

EDUCATION WEEK

States Urged to Adapt Rules To Keep Pace With Growth In Online-Learning Options .

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8 November 2006

States should expand precollegiate online learning by allowing teachers to teach across state lines and removing student seat-time requirements, says a report that tracks the fast growth of state virtual-learning programs.

More states could add online programs if policies meant for traditional schools could be amended to take into account the "anytime, anywhere" aspects of online learning, say the authors of "Keeping Pace," slated for release this week at the Virtual School Symposium in Plano, Texas. The symposium is an annual conference sponsored by the Vienna, Va.-based North American Council for Online Learning, or NACOL, a nonprofit advocacy and research organization.

"Online course delivery across state and national borders highlights how 20th-century funding and policy models can hinder 21st-century models of teaching and learning," says the report by John F. Watson, the founder of Evergreen Consulting Associates, an educational technology and environmental consulting firm based in Evergreen, Colo.

Education funding, for instance, relies in part on how many students actually sit in school classrooms, said Susan Patrick, the president and chief executive officer of NACOL. The group is one of the report's funders, which include state virtual schools, state education departments, school districts, and the Atlanta-based BellSouth Foundation.

The prevailing finance model doesn't work for virtual schools, Ms. Patrick said.

"We have a funding system based on seat time. You have to ask, "Does this make sense?" "Ms. Patrick said. "There's nothing about how much learning is taking place or whether a student is being challenged intellectually."

States are slowly recognizing that disconnect, the report says, and several, such as Georgia and Missouri, may move to a method like the one used to fund the Florida Virtual School, which is not based on seat time.

The nation's largest online program, with 31,000 students, the Florida Virtual School receives per-pupil funding under a system linked to student course completion. Students can complete the courses at their own pace.

Two other reports on virtual school funding and teaching were scheduled to be released this week at the Virtual School Symposium. BellSouth was to present a report detailing the start-up and operational costs of state virtual schools, and the Washington-based

National Education Association was to issue a comprehensive report on high-quality online teaching and courses.

Varied Governance

Besides policy recommendations, the "Keeping Pace" report discusses such issues as online professional development for teachers, the emerging trend of schools blending Web-based instruction in brick-and-mortar classrooms, and the diverse governance models being used to run the 24 state-level online programs.

The virtual schools in Idaho, Maryland, and Utah, for example, are housed and run by their respective state education departments. In contrast, Michigan's virtual school is managed by the Michigan Virtual University, a nonprofit organization led by an independent board of directors. California's online program is governed by the University of California, Santa Cruz.

"A state program defies a singular definition," Ms. Patrick said.

Despite barriers, the number of state-led virtual schools has grown quickly. The number of students taking courses in the Florida Virtual School and the Idaho Digital Learning Academy has increased by more than 50 percent just since last year, according to the report. Enrollment has grown 24 percent in Massachusetts' Virtual High School, and 22 percent in Ohio's eCommunity Schools.

About 36 percent of public school districts offered online learning courses in 2002-03, enrolling more than 328,000 students, according to a 2005 report by the National Center for Education Statistics. Of the 1.1 million home-schooled students ages 5-17 in 2003, about 19.4 percent, or 212,000, took an online course, according to a 2006 NCES report.

As of this September, 38 states had either statewide virtual schools or significant policies on online education.

Of those 38 states, at least five had either created virtual schools or passed laws on online learning in the 2005-06 school year. Missouri's virtual school is slated to open next fall, as is the North Carolina Virtual School, which is getting off the ground with \$2.7 million in state seed money.

Michigan has passed a law requiring students to complete an online-learning course to graduate from high school, and Washington state issued guidelines last year for online learning under its "alternative learning experience" policies governing individualized courses that are not based in a school.

State policymakers are becoming increasingly savvy about online learning, said Mr. Watson of Evergreen Consulting. In 2003, when he started research for the first "Keeping Pace" report, he said, "they didn't even know what questions to ask."

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