

Education Options

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If you can shop, make appointments or register your car via the Internet from the convenience of your home -- or from halfway around the world, for that matter -- why can't you get your education in the same manner? These days, many students can.

Not only are continuing education and college students completing courses at times and places convenient for them, but in recent years, more and more high-school, middle-school and even grade-school students do so as well.

At least 15 states have distance education programs for public school students, according to the U.S. Department of Education's 2004 report, *Toward a New Golden Age in American Education -- How the Internet, the Law and Today's Students Are Revolutionizing Expectations*. A deluge of regional and districtwide programs exist as well, and new programs are cropping up all the time.

Within the next decade, the report predicted, every state and most schools will offer some form of virtual schooling. Virtual schools offer students and their families scheduling flexibility, course options, varied learning formats and experience that will benefit them beyond their schooling. Each program, however, is not for everybody, and a wide variety of virtual schools have emerged to cater to the varying needs of both students and the educational systems in which they learn. Though this next evolution in education shows no sign of slowing, some kinks must be worked out -- such as questions about funding and oversight in a school system that no longer fits within previously delineated geographic boundaries.

"It's relatively new even at this point," said David Griffith, spokesman for the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE), comparing virtual schools -- in existence for only about 10 years -- to charter schools. "Even [with] charter schools, there's a physical location, and the geographic area where students -- the attendance -- would be pulled from is somehow limited and finite. With virtual schools, that's not the case. "You could have students living in one part of the state attending a virtual school in another," he continued. "And one of the things we've seen is it's a question of who pays, and determining which is the student's location for the purposes of making funding calculations and that sort of thing."

In many cases, this situation has created friction among virtual and traditional schools, as per-pupil funds are drawn away from traditional schools along with students choosing to attend a virtual or charter school. In Ohio, many public school entities have begun offering online courses to compete with charter schools.

Virtual schools have also raised questions about oversight, said Griffith. "If it's removed from the local community, then who is able to guarantee the services are being

delivered and students are making the educational progress they should? The local district? The virtual school on the other side of the state? The local district in which the school is being operated? Is it the state, because it does cross district boundaries? These are all issues as we move forward that are going to have to be figured out."

Virtual Learning Put to Use

For years, Florida has used virtual schools to offer students and families more options. The state has several statewide programs -- including two full-time K-8 pilots aimed at reducing class sizes and the Florida Virtual School (FLVS), a supplemental program that caters to middle- and high-school students. Florida's Legislature has taken virtual schooling in hand and created mechanisms to fund its three statewide programs, as well as a handful of district-level programs.

"What we're providing for students is really a choice of how they receive their education," said Bruce Friend, chief administrative officer for the FLVS. "The traditional classroom environment model is not the best learning environment for every student. That doesn't mean the online learning environment is the best model for every student, but I think we've been able to complement what students can get at their traditional schools with providing the option of online courses."

The school does not grant diplomas, and for the most part, students take courses from the school on a supplemental basis. Students must arrange through their own school counselors to take courses for credit.

Friend said the school allows students in rural districts to take courses not normally available to them, and accommodates scheduling needs for students and their families. "What we're really providing is just another option for students to earn credits they need toward high-school graduation."

As one of the most established virtual schools in the nation, the FLVS serves as a model for other programs both within the state and without. The school started with a "Break the Mold" funding grant in 1997 as a pilot project between two Florida counties, which offered a minimal number of classes to a limited number of students. The state Department of Education continued funding the school as a line item until 2003, when the FLVS was deemed a public school district and the Legislature began funding the school on a variation of full-time equivalent (FTE) funding.

In Florida, each school district receives a certain amount of funds, which varies by district, for each student enrolled full time. The virtual school, however, isn't funded exactly the same as a regular school district -- it receives funds based on course completions rather than on simple head count. Since most FLVS students don't take all of their classes through the program, the school's FTE funds are based on aggregate course completions (i.e., how many courses completed by various students add up to one FTE). The school does not charge fees to students who are Florida residents.

Attendance has grown exponentially since the program began -- Friend said he anticipated at least 28,000 course enrollments for the 2004-2005 school year. Even as the school expands, it continues to have waiting lists for certain courses.

The FLVS devised a way to partner with state school districts to keep up with in-state

demand. Where demand is high in certain districts, the FLVS will set those districts up with their own programs if the districts so choose, allowing them to run their own virtual school with local staff based on the FLVS curriculum and practices. The FLVS provides training and oversight to the franchises.

