

Virtual Schools Forum Report

**A Report on the
Virtual Schools – A Policy Forum
October 21-22, 2002
Denver, Colorado**

Executive Summary: Virtual Schools Forum

The U.S. Department of Education in partnership with Converge Magazine hosted a “Virtual Schools Forum” in Denver, Colorado on October 21-22, 2002. The purpose of the forum was to begin shaping a national virtual school agenda by bringing together key stakeholders to identify specific challenges, policy issues and regulatory obstacles facing virtual education. Workgroups identified and then discussed four specific sets of issues: accountability, equity, funding, and quality. The work group discussions focused on: 1) what are the barriers to virtual learning and 2) what roles can and should the federal government play in overcoming these barriers?

The increasing availability of information technology and the Internet is challenging our fundamental understanding of how education is organized and delivered creating many new and different learning environments. Students who were isolated are now being connected to teachers from around the world. Teachers who left the classroom due to retirement or maternity leave are now back in the “classroom” as the result of the flexibility offered by teaching online. Gifted students have access to more AP courses while those students who struggle in a traditional classroom setting are finding more individualized attention through web-based courses.

“This is the 21st century. Ours is a world of 24-hour news cycles, global markets and instant messaging. Our education system should reflect the times we’re living in.” - Secretary Rod Paige, U.S. Department of Education

Traditionally, educational resources, expertise and courses have been limited to the geographic area in which a student resides. Pioneering web-based curriculum, new class formats and distant instruction for anytime, anywhere learning is prompting nothing short of a revolution in education. Students are taking classes with instructors from other schools, districts, and states. More flexibility and choices for learning are prompting students, parents, counselors, teachers and administrators to rethink how the business of education can or should be organized. Overall, there is a renewal of the educational process as digital technologies transform learning – moving it from a school centered to a student centered approach.

Many states, including Florida, Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, West Virginia, Alaska, Maryland, California and Arkansas, have launched virtual school while others are experiencing a growth of cyber charter schools. In other instances traditional schools are turning to distance education courses to expand their offerings for students and professional development opportunities for teachers. Public policy makers and education entrepreneurs see the potential of improving educational access, options and equity by using distance learning technologies to break down barriers of time and eliminate the limitations of geography. But at the same time, they are experiencing significant policy and regulatory barriers as these 21st century innovations collide with regulations designed for a 19th and 20th century education. Most state and federal policies have never conceived of an Illinois student enrolling in a Pennsylvania cyber charter school being taught by a teacher from Florida.

Secretary Paige understands that virtual education offers yet another option for engaging students and expanding educational opportunities to ensure that no child is left behind. He saw the benefits of online instruction firsthand while creating a virtual middle school during his tenure as Superintendent of the Houston Independent School District. Now as Secretary, he wants to explore ways of supporting this growing movement from a national level.

The Forum intended to build on existing work already done by a number of organizations. In fact, the timing of the Forum coincided with the launching of an effort to develop a virtual school association being led by WICHE and the Hewlett Foundation. Additional work focused on virtual schools include:

- **Any Time, Any Place, Any Path, Any Pace: Taking the Lead on e-Learning Policy**
NASBE, http://www.nasbe.org/e_Learning.html
- **California Virtual School Report: A National Survey of Virtual Education Practice and Policy with Recommendations for the State of California**
University of California College Preparatory Initiative (UCCP), Knowledge Base, LLC, Clovis Unified School District, http://www.uccp.org/docs/VHS_Report_lowres.pdf
- **Federal Trade Commission's Public Workshop on Possible Anticompetitive Efforts to Restrict Competition on the Internet**
<http://www.ftc.gov/opp/ecommerce/anticompetitive/index.htm>
- **Guide to Online High School Courses**
National Education Association, Virtual High School, Inc., American Association of School Administrators, CNA Corporation, IBM Corporation, National Association of State Boards of Education, National School Boards Association, Verizon Communications, <http://www.nea.org/technology/onlinecourseguide.html>
- **UC Santa Cruz VHS Summer Institute 2002 Discussion Guide**
<http://oasas2.ucsc.edu/vhsconf/DiscussionGuide.html>
- **Web-based Education Commission, *The Power of the Internet for Learning: Moving from Promise to Practice***
<http://www.hpcnet.org/webcommission>

The Forum participants were challenged to identify the main policy challenges and recommendations related to virtual schools and distance education. Participants were assigned to work groups to discuss each of the identified topics, asked to create a group name and developed the following vision statements for Virtual Education:

- Group 1: Empowering Quality Education for Each Learner
- Group 2: Delivering the Promise: Never-Ending Learning
- Group 3: Learning Opportunities Without Boundaries
- Group 4: Future of Learning: No Boundaries
- Group 5: Reach Every Learner

A number of recommendations emerged related to the federal government's role in advancing the future of online education:

1. **Accountability:**

- New Federal policies and regulations need to be considered carefully so they do not create new barriers for virtual learning on state or federal levels.

