



Envisioning Virtual Learning in New York State: The Consortium Model

SUMMARY

Two longtime advocates of educational technology say there is no reason to fear virtual learning — if it's done right.

Unkempt, bleary-eyed teens in their pajamas sitting alone before a computer, cheating on their homework while playing mindless video games. Teachers on roadsides holding “will teach for food” signs after being replaced by online content providers who have automated the teaching process through computerized examinations. These are two images that come to mind for many of us when we hear “virtual learning.” The gut reaction is resistance and skepticism.

But as educators who are passionate advocates of educational technology (Sherman) and have taught online courses for over a decade (Eaton), we

embrace the opportunity to explore the development and implementation of a state-sponsored virtual high school (VHS). Indeed, fighting virtual learning doesn't make sense. The latest New York State Education Department (NYSED) technology plan, approved by the Board of Regents in November 2009, includes an initiative to establish a state virtual high school. Further, the state's successful Race to the Top (RTTT) application references creating a VHS for all students who want to participate in school anytime, anywhere, with a goal to reach up to 20,000 students by 2014 (“New York State,” 2010). The creation of a state VHS is very real — and has the potential to transform our schools.

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What is Virtual Learning?

The term *virtual high school* often conjures up some nebulous space on the Internet where students can get their diploma entirely online. That's not the kind of education we support; instead, we support a statewide virtual learning network of existing institutions that supplements, not supplants, what's currently happening in our schools — a virtual consortium that offers core and elective courses of the highest standards.

Virtual learning refers to “technology-mediated teaching and learning that occurs when teachers and students are not in the same place” (*AFT Higher Education*, 2003, p. A-1), with most work happening asynchronously online. The term *virtual high school* generally refers to any organization offering secondary education courses or curricula in the form of online or hybrid classes. State VHSs are defined by the Education Commission of the States (Bush, 2008, para 1) as “state-led schools created by state legislatures or state-level departmental agencies” and typically administered by a state’s education department.

Most state VHSs are available only to in-state students enrolled in public schools and are supplemental; that is, they augment existing course offerings and do not grant diplomas (exceptions include Arizona and North Dakota). Teachers in almost all VHSs must hold the same credentials as public school teachers. Some state VHS programs cap the number of credits students can take online, but while they may not restrict student participation, many districts use the VHS only for making up course credit (i.e., “credit recovery”—an option for a student who fails a high school course[s]), for electives, or to reach certain student populations such as Advanced Placement (AP) or suspended students. A state VHS is distinct from online charter schools/cyberschools, which more commonly enroll students full time, are run by private for-profit companies, may not be accredited, and rely on parents to serve as “in-home instructors.” A state VHS is also distinct from dual credit or other programs in which high school students take online courses for college credit.

We prefer the term *virtual learning* to *virtual high school*, as we are primarily

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focused on ensuring students have access to quality virtual learning opportunities. When New York does develop a state VHS, it should be just one component of our current public schools to expand learning opportunities and offer resources to encourage access and increase student retention.

Why Embrace Virtual Learning?

While we believe that virtual learning has transformative potential and offers academically sound possibilities for enhancing traditional instruction, we are well aware of its critics. Educators fear it might result in loss of educational rigor or social interaction for students, or loss of jobs. Admittedly, research is ongoing as to the effectiveness of virtual learning (Cavanaugh, Gillan, Kromrey & Blomeyer, 2004; “Evaluation,” 2010; “Meta-analyses,” n.d.), and a recent *New York Teacher* poll (“We asked/you said,” 2010, para. 3) showed 72% of respondents opposed to a state VHS because “online courses are not as effective as face-to-face classroom learning; students need genuine personal interaction to learn.”

As noted in “Virtually Successful: Defeating the Dropout Problem through Online School Programs” (Roblyer, 2006. p. 35), critics also point to high dropout rates and practices they find unacceptable such as

Florida Virtual School reading teachers’ e-mails “to judge the tone of communication between teachers and students,” or Idaho Digital Learning Academy’s practice of paying teachers for each student who completes the course (p. 35). Others fear that a state VHS might be structured as an online charter school (see NYSSBA, 2009), competing with regular public schools for students (Bleyaert, 2009).

Currently, only 180 of more than 4,500 U.S. charter schools are online charter schools (Center for Education Reform, 2009).

Given the promises and potential pitfalls of a state VHS, we believe that virtual learning should be shaped locally and that educators, students, and parents must be integrally involved in all decisions. This is why, consistent with good collaborative labor practices, it is imperative that the planning for such a project include, where appropriate, the collective bargaining process. Most importantly, we believe that the motivation for participating in virtual learning should be improving access to coursework based on high standards of educational quality.

Virtual learning helps to ensure high educational quality because it encourages pedagogical and technological advancement in our schools as teachers use the variety of modalities and emerging technologies to keep students engaged. Virtual learning, by its

very structure, requires more active and participatory learning. It also recognizes that learning can be less effectively measured by “seat time” than by successful development of skills and comprehension of content.

