

**Study: Virtual-school enrollment explodes
NACOL symposium states the case for online learning**

By Corey Murray, Senior Editor, eSchool News
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Enrollment in K-12 online courses in the United states has exploded in the past year, increasing by as much as 50 percent in some states, according to a new report from the North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL).

Called "Keeping Pace With K-12 Online Learning: A Review of State-Level Policy and Practice," the massive, 131-page document examines state-led online learning programs underway in 24 states and considers the policies, funding models, training programs, and other factors necessary to establish effective online learning environments.

According to the report, 38 states now feature either state-led online learning programs, policies regulating online education, or both. At the Florida Virtual School, the nation's first statewide public online high school, enrollment reportedly spiked by more than 50 percent compared with the last school year. The statewide Idaho Digital Academy reported similar growth, while the Louisiana Virtual School program grew by 18 percent and the international Virtual High School program, which now has virtual-school programs in 30 states and 25 countries, grew by 24 percent, the report said.

With such tremendous growth have come a host of challenges, researchers say. Where educators and students are drawn to the new opportunities created by online courses, the policies put in place to govern traditional brick-and-mortar learning environments often don't address the special needs and challenges associated with learning and teaching in a virtual context.

As part of the report, researchers examined the different models currently used to fund and sustain statewide online learning programs, and they examined other issues facing virtual schools, such as how to conduct teacher professional development, establish program accountability, meet standards for student achievement, and use the web as a means of enhancing traditional learning environments.

A PDF of the full report is available on NACOL's web site.

NACOL released the report at its annual Virtual School Symposium, held Nov. 5-7 in Plano, Texas. The event--which preceded the opening of the National School Boards Association's annual Technology & Learning conference Nov. 8 in downtown Dallas--

was conceived as a forum to discuss the many ways virtual schooling can be incorporated to enhance traditional learning environments.

"Online learning is opening access and opportunity for all students by providing high-quality courses and highly qualified teachers over the internet--regardless of their neighborhood or geography," said NACOL President Susan Patrick. Patrick is the former director of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Technology, where in 2005 she was instrumental in publishing the current National Educational Technology Plan.

The "Keeping Pace" report was just one of many developments to come out of this year's symposium.

Realizing that U.S. schools aren't the only institutions making headway with virtual schooling, NACOL also has released the results of an international survey, examining how other countries are using the internet to boost student achievement.

The survey, which seeks to establish a dialogue between the United States and other countries about how to improve the quality of virtual instruction, provides snapshots from 30 different countries, including Australia, China, the United Kingdom, Japan, Singapore, Nepal, and more.

The survey asked education officials from participating countries to answer questions on a variety of topics, including current online initiatives, funding, student population, content development, quality control, professional development, and current trends and obstacles.

The report, available free of charge on NACOL's web site, includes summaries of each country's returned questionnaire.

In addition, in partnership with NACOL, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21)--a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group focused on better preparing students for the challenges of the new global economy--has released a document examining the role virtual learning can play in better preparing students for an increasingly competitive, technology-laden workforce.

Though virtual learning shows promise in expanding the options available to students and thereby improving U.S. education, the real challenge for schools is ensuring that online lessons incorporate the skills demanded by employers in the modern workforce, the P21 report says.

Where subject mastery in such basic areas as math and reading is important, researchers contend, students also must work to develop higher-level critical thinking and advanced reasoning skills. Unfortunately, they say, U.S. schools have no system in place to develop these attributes fully--at least, not yet.

"Skills like creativity, problem-solving, communication, and analytical thinking are necessary for all levels of success, from entry-level jobs to engineering and technical fields," researchers wrote. "However, the U.S. K-12 education system as a whole does not yet teach and measure these skills directly."

Where eLearning already is being used in the workplace to conduct staff training and offer continuing education, it also could be used in K-12 schools to better prepare students for the challenges and realities that await them after graduation, advocates say.

"The virtual school provides access to online, collaborative, self-paced learning environments--settings that can facilitate 21st-century skills," the report said. "Today's students must be able to combine these skills with the effective use of technology to succeed in current and future jobs."

Still other developments to come out of the symposium are a new report about funding for virtual schools by the BellSouth Foundation and new "Guide to Quality Online Teaching."

Authored in conjunction with the National Education Association, the guide makes several recommendations for schools looking to launch new virtual-school programs or improve the quality of existing programs, NACOL says. Among its many recommendations, the guide suggests offering reciprocity for virtual educators hired to teach across state lines.

This isn't the first time an educational organization has attempted to develop standards for improving virtual-school instruction. Earlier this year, the Southern Regional Education Board released its "Essential Principles of High-Quality Online Teaching," a checklist of sorts for schools to follow in hiring and training effective online educators.

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