- Identify virtual schools as models of reform; virtual schools set the tone for change and provide alternative approaches to meet federal requirements.
- Identify additional alternative assessment methods. The virtual school community can play a leadership role in exploring new assessments that can be used in traditional classrooms.
- Convene a group of expert stakeholders to develop appropriate accountability framework, including metrics and indicators, for virtual schools.

2. **Equity**

- Consider Virtual Schools as an option (implies choice) instead of as an alternative path.
- Sponsor a conference on equity of access for virtual schools examining the related legal and regulatory issues.
- Assist local, state and federal policy makers with understanding what virtual education is and is not. Educate policy makers on virtual education and the changing learning environments available to students.
- Assist local, state and federal policy makers with developing “virtual education friendly” policies and regulations.

3. **Funding:**

- Study the federal role in funding virtual education.
- Identify state funding models and sample legislation that state policy makers can use as frameworks with shaping their laws.
- There is a challenge to do funding and then figure out the model for providing learning; Work on accountability, quality, equity issues first before determining the funding model.
- Study and report the costs and benefits of online course delivery to demonstrate efficiencies and economies of scale.

4. **Quality**

- Support a National Award Program that highlights quality online learning projects or virtual schools.
- Convene a group of expert stakeholders to create guidelines on quality virtual teaching.
- Explore how virtual education can play a role with the Higher Education Reauthorization.
- Facilitate the identification and development of quality standards and best practices for virtual education.
- Invest in research to determine the effectiveness of virtual education. Additional research and evaluation efforts are needed to improve the practice of teaching online.

Integrating technology provides an opportunity to catalyze change and infuse excellence into education models. In many instances, virtual schools are laboratories of educational reform. By examining the virtual school community, pathways to reform are unveiled.

The recommendations provide a framework to address the emerging movement and develop strategies for moving virtual education forward in all areas. The Forum was a rare opportunity

with a productive outcome in shaping the future of virtual schools in engaging a variety of communities in the debate.

Thanks to the Virtual Schools Forum advisory board members for planning a successful Forum:

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- Melinda Dinin, Event/Marketing Manager, Converge Magazine, Folsom, CA
- Sue Collins, Chief Education Officer, Apex Learning, Seattle, WA
- Liz Pape, Chief Executive Officer, Virtual High School/Concord Consortium, Maynard, MA
- Julie Young, Executive Director, Florida Virtual School, Orlando, FL
- Bill Thomas, Director of Educational Technology for the Southern Regional Education Board, Atlanta, GA
- Keith Kruger, Executive Director, Consortium for School Networking, Washington, DC
- Karen Middleton, Senior Project Coordinator, Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications, Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, Denver, CO

The group leaders deserve recognition for their leadership role and additional thanks to: Virginia Roach, Bill Thomas, Liz Paper, Keith Kruger and Julie Young for facilitating the groups' outcomes as well as Bernard Percy and John Bailey for setting the framework, leading the discussions and providing a creative context for dialogue.

Appendix I: Work Group Recommendations

Discussion of the Federal Role

The top issues are listed below to complement the summary of recommendations. The four top issues: Accountability, Equity, Funding and Quality were ranked and prioritized against a host of issues by the participants. The issues were ranked on a scale from one to seven. Please note that individual points under the issues are listed in no particular order.

The results were:

- Accountability (5.7)
- Equity (5.7)
- Funding (6.1)
- Quality (6.4)

Accountability

Accountability includes a broad range of concepts from measuring effective student outcomes using accountability systems to defining data standards, indicators and metrics for online learning. Obstacles include the need for better evidence of effectiveness of online learning and measures.

Group 1:

Barriers Identified:

- The traditional accountability standards and processes do not always match or apply to virtual learning.
- There is a lack of “buy in” from pivotal levels, such as State Departments of Education, for funding virtual learning.

Recommendations:

- Create a model set of national standards for virtual learning at each level (state, local, students, teachers), such as the ISTE NETS standards.
- Provide proof that virtual schooling works just as well as face-to-face schooling.
- Promote a top down model from federal level to enhance virtual learning opportunities. For example, special education laws have a trickle down effect.