Virtual learning also has the potential to improve access to a wide range of learning opportunities. It gives students more choices for how to learn since it operates on multiple modes of instruction — text, video, audio — and gives students access to learning opportunities that might otherwise be unavailable (e.g., students can take classes online that aren’t offered in their district; suspended students can take classes online). Virtual learning can also accommodate students across a range of physical and learning characteristics in a way that encourages equity with peers.

Thus, if virtual learning is integrated effectively into our schools to enhance our current class models, greater strides may be made toward closing the achievement gap, reducing student attrition, and improving graduation rates.

National and State Perspectives

Virtual high schools are nothing new. One of the first secondary virtual schools, Virtual High School, Inc., was opened in fall 1997 by the

Hudson, MA, Public School System and the Concord Consortium. Florida Virtual School, the country’s first statewide online public high school, and Utah’s Electronic High School were established in the mid-1990s. “Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning: A Review of State-Level Policy and Practice, 2009” reported that state virtual schools existed in 27 states, and 45 of 50 states had a state virtual school or online initiative, full-time online schools, or both (2009).

While New York currently has no state-administered VHS, individual schools have participated in virtual learning for years via videoconferencing, typically in conjunction with their local BOCES. A good number have already ventured into online learning. As of August 2010, for example, Virtual High School, Inc., listed 43 participating New York schools (“Participating schools,” n.d.).

In January 2010, however, the Regents Statewide Learning Technology Plan (Steiner, 2010) indicated that the University of the State of New York (USNY) “will provide learning technologies that change how students learn, what they learn, and why they learn” (Attachment A, para. 3) and that “multiple environments will exist for teaching and learning, unbound by place, time, income, language, or disability”

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(Attachment A, para. 5). Further, “students will access learning resources anywhere, anytime through the use of technology” as “the classroom...will be a workspace for teachers and learners but will not always be a physical space” (Attachment A, para. 5). For more than a decade, educators throughout the state have discussed virtual learning, and many educators believe that, rather than adopt the model of other states, New York should forge its own path.

Utilizing the Expertise of New York State Teachers: Creating A Virtual Consortium

Below we outline our vision for a virtual consortium model, which would work best given the complexity of the many educational agencies that fall under the purview of the University of the State of New York (USNY).

This model should operate on a reciprocal sharing of resources among individual educational institutions that maintain local autonomy in choosing if and how to participate in the network — consistent with Section 100.11 of the Regulations of the Commissioner of Education (participation of parents and teachers in school-based planning and decision-making) (“100.11 Participation,” n.d.). In addition, this virtual consortium would

enable equitable access of participating districts, consistent pedagogy and teacher quality, alignment to state standards, and flexibility as it brings together individual institutions under one centralized authority while harnessing the state’s collective power.

Perhaps most importantly, the virtual consortium could be financially sustainable because it capitalizes on the resources that already exist in New York state. Here are some possibilities:

- Participating districts could identify a teacher who has volunteered for professional development to develop and teach an online course as part of her or his contractual load.
- Professional development could be provided by a regional NYS Teacher Center. Individual teachers in participating districts would develop the course according to state-aligned standards and then receive training, perhaps online, on the pedagogy of virtual learning as well as the software system being used. Costs for districts would be shared using a BOCES Cooperative Services (CoSer) agreement (“BOCES of New York State,” 2010).

- Local BOCES could serve as the consortium administrator, with school districts deciding locally whether to join. BOCES would provide the hardware and software for online course implementation, and make a catalog of available virtual consortium courses.
- Participating districts could also identify a teacher to serve as a virtual consortium facilitator to assist virtual learning students within each school.
- Each district could determine the parameters of student involvement (e.g., whether to use consortium courses only for credit recovery or AP classes). Again, for a district's students to participate in these online courses, the district must commit to having one of their own teachers offer a virtual consortium course; this is a reciprocal agreement.

Consider a hypothetical example: Auburn High School offers an elective course on the geology of the Finger Lakes but sees a decline in student participation. The district could opt to train a teacher to offer the course via the virtual consortium so it would be available, with a maximum enrollment of 20, for any participating district including the students at Auburn. Also, say that Plattsburgh High School

offers a course in Farsi. If facing similar declining enrollment, the Farsi teacher could voluntarily train to offer the course online, which would preserve the Farsi course at Plattsburgh just as it preserved Finger Lakes geology at Auburn — and at the same time both courses are now available to students in other participating districts. This scenario could be replicated throughout the state, with a wide variety of core and elective courses offered to students.

This virtual consortium model is similar to that of programs like Virtual High School, Inc., but with two notable differences: quality control and cost control. For example, Virtual High School Inc. matches teachers and students across state and international lines. While there are merits to this practice, New York could maintain greater quality control by employing New York State certified educators to teach to the New York State Learning Standards.

Second, there could be considerable cost savings under this model. New York could leverage its resources (i.e., BOCES, teacher centers) to significantly lower costs, making it a more compelling option. This model would allow New York to avoid being at the mercy of an organization that can unexpectedly raise prices, affording greater cost control to our state.

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We should envision a reciprocal network of teachers and students across the state who work together to provide and receive virtual learning in this win-win-win plan. Students win with more course options and learning opportunities, teachers win by sharing their knowledge more widely, and districts win as they maintain high standards in a financially sustainable model that requires no special state legislation. All good reasons to consider this model!

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