portions or develop them in-house) to meet multiple needs such as initial credit, credit recovery (including partial and full credit options), or standards mastery to meet either an individual standards gap or for remediation for state mandated tests.
- Ask yourself if you need to develop your own program from scratch knowing the expense involved, or if can you partner with a private or state provider to meet students' needs. It's critical to understand the costs of outsourcing and creating internally when it comes to content development.

The Cobb Virtual Academy team also recommended that those starting virtual education programs tap the helpful resources that are now readily available, including those offered by iNACOL, SREB, the iNACOL Virtual School Symposium (VSS), and other state-based organizations such as the Georgia NACOL, which offers a local community of online K-12 professionals.

Cobb Virtual Academy develops its own courses, purchases some courses and supplements locally to meet their quality and content standards. The Academy uses iNACOL's standards as a quality benchmark. Rowley pointed out that they strive to make sure that all content standards are met and that the formative and summative assessments and the scope and sequence of the courses match the district's performance standards, which include both state and county performance standards as well as the Common Core standards, that Georgia has adopted.

When asked about the biggest challenges in getting stakeholders to accept their virtual programs' quality and efficacy, Rowley replied, "Our stakeholders have bought into the use of online courses and content for different reasons. By the time students get to us, they have accepted the quality and efficacy of online learning and may have already experienced this themselves or viewed other students or parents involved in an online learning experience. Similarly, because of the explosion of online courses at work, many parents have already been involved in an online learning experience of their own. In some cases, they have chosen to expand their education through the taking of online courses. Their experience eliminates the concerns because they have mostly had positive experiences."

Rowley also noted that for teachers, online learning is now a regular part of their professional lives: "With the downturn in the economy, many districts have turned to online professional development, including those in Cobb County. Teachers are familiar and comfortable with online content and courses. There is an increased number of teachers, counselors, and administrators who take graduate-level courses online, and they see the value. The attitude is really beyond accepting. Educators may be encouraging students to take an online course because it is a necessary skill for post-high school. Students must be prepared for an online world as part of our career-ready and college-ready mission."

Research has shown that online learning is an effective practice to improve access and academic achievement.

### Virtual Education: Effective and In Demand

Questions about the efficacy of virtual education have been part of the movement's landscape from its earliest days. Now, with several years of research supporting the value of virtual education, it's valuable to revisit that data.

Research has shown that online learning is an effective practice to improve access and academic achievement. A 2009 study from the U.S. Department of Education found that, "On average, students in online learning conditions performed better than those receiving face-to-face instruction."<sup>4</sup>

Not only are virtual learning practices academically effective, but they are also highly desired by students. Students are making their voices heard, and clearly they have a growing interest in taking online courses. According to recent data from the Speak Up 2010 report, *Learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: 2010 Trends Update*, students want online learning and see it as a feature of their "ultimate" school. In fact, the number of middle and high school students who are taking online classes for school has grown significantly as Table 1 shows.<sup>5</sup>

Jed Friedrichsen, Chief Administrative Officer for blendedschools.net, an organization that serves multiple districts by offering 100 percent virtual courses and programs, added another important perspective: "Students are continuing to evolve, and they're

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning  
A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies



**Table 1: Growth in student participation in online classes**

	6 <sup>th</sup> - 8 <sup>th</sup> grade		9 <sup>th</sup> - 12 <sup>th</sup> grade	
	2009	2008	2009	2008
Took an online class for school	13%	9%	18%	10%
Took an online class for personal reasons	8%	7%	9%	4%

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increasingly savvy about defining and exploring learning opportunities. Many of today's students are 'free-agent' learners. They're more than digital natives now. They see the Internet and its resources as an open-source learning environment. They've discovered lifelong learning skills on their own, and they use these skills in all aspects of their lives, including school, home, and social interaction."<sup>6</sup> As Friedrichsen pointed out, student demand underscores the effectiveness of virtual education.

Friedrichsen noted that in his experience, today's online learners are more globally aware and more technology-connected. They are no longer the early adopters. They're mainstream learners who seek a broader spectrum of learning options and opportunities. Blendedschools.net has experienced growing enrollment and participation in the programs and courses it offers. As Friedrichsen pointed out, "Mainstream students are asking for online and virtual learning options, and school districts are more interested and accepting of blended learning. Just four years ago, we served three school districts that had more than 200 online students. Today we serve 42 districts with 1,000 or more online students and another 20 districts that have 500 students involved in our programs."