Group 2:

Barriers Identified:

- There are no guidelines or accountability models for K-12 virtual schools.

Recommendations:

- New policies and regulations need to be considered carefully so they do not create new barriers for virtual learning on state or federal levels.
- Provide a set of measurements and a model for accountability for virtual schools at each level (local, state, and federal).

- Establish an Office of Virtual Learning under the Office of Educational Technology that encompasses all facets of academic education and an integration function.

Group 3:

Barriers Identified:

Recommendations:

- Hold all schools to the same high standards; do not carve out different standards for virtual schools.
- Develop accountability metrics for: student characteristics, program characteristics including quality of materials and teachers, alignment to standards (e.g. state, county).
- Define the audience for accountability metrics.
- Fund specific research on virtual school accountability metrics, similar to National Science Foundation research funding.
- Pull together a think tank to develop appropriate accountability metrics and indicators for virtual schools.
- Benchmark corporate and higher education online learning programs to determine what can be learned and applied to K-12 virtual schools.
- Extend concept of virtual schooling to include instructional sequences targeted to specific content and then assess these as well.

Group 4:

Barriers Identified:

- It is unclear how traditional accountability measures are applied to virtual schools.

Recommendations:

- Identify additional alternative assessment methods. The virtual school community can play a leadership role in exploring new assessments that can be used in traditional classrooms.
- Create a national task force to examine assessment in broad terms to include virtual education.
- Identify virtual schools as models of reform; virtual schools set the tone for change and provide alternative approaches to meet federal requirements.
- Provide funding so states can purchase or create new assessment tools.
- Identify or conduct research on assessment appropriate to virtual schools.
- Expand the definition of accountability beyond high stakes tests; Accountability to include: ongoing assessment using technology, multiple measures of progress, collaborating with student's home school, etc.
- Explore how portfolios complement standardized testing.
- Measure by mastery, rather than seat time. This concept is embedded into many online programs which permit a child to progress to a next lesson only when mastering the current one.
- Identify research that points to accurate measures.
- Collect data from existing virtual schools.
- Provide federal dollars to support research based on data collection and dissemination.

- Identify acceptable additional assessment measures, e.g., online testing aligned to standards.
- Foster a model working with individual student profiles.

Group 5:

Barriers Identified:

- There is a lack of consistency around data collection and dissemination.

Recommendations:

- Lead the effort to define data standards for common communication.
- Lead the research effort to evaluate effectiveness of online learning.
- Provide a definition for online education.
- Broaden the definition of accountability standards in NCLB to better reflect online education.
- Define what we are accounting for: learning or socialization.
- Use the bully pulpit to promote virtual educational.
- Fund research and define instruments to use.
- Differentiate between full-time and part-time online students, such as those taking online as part of school day.

Equity

Equity is often described as making everything equal, when it should be that every child has access to what they need and what is “appropriate”. Equity issues include: equity of access to educational resources including people; equity of access to computers, networks, connectivity; equity issues around course design and content.

Group 1:

Barriers Identified:

- There are inequities in access to broadband technology nationally (related to eRate), also seen as equivalent in importance to the historic rural electrification program.

Recommendations:

- Demonstrate that virtual education makes it possible for every child to have an individualized plan and access to an individualized high quality education.
- Use federal influence to improve access to virtual education after the model used for federal influence on accessibility and special education services.
- Make visible benefits of virtual education and disseminate.
- Use the bully pulpit to advocate basic computer literacy for all.

Group 2:

Barriers Identified:

- There is inequality in access across cultural, economic and learning environments.
- Students’ access to quality course content is dependent on demographics and location.
- There are students at low performing schools without access to virtual learning opportunities.

Recommendations:

- Promote e-learning as side-by-side solutions to No Child Left Behind mandates; i.e., children from low-performing schools should be able to use e-learning courses in their own schools to improve achievement as an option to going to a new school.
- Consider Virtual Learning as an option (implies choice) instead of as an alternative path.
- Encourage partnering with the business community and IT companies to overcome economic barriers.
- Facilitate education of state boards and Governors as to what virtual schools are and what they are not.
- Promote Internet 2 (I2) to state leaders to ensure quality courses and content are being developed for this new infrastructure.
- Identify leadership as a key component in equity of opportunities for students.

Group 3:

Barriers Identified:

- There is inconsistency in what circumstances a student is allowed to take online courses and who pays for it – local school policies can be an obstacle.
- Not all states have policies to ensure equity – it is a state’s responsibility to ensure equity.
- Not all students can afford to take courses from virtual schools; equity of access is a funding issue.
- English Language Learners (ELL) are not always listed as a group to ensure equity.

