

Online Schools: The Future of Education?

Virtual classrooms are still outnumbered by brick-and-mortar schools, but they are gaining popularity. A glimpse of the future

By Laura Fording

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March 30 - Ask Virtual High School CEO Liz Pape what she thinks her organization has to offer high school students and she'll tell you in no uncertain terms: great content, curriculum not available in kids' regular schools, a chance to interact with people around the world, a 24/7 learning experience, an environment that tends to include, rather than exclude kids. Pape's cyber school, a non-profit entity, primarily works with educators in traditional high schools to provide a wider variety of courses for their students. Since 1997, enrollment has mushroomed, from 710 students in 11 states to more than 5,000 students in 26 states and 10 countries. Pape's forecast for next year: 7,500 enrollees.

While critics may find Pape's glowing assessment of online education for the under-18 crowd flawed—isolation and too much spent time in front of a computer are common complaints—schools like Pape's, which focus on varying aspects of a K-12 education, continue to pop up across the country. Today there are roughly 2,400 publicly-funded cyber-based charter schools and state and district virtual schools in 37 states, with an estimated 40,000 to 50,000 students participating in online courses, says Susan Patrick, Director of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Technology. While those numbers may seem small, they are expected to grow. Some kids are opting to leave traditional schools and get their entire education online from home. Others remain in school but use virtual classrooms to take courses not offered in their own schools. Some web sites focus purely on tutoring services.

NEWSWEEK's Laura Fording spoke with Patrick, whose department addresses the use of technology in education, about the growing enrollment of kids in virtual schools.

Excerpts:

NEWSWEEK: Virtual and online education seem to be gaining popularity among students from kindergarten through high school.

Susan Patrick: We are seeing this not just in a few states but nationwide... From a federal standpoint, virtual schools and distance learning is one of the top technology issues we are focused on... This year we funded a study to look at K-12 distance learning and the use of virtual classes in the curriculum. Those results should come out around July.

What types of students participate in these classes?

There is a misconception sometimes that online education is being only offered to the highest achieving students because they may have access to the Internet. We're finding that other students, the ones who have trouble in classroom settings, the ones you think wouldn't do well with distance learning, it tends to reach them well too, because of the

one-on-one interaction. There are many different structures and lots of different ways virtual education works.

Can you describe how a virtual classroom might work for a student in a public high school?

An example might be a student who is in a rural Nebraska public high school who wants to take an AP Calculus class. The community doesn't have a teacher who is qualified to teach the class. That student might be able to take an online class through the Florida Virtual School, for example. In fact, that particular class might be taught by a teacher in another state, such as Pennsylvania, who is qualified.

Isn't the Florida Virtual School intended for students from the state of Florida?

They were finding that students from across the country were taking courses from Florida Virtual School. They are funded through Florida, but there are different funding models. The model they have set up allows for students outside of Florida to participate [the school is free for Florida residents; non-residents pay tuition].

Does virtual education work differently for younger children in the school setting?

For elementary school kids I've seen several different models. One example is having an entire online curriculum available in a computer lab or in a classroom. A teacher working with the students is able to assess where those students are [in terms of the curriculum]. They might see that some of the students are performing well and some of the students are a little behind. In a traditional classroom, there is no way, in the time that the teacher has, for personalizing instruction for each of these students. But by using this technology the teacher can split students up, even in the first grade, and have them work through the curriculum based on their achievement level so they can progress at their own rate.

Do students typically take entire classes online?

Dr. Robert Ballard, who discovered the [wreck of the] Titanic, founded the JASON project, which uses distance learning to go on expeditions. The students across the country who are involved in the JASON project sign on and participate. But it's a supplementary piece to the standard curriculum they are doing in their classrooms with a teacher.

What would you say are some of the biggest benefits to virtual learning?

One is that you can live in an urban area or in the most isolated area of the United States and you can have access to a teacher who has been trained in the best schools and has the best degrees and who is just a terrific teacher. That was impossible before. Second, learning can be personalized, because the technology allows teachers to assess where students are in their learning... [With] discussion groups, technology allows both teachers and students to see and interact with all the different comments. Students are engaged in e-mail and instant messaging all of the time so it's a natural medium for them to have a discussion and to have a free flow of ideas. So I think you hear more students speak up, it's a natural environment for them to communicate.

Isn't there a fear that kids will become more isolated with this type of learning?

If you live in a rural community and you only have a few people around you, if your school is that small anyway, then you are going to be less isolated because you have access to students from around the country. If you are in an area where you have lots of

other students around you and you are the only person taking an [online] class, I don't know if that's socially any different than being in a school or classroom, you are just doing a different curriculum. There are homebound students who take virtual classes and I think they are given more opportunities to socialize just by communicating online... Teachers have said that their communication with students actually increases. When students are taking a virtual class they might have 15 interactions with their teacher a day using e-mail.

I think the concern is especially with troubled kids, the kids who are already feeling alienated. What happens when they spend even more time online?

I think the kids that are already feeling alienated are always going to be the kids we have to watch out for, whether they are online or not. [Although] I'm not trying to paint too rosy a picture, that this works for everybody all of the time...

It seems like online classes would encourage kids to be even less active than they already are, also a major concern these days.

I think we are all concerned with the trends in both students and adults becoming less active. But if you think of the general activity that takes place in a language arts class or a math class... if you compare how students go through any curriculum using books, they are not very active doing that.

What do you see as some of the disadvantages to online learning at this point?

One of the disadvantages is that not all students have access to the technology at home and in the schools.

Can you give some examples of programs that are working well?

We are seeing the use of virtual learning for tutoring and supplemental courses working very well in many states in the public schools. We are seeing virtual schools work really well for rural areas. We are seeing students get excited about expanded opportunities—not only in their high school work, but in preparing for their future.

What are the signs of a bad virtual school program?

I think that we should measure quality of virtual learning the same way we measure quality in a traditional classroom. That is, good teaching, good resources, good curriculum. Those are the foundations for quality teaching and learning. As we move forward and this becomes more ubiquitous, we have to make sure that we are putting the same quality control measures in the online environment as we do in traditional classroom.

Do you think non-profits do a better job than for-profit companies in providing these educational services?

I think whether an organization offering virtual education is a non-profit, a for-profit entity or a traditional classroom, it needs to be subjected to the same rigorous quality assurance measures across the board. It's a matter of whether they meet the standards, who they are bringing in to be quality teachers, who is pulling the curriculum together, what the curriculum is, and ultimately how the students are learning.

How do you see virtual education working with our current educational system?

Everything in K-12 education is locally based. So when you start talking about distance learning, some of these policy barriers can be walls. If you are student, for instance,

who do you talk to about taking a course online? Your guidance counselor? Your principal? When you think about all of the possibilities, all of the different opportunities now available, you really start looking at fundamentally reengineering education through virtual learning.

Sounds like it will take some time to flesh it all out.

Yes. We are trying to look at how we can use technology to transform education rather than just automating the old ways of learning, the ways we've always done it... Public education is being drawn to virtual education because it's offering so many more opportunities—language classes, math classes, science classes, things that schools have struggled to find teachers for, or resources for. We don't want to focus on distance education in and of itself, because there are so many models and ways of doing it. Instead we want to focus on the role of education.

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