### Meeting Students' Needs: The blendedschools.net Perspective

In March 2009, blendedschools.net conducted a study of 124 of the districts that the organization serves. The survey asked districts what needs were being met by online learning:

Blended Learning	60%
Online Summer School	48%
Credit Recovery	46%
Addressing Students' Scheduling Conflicts	22%
Offering Courses That Can't Be Offered by Smaller Districts	72%
Advanced Placement and Gifted Programs	43%
Parents That Travel	14%
Homebound Students	38%
Serving Cyber Students (those who seldom or never come to school)	36%
Remediation	27%
Alternative Education	42%

## Standards Support Effective Virtual Education

Typically, once adoption starts to occur in any field, standards develop and evolve to establish, support, and advance best practices. In virtual education, standards have helped to reinforce credibility and assure quality. iNACOL and SREB have developed and published an extensive portfolio of standards, including:

- *National Standards of Quality for Online Courses*
- *Standards for Quality Online Teaching and Online Teaching Evaluation for State Virtual Schools*
- *National Standards for Quality Online Programs*

These standards help guide educators as they implement virtual education and other online learning programs. The standards continue to evolve as best practices are validated and refined.

## Success Stories: Quality Virtual Education Programs at Work

The IDEAL-NM program strives to reduce geographic and other barriers to educational opportunity.

IDEAL-NM provides eLearning services to preK-12 schools, higher education institutions, and government agencies throughout the state of New Mexico. This statewide program strives to reduce geographic and other barriers to educational opportunity while increasing the digital literacy skills youth and adult learners need to participate in a global economy. IDEAL-NM has had more than 2,000 middle and high school enrollments in 53 courses, and 31 state agencies who are currently participating in online training for state employees, with 13 higher education institutions offering online courses through IDEAL-NM's shared technology.

In a recent press release from IDEAL-NM, Dr. Veronica C. Garcia, New Mexico Secretary of Public Education, stated, "Students taking IDEAL-NM courses have greater than a 95 percent pass rate from credit recovery to advancement. It connects more students to highly qualified teachers, allows districts to expand curriculum, and allows all districts free access and use of state-developed curriculum and other technology tools. IDEAL-NM has the potential to greatly impact student success in New Mexico."<sup>7</sup>

New Mexico's Cabinet Secretary of Higher Education, Dr. Vi Florez stated, "IDEAL-NM exemplifies the positive outcomes of innovative and well-considered partnerships—specifically that of higher education and public education working hand in hand to help students succeed in college and career. Together, through initiatives such as IDEAL-NM, we will continue to increase educational attainment and expand professional development opportunities for New Mexicans."

## Helping Districts Meet Needs and Address Challenges

Judy Bauernschmidt, Director of Student Online Learning for the Jefferson County School District in Colorado, believes that successful virtual education programs are critical for districts that find themselves competing to keep their students, meet funding challenges, and use available resources effectively.

She explained, "I think that virtual education has turned the corner. Districts have recognized online learning as a viable option. In the not-too-distant past here in Colorado, there were no district-led virtual schools. Online learning was available mostly through charter schools, private schools, or for-profit entities that were really outside of mainstream education. Now that we have a district-led program, the Jeffco Virtual Academy, online education is becoming more mainstream and it's finding its way into the general education conversation. It's really for any student and it offers another option. It's a competitive situation. Districts were losing students and money due to not having online school options and they needed to have strategies to bring students back. We've found that parents are shopping around and they want a menu of items for their students. So districts need to compete and offer options to support the needs of their communities. Quality virtual education helps districts do just that. In Jeffco schools, it is all about student achievement."<sup>8</sup>

Jeffco's online program includes blended learning options and 100% virtual courses that are implemented throughout the high school level, through the district's online education department and Jeffco's Virtual Academy. According to Bauernschmidt, each high school decides whether to offer online learning and how their delivery models will work. Every high school offers some kind of credit recovery and typically that is a hybrid model, with students taking a course online with classroom teachers providing student support and acting as facilitators. Jeffco's Virtual Academy also offers full-time online credit recovery and currently serves 260 full-time credit recovery students. Jeffco currently has 7500 students district-wide engaged in at least one fully online or blended learning course.

Bauernschmidt said, "There is no typical student in our online program. We began the program to address needs from our individual school sites. It's more than just an option for students who need accelerated courses or students who could not come to school. We have mothers and mothers-to-be enrolled, professional athletes, students whose families are traveling for an extended length of time, and more and more students who simply gravitate toward online learning."