Recommendations:

- Identify virtual schools as a resource for equity of access to curricular offerings.
- Address areas of equity: technology access, content, cultural diversity and special needs.
- Sponsor a conference on equity of access for virtual schools examining the related legal and regulatory issues and coordinate a national dissemination program.
- Require that federally funded curriculum development adhere to the principles of universal design.
- Re-examine Federal programs for access (i.e. e-Rate) to ensure alignment with virtual schools, including focus on broadband access.
- Allow some state set-aside from NCLB to ensure that there are state-funded seats at virtual schools.

Group 4:

Barriers Identified:

- Small districts often resist virtual alternatives for their students because of the lost revenue that is necessary to provide basic services to their community.
- School districts have restrictions on serving as for-pay providers of technology or reselling IT services.
- Students should not be prevented from participating in virtual education because of traditional models.
- There are uneven levels of resources to participate in virtual programs ranging from too much equipment (free computers) to not enough (do not even have phone lines).
- There needs to be more funding flexibility to meet needs. For example, some schools are forced to provide video conferencing when that is not what they want or need.

Recommendations:

- Provide federal funding to “hold harmless” districts losing funding due to the student’s participation in a virtual program and develop incentives to increase involvement.
- Fund and lead the effort to provide a low cost computer appliance.
- Revamp the E-Rate program to extend to virtual schools, community-based centers or consortiums.
- Fund and lead the effort to provide local Internet access at a reasonable cost.
- States should permit use of textbook dollars for the purchase of computers and access.
- Provide support for parents learning how to use technology from their kids.
- Demonstrate or study where districts act as central service providers of technology in working models and publicize best practices -- fund demonstration projects.

Group 5:

Barriers Identified:

- There is misunderstanding on who is not being reached and why not.
- There is inequity in access outside of classrooms.

Recommendations:

- Fund cross-departmental programs and improve coordination of funding sources.
- Increase access after school hours and increase access from homes.
- Encourage more partnerships through federal funding.
- Increase funding of existing programs designed to address equity issues.
- Use virtual education to increase options for disabled students from home.
- Use online education to give students a new voice.
- Use virtual education to give teachers equity of access to resources with collaborative communities.

Funding

Funding traditional K-12 education is different from the variety of models used to fund virtual learning. There is a disconnect between funding and practice. Students may have to deal with a variety of other funding obstacles when seeking choices, including tuition payment or attendance requirements inconsistent across models.

Group 1:

Barriers Identified:

- Key obstacles are seat time, geography, taking funding away from regular schools, the perception that virtual is cheaper, lack of consistency with who pays, equity, sustainability.
- There is inconsistency of funding for virtual education.
- Early adopters have advantage; late adopters have difficulty.
- There is a lack of funding; the reality has shifted from budget surpluses to deficits.
- The expectation for virtual schools to have a self-sustaining model is unrealistic.
- There is a challenge to do funding and then figure out the model for providing learning; Work on accountability, quality, equity issues first before determining the funding model.

Recommendations:

- Provide more flexibility with federal funds.
- Make it possible to lease, not buy with federal funds.
- Make it possible for virtual schools to use eRate by broadening definitions on how eRate is applied.
- Provide start up money for projects to give districts an incentive to go to virtual schools.
- Tie funding to performance.
- Encourage time and money commitments on all sides.
- Identify more choices in funding and options on how to spend it.

Group 2:

Barriers Identified:

- State vs. District funding – there is difficulty in funding when the state is managing the content, portal while the teachers and districts are receiving services.
- There is no single solution for funding models. They vary from state to state.

Recommendations:

- Identify state funding models and sample legislation.
- Provide legislative templates for state policy makers.
- Provide targeted incentives for virtual schools.
- Identify innovative funding programs that will provide revenue for virtual schools.
- Create a tax incentive for parents for students to take courses online.

Group 3:

Barriers Identified:

- There is a challenge when funding is addressed to support schools funding online courses without taking funding from other critical programs.
- States have restrictions on textbook fund spending preventing the use of these funds for instructional software or online courses.
- Current state funding models (e.g. based on Average Daily Attendance) do not have a component that addresses virtual schools.

Recommendations:

- Provide online education free-of-charge to students and parents when part of an appropriate education plan within the context of the public education system.
- Require program funding tied to accountability metrics to allow shared ownership with schools who provide funding per seat.
- Remove state restrictions on spending of textbook funds.
- Lead an effort to investigate alternative funding models.
- Restructure Department of Education grants, especially alternative, so that states can apply for their state-sponsored virtual school.
- Ensure grant awards are meaningful and programmatically adequate.
- Take another look at No Child Left Behind funding and provide more state set aside.
- Suggest a National Lottery to support virtual schooling.