The arrangement helps local districts ensure that their kids can enroll in courses and allows the districts to keep the FTE funds in their district. The arrangement also benefits the FLVS, Friend said. "It just provides more opportunity for us to serve more students because now we know we have sort of a franchise that can offload some of the demand we ordinarily would have received."

Broward County was the first of seven Florida districts to establish a franchise. MaryAnn Butler-Pearson, Broward Education Communications Network director of distance learning for Broward County Public Schools, said the district approached the FLVS with the idea because the district had so many students on waiting lists for courses. "In Broward County, one very important goal is to make sure all of our students have equitable access to quality learning, so when some students were able to get in and others weren't, it caused an inequity."

Equal access is one reason an urban school district needs such a program, said Butler-Pearson, adding that people are often surprised an urban district like Broward would need a virtual school. "Our students need it just as much as suburban or rural students," she said, "just for different reasons."

Reducing class size is one area in which the school, Broward Virtual Education (BVEd) has helped the district, she said. "If a class had just two or three too many students, they wouldn't be able to afford to hire a teacher and split the class in half."

Now students can opt to take classes online. The school also expands offerings available to students in smaller schools with limited courses, she said. "The students they're teaching are learning the skills and attitudes they're going to need for this type of success in the workplace, as well as in higher education." One district school requires that students take at least one class online. While competition for funding has in some cases created a contentious relationship between districts and remote virtual schools, Butler-Pearson said students can take courses from either virtual school, and that the relationship between the FLVS and the Broward County franchise is a good one.

"They really nurture the franchises, and they go out of their way to make sure we have everything we need," she said. "It's not a competitive relationship at all because they have so many students."

She said having a model to follow made it a lot easier for the district to get the school up and running. "Not only did we use the coursework, but they also trained all of our teachers initially in both the pedagogy, the philosophy, as well as the course content." Though franchising can be beneficial for districts with a large demand for online classes, Friend said franchising isn't always a good option.

"Franchising is really meant for districts that want to have a large online initiative, and maybe even larger than what we ourselves can provide to them," he said. "A district that's not going to serve many students online would frankly be better off just having the

students come to us because there's a threshold of how many credits they need to get before they break even on the franchising cost."

He said districts that choose to franchise must spend at least \$20,000 upfront for franchising costs. "But then they're going to have to put people behind it." He said the FLVS recommends that districts have one full-time staff member oversee the initiative, and then the district must supply teachers as well. And Butler-Pearson said there are ongoing costs associated with the franchise.

The in-state franchising fees, however, are not profit-making initiatives for the FLVS. "It's really a cost recovery for us," said Friend. "It's not something that we generate revenue from in our own state. It's really meant to cover the cost of setting them up and providing oversight."

Broward County Public Schools started the franchise in September 2001 with school board funding, and schools paid for students who took courses through the school until 2003, when the Legislature allowed FTE-type funding for the franchises and the FLVS, Butler-Pearson said.

There are some benefits a local program can offer that a statewide program can't. Unlike the FLVS, BVEd can issue diplomas to its own students -- some of the tracking requirements for graduation would be too unruly for a statewide program, Butler-Pearson said.

"For example, it's one of the state requirements that the students do 50 hours of community service, and we have to document that just like the traditional high schools do. That would be a lot of record-keeping for Florida Virtual because their student population is huge," she said. "I think it's because we're local that we have a little bit more of a handle on it."

The FLVS also sells its curriculum and training to other states or jurisdictions, and offers courses to out-of-state students for a fee. Profits, by law, must go back into course development and otherwise improving the FLVS, and the school's out-of-state efforts earned approximately \$1.5 million in the 2003-2004 school year, Friend said.

The FLVS partnered with Stetson University to provide courses to out-of-state students. Stetson runs the program, but the courses and practices are the same as those at the FLVS. "It's basically a mirror of our program," said Friend, adding that keeping up with demand in the state was behind the decision to work with Stetson. "We want to serve as many Florida students as we possibly can so there's not that conflict of interest of, 'Why would you have a Florida teacher teaching to Georgia if you still have Florida kids wanting to get in the courses?'"

Teaching Youngsters

In addition to the FLVS, Florida is now piloting two K-8 virtual school programs. The state contracted with private companies -- K12 and Connections Academy -- for both schools. Unlike the FLVS, the K-8 initiatives are full-time programs, and though courses are taught by certified teachers, the classes rely heavily on parental guidance.