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Judy Bauernschmidt,  
Director of Student Online Learning  
for the Jefferson County School  
District, Colorado

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## A Closer Look at Students' Needs and Preferences

Bryan Setser, CEO of the North Carolina Virtual School, stated that the school has served “60,000+ students in the past two years.”<sup>9</sup> North Carolina Virtual offers:

- Credit recovery
- Advanced Placement courses
- Flexible scheduling to accommodate students' work requirements
- Opportunities for middle school students to earn high school credits
- Accelerated learning
- Courses not available in some high schools
- Courses for homebound students
- Courses to meet IEP/504 requirements

Setser noted that one of North Carolina Virtual School's core missions is to provide online courses to hard-to-reach areas of the state and to offer Highly Qualified Teachers (HQT) to areas of the state that could not attract those teachers.

Setser also stated that there were several drivers for the recent growth in virtual education saying, “We are experiencing enrollment increases. Our student population is growing at 75 percent per semester and students are taking more courses, with the new average being 1.75 courses per student. The economy is a factor. When you have cuts in face-to-face classes, so a school cannot offer five languages anymore, then we need a virtual solution. In addition, our competency is growing. As we have gotten better at delivering online learning, more students have signed on. I think longevity is playing a role as well. It just takes several years for everyone to ‘get it’, and we’ve been at this for some time now. School districts are seeking ways to maximize their schedules, and there is a global focus on increasing participation in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) courses.”

While the North Carolina example showcases virtual education's advantages in reaching geographically challenged students, the North Kansas City School District in Missouri provides its own virtual education program. The eCampus program serves students with different sets of challenges across four high schools with free and reduced numbers ranging from 16 to 48 percent. Marla Walker, eCampus Coordinator with North Kansas City Schools, explains, “We believe it's important to provide the real advantages of online learning to all our students – from those who are college-bound, to those needing to make up a credit, students with a learning disability or even those students homebound due to illness. The district's growing eCampus program currently offers 27 courses with more than 600 course enrollments during each of the fall, spring and summer semesters, giving students the opportunity to accumulate additional credits that free up their school day schedule or complete credits for graduation.”<sup>10</sup>

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“As we have gotten better at delivering online learning, more students have signed on.”

Bryan Sester,  
CEO of the North Carolina  
Virtual School

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Walker provided an interesting example of the flexibility and opportunity online learning can offer saying, “We offer a course called Career Internship, so students can explore career interests within area businesses while completing coursework online. Students learn job skills that help them plan for their futures.” Walker noted that the course has become very popular and provides important benefits to every student by leveraging their school and work experience. Additionally, Walker noted that the virtual education movement in Missouri benefits from a district’s ability to earn state funding for students taking a virtual course. In Missouri, districts can collect 94% of the course cost if students complete the course.

## The Future is Today

As the examples described here clearly show, virtual education is no longer “education of the future.” It’s a valuable contributor to today’s educational landscape. Blendedschools.net’s Jed Friedrichsen summed it all up powerfully, saying, “Virtual education has reached critical mass, and market acceptance is being driven by technology advances, the ability of districts and institutions to offer safe choices, and a growing body of research that validates virtual education’s ability to help students achieve essential learning objectives.”

Friedrichsen also noted that districts now see that virtual learning opportunities across the spectrum will help them compete more successfully for students, and will support their quest for leadership and quality. Additionally, online learning offers districts economic advantages, because in most cases it is cost competitive with more traditional face-to-face models. Most importantly, virtual education empowers districts to serve all learners and to differentiate learning paths based on student need.

The momentum is established and growing. The opportunities for starting new programs and growing existing ones are evolving in exciting new ways. Examples of innovation and program quality are plentiful. Virtual education is opening new doors to achievement and success for students, educators, and communities alike.

## Endnotes

1 *Keeping Pace 2009*

2 *Education Week, April 28, 2010, pg. S13*

3 *Interviews, May and October, 2010*

4 U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development, *Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies*, Washington, D.C., 2009

5 *Speak Up 2010 report, Learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: 2010 Trends Update*, 2010 Project Tomorrow.

6 Interview, May 2010

7 IDEAL-NM press release

8 Interview, May 2010

9 Interview, May 2010

10 Interview, May 2010

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“Virtual education has reached critical mass, and market acceptance is being driven by technology advances, the ability of districts and institutions to offer safe choices, and a growing body of research that validates virtual education’s ability to help students achieve essential learning objectives.”

Jed Friedrichsen of  
blendedschools.net, Pennsylvania

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Blackboard

#### **Worldwide Headquarters**

650 Massachusetts Ave, NW, 6<sup>th</sup> Fl.  
Washington, DC 20001  
+ 1.800.424.9299, ext. 2427  
+ 1.202.463.4860, ext. 2427

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