

Online classes can save schools money, expand learning time for K-12 students

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GAINESVILLE, Fla. — New research at the [University of Florida](#) predicts more public school students in kindergarten through 12th grade will take classes online, have longer school days and more of them in the next decade. Academic performance should improve and schools could save money.

While distance education over the Internet is already widespread at colleges and universities, UF educational technology researchers are offering some of the first hard evidence documenting the potential cost-savings of virtual schooling in K-12 schools.

"Policymakers and educators have proposed expanding learning time in elementary through high school grades as a way to improve students' academic performance, but online coursework hasn't been on their radar. This should change as we make school and school district leaders more aware of the potential cost savings that virtual schooling offers," said [Catherine Cavanaugh](#), associate professor at the [University of Florida's College of Education](#). "Over the next decade, we expect an explosion in the use of virtual schooling as a seamless synthesis between the traditional classroom and online learning."

UF researchers considered several key factors to calculate and compare the cost of full-time online learning with regular schools. Cavanaugh reported their findings today at an education reform conference and national podcast sponsored by the Washington D.C.-based Center for American Progress. A monograph of her report will be posted on the center's Web site at <http://www.americanprogress.org/events>.

Based on a 2008 survey of 20 virtual schools in 14 states, UF researchers found that the average yearly cost of online learning per full-time pupil was about \$4,300. This compared with a national average cost per pupil of more than \$9,100 for a traditional public school in 2006 (the most recent year in which such data was available). Their cost estimates covered course development and teaching, and administrative and technical expenses.

"Online programs have little or no cost for instructional facilities, transportation and related staff," Cavanaugh said. "The value of distance education also increases when considering the broad range of available online courses."

She said investing in virtual education could allow schools to provide instruction before, during and after school — in essence, lengthening the school day and school year — without sinking millions of dollars into new buildings, additional personnel, professional development and other operating costs. Such school reform measures may not be popular with the kids, but America's education system is falling behind our competitors abroad. Simply put, students in other developed nations are spending more time in school and learning more than our kids do.

"Time is one of the most valuable resources for learning. Even a few days' difference in learning time can determine whether a school makes adequate yearly progress," Cavanaugh said.

In her report, Cavanaugh describes various scenarios whereby school days begin early and end late, with students attending traditional classes on designated weekdays and learning online in a flexibly scheduled computer lab on other days. The longer school day allows time for club and enrichment activities and recreation or athletics for a healthier school experience. The

boundaries of time and place are removed through Internet-connected mobile devices such as netbooks and smart phones, letting students access online courses while traveling between home, school, work and athletic events. Most homework is done at school under direct teacher supervision or with after-school online coaching.

With two decades of studies supporting the effectiveness of K-12 virtual schools, researchers are moving beyond the question of whether virtual schooling works as well as face-to-face instruction, focusing instead on when and how distance education works best. Partnerships between school districts and state-run virtual schools — including Florida Virtual School, the nation's largest virtual school, based in Orlando — are expected to play a major role in the emergence of K-12 distance education.

"Virtual schooling and online learning fit in extremely well with the emerging trend to embrace the same technologies that our young people are using in their everyday lives and apply them in education," Cavanaugh said. "Schools that don't embrace online learning soon will be viewed as limiting the learning opportunities of their students."

The better K-12 online programs, she said, will have experienced online teachers and coaches and on-site facilitators, with tailored lesson plans to suit the learning levels and pace of all students.

"Dr. Cavanaugh's report provides a vision of what schools could look like in the near future, as online courses and programs are developed that not only expand learning time but help educate students with a wide range of academic and learning needs," said Susan Lowes, director of research and evaluation at the Institute for Learning Technologies at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Credits

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