



School of Education, University of Colorado Boulder
Boulder, CO 80309-0249
Telephone: 802-383-0058

NEPC@colorado.edu
<http://nepc.colorado.edu>

VIRTUAL SCHOOLS IN THE U.S. 2014: POLITICS, PERFORMANCE, POLICY, AND RESEARCH EVIDENCE

Introduction

Jennifer King Rice, University of Maryland
Luis Huerta, Teachers College, Columbia University

March 2014

Virtual education has become a focal point for policymakers interested in expanding education choices and improving the efficiency of public education. In particular, full-time virtual schools, also known as online schools or cyber schools, have attracted a great deal of attention. Proponents argue that online curriculum can be tailored to individual students and that it has the potential to promote greater student achievement than can be realized in traditional brick-and-mortar schools. Further, lower costs—primarily for instructional personnel and facilities—make virtual schools financially appealing. Assumptions about the cost-effectiveness of virtual schools, coupled with policies that expand school choice and provide market incentives attractive to for-profit companies, have fueled a fast-growing virtual school expansion in the U.S.

This report is the second of a series of annual reports by the National Education Policy Center (NEPC) on virtual education in the U.S. The NEPC reports contribute to the

existing evidence and discourse on virtual education by providing an objective analysis of the evolution and performance of full-time, publicly funded K-12 virtual schools. Specifically, the NEPC reports: describe the policy issues raised by available evidence; assess the research evidence that bears on K-12 virtual teaching and learning; and analyze the growth and performance of such virtual schools. The 2013 report presented several important findings:

- A total of 311 full-time virtual schools enrolling an estimated 200,000 students were identified; 67% of the identified students were enrolled in charters operated by Education Management Organizations (EMOs). In 2011-12, the largest for-profit operator of virtual schools, K12 Inc., alone enrolled 77,000 students.
- Compared with conventional public schools, full-time virtual schools served relatively few Black and Hispanic students, impoverished students, and special education students. In addition, on the common metrics of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), state performance rankings, and graduation rates, full-time virtual schools lagged significantly behind traditional brick-and-mortar schools.
- Policymakers were facing difficult challenges in the areas of funding and governance; instructional program quality; and recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers.
 - Significant policy issues associated with funding and governance included linking funding to actual costs, identifying accountability structures, delineating enrollment boundaries and funding responsibilities, and limiting profiteering by EMOs.
 - Significant policy issues associated with instructional program quality included ensuring the quality and quantity of curricula and instruction, as well as monitoring student achievement.
 - Significant policy issues associated with the recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers included identification of appropriate skills for online teaching, designing and providing appropriate professional development, and designing appropriate teacher evaluation.
- Claims made in support of expanding virtual education were largely unsupported by high-