Group 4:

Barriers Identified:

- There are barriers between states serving children in other geographic areas.
- Seat time funding does not work well in virtual environments. Virtual schools should not be funded on seat time – creates vehicle for changing models in states. A strong federal policy could support this idea.
- Current funding models discriminate against students in virtual, home school and other unique learning environments.
- Current funding models promote competition, not collaboration.
- Categorizing children on single census date; home school; virtual learner; mixed environment (some face-to-face and virtual) does not work.

Recommendations:

- Study total cost of ownership to evaluate funding models and costs that better serve students.
- Identify best practices through federally funded projects to provide new alternatives and models.
- Support mechanisms for serving out-of-area children (guidelines, funding, allowing certain situations for student learning).
- Provide matching or categorical funding to support virtual education.
- Define virtual education within federal guidelines explicit for K-12.
- Identify that virtual education is the future of education and should be funded as such.
- Support performance-based models and projects.

Group 5:

Barriers Identified:

- There is not a clear definition for attendance as it relates to online learning.
- If we continue to look at this as supplemental funding, it will not scale up.

Recommendations:

- Study the costs and benefits of online course delivery to demonstrate efficiencies and economies of scale.
- Review state funding models and make recommendations for equitable funding mechanisms to incorporate.
- Identify opportunities for cross-departmental funding.

Quality

Key problems concerning quality issues are quality assurance, teacher certification issues, accreditation, standards and curriculum quality. How is an online course measured for high quality and desired outcomes? How do we “ensure” and “assure” quality in online education?

Group 1:

Barriers Identified:

- There is a lack of quality professional development and course content for virtual learning.

Recommendations:

- Incorporate virtual learning issues when reviewing the Higher Education Reauthorization.
- Need PT3-like program to help support pre-service and in-service professional development for virtual teachers.
- Support intra-state compacts for allowing teachers to teach with licensure and certification.
- Convene interested parties to create guidelines on quality virtual teaching; create quality guidelines for teacher endorsement
- Benchmark costs related to professional development (TCO).

Group 2:

Barriers Identified:

- There is a lack of consistency among programs.
- There is difficulty in re-educating adults about e-learning (what it is and what it is not).

Recommendations:

- Support a National Award Program that highlights quality eLearning projects.
- Identify and use resources such as “Essential Principles of Quality” developed by SREB.
- Encourage the National Board Certification to have an eLearning component.
- Require pre-service students to be able to teach in both traditional classroom settings as well as online environments.
- Identify methods that build quality.
- Evaluate students in different ways to meet all student needs.
- Educate all stakeholders to bring them on board to support quality eLearning.
- Provide flexibility for quality measures to evolve as technology changes.

Group 3:

Barriers Identified:

- Virtual schools are not accredited the same ways as brick and mortar schools are; there is no consensus on this.
- Virtual schools are not always evaluated on the same criteria as traditional schools.

Recommendations:

- Courses should be subject to same curriculum review process as traditional materials (review of course/instructional design and content) with alignment to standards.
- Do not separate the issue of credentialing teachers for virtual schools from the issue for schools in general. However, online teachers need appropriate training to teach in an online environment and that training itself should be online.
- Require an accreditation process for online courses using course design standards and content standards.
- Require an accreditation process for online instructors and teachers using course delivery standards.

Group 4:

Barriers Identified:

- The requirements for contracts based on the traditional hours of classrooms versus virtual classes.

Recommendations:

- Develop accreditation for programs, vendors and staff development.
- Require national guidelines for best practices for courses and curriculum which meet and align with state standards.
- Lead a nationwide teacher certification and or national online teacher certification effort and determine who will have oversight on quality control.
- Allow flexible hours on teacher and other contracts.

Group 5:

Barriers Identified:

- There are currently no nationally adopted quality standards.

Recommendations:

- Encourage evaluation research.
- Develop national standards that can support reciprocity.
- Develop federal guidelines for Schools of Education on teacher competencies for online education.
- Fund special programs for teacher preparation in online education.
- Create a national forum to review and study quality areas with goal of creating instruments of evaluation for purposes of comparison, include all constituencies.
- Require every pre-service teacher to have one semester course in online pedagogy with teaching.
- Develop a “Consumer Reports” or “Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval” for quality.

Appendix II: Work Groups

Note: Bold means facilitator

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