Some question the reliance on parents, who often lack the experience necessary to teach children. But K12's senior public relations manager, Jeff Kwitowski, said parental involvement is an added benefit for any age group -- especially youngsters. "Obviously a child who is 6, 7, 8 years old is going to need more oversight with the parent."

He said traditional schoolteachers are often overwhelmed with classes that are too big, and schools try to bring in other adults who can provide more individual attention. This environment, he said, allows parents to provide that attention.

That, we believe, is the incentive for a lot of parents who want to be very involved in their child's education, but it's also to the benefit of the child because it gives even one more adult along with the certified teacher."

NASBE's Griffith questioned whether elementary school students are mature enough to take full advantage of virtual schooling. "It does take a certain level of sophistication to get all the benefits out of a virtual education," he said. "It's also an efficiency thing -- being able to operate the computer, being able to keep work, typing speed, that sort of thing."

Lisa Gillis, operations administrator for the California Virtual Academies (CAVA), a network of six K12 programs in California, said the "virtual" is a little misleading.

"Kids only spend about 20 to 30 percent of their time online. The rest of it is project-based instruction," she said, adding that everything -- including the computer, Internet connection, the seeds used in science experiments and the clay used for modeling -- is sent to the home so parents have the guidance and support they need to lead the lessons.

The educational structure and guidance provided by virtual schooling has raised another issue as the programs have become popular with previously homeschooled students, bringing formerly unfunded students back into the public education system. To quell the demand on their budgets, some states have created requirements that only students who previously attended public schools can take advantage of public virtual schools.

Though acknowledging there are costs involved, Griffith said homeschooled students should be allowed to take courses in any public school. "To the extent you're bringing homeschool students back into the system, that's a good thing," he said. "I think that's an encouraging sign that the system is offering all kinds of families the options they desire."

Another issue that's been raised as students from traditional schools opt to go online is that of socialization. Griffith noted that students who choose virtual schooling must find other ways to socialize with kids in their age group.

"I don't think you can overlook the intangibles that the traditional schools have now -- the school spirit, athletic opportunities, extracurricular activities and benefits students get from gathering with their peers in a nonacademic setting but still within the school," he said, noting that this concept is especially important for youngsters, and that extracurricular activities can be supplemented in other ways.

Gillis said in the K12 programs, teachers organize monthly outings for their students (each class is grouped by local area), but any CAVA student can go on the outings.

In contrast to Florida, where the Legislature has driven statewide initiatives, California virtual schools are governed by the state's charter school laws, which require that schools have a local educational agency (LEA) sponsor the program. Any virtual school in California, by law, can only enroll students from the county in which it operates, or from contiguous counties.

Though CAVA does not operate in all counties, Gillis said the network of schools affords students some of the benefits a statewide program offers, such as going on CAVA outings that have been organized in another part of the state, and enjoying uninterrupted schooling if a student moves to another CAVA county.

Other California counties and districts have implemented their own programs, including some that serve high-school students and some run by the LEAs themselves, as opposed to a private entity.

Of the many ways to deliver online education, the best approach is still up in the air, said Griffith. "It's still in its infancy," he said. "States are trying to wrestle with this. We'll see what works and what doesn't. Hopefully each of those models will take the best aspect from each other and learn from each other's mistakes as well."

Griffith said states not only need to settle the issues currently brought by the expanding educational boundaries, but they must plan for future possibilities as well. NASBE's Public Policy Positions urge states to form relationships with one another to further the possibilities afforded by online education, and Griffith said it's only a matter of time until states will need to consider such possibilities.

"The Internet is bringing states and countries closer together, making these geographic artificial boundaries obsolete."

Online schools are an indicator of education's path for the future, a logical next step in a society where, thanks to the Internet and technology, we expect more conveniences, he said.

"It's no longer, the store [closes] at 5:00, and you have to fit to the store's hours, not have the store fit to your hours," said Griffith, adding that virtual schooling has brought about a more individualized way of learning. "Much more student-centered, based on students' time, learning ability and that sort of thing, as opposed to being more of a one-size-fits-all model we've got now."

"In the long run," he continued, "it's a pretty radical change from the way schools have been operating in this country for 150 years."

And with such a radical change, he said, there is some level of tolerance for the growing pains states and schools must endure to get the programs running smoothly.

"You certainly don't want to impede people from trying different things, experimenting or

pioneering, but at the same time, it's maturing, evolving and developing in some areas," he said. "You need to make sure that if it's going to be offered and students are taking advantage of it, that you get back to making sure it's equitable, it's working for students, they're getting something out of it, and it's available to as many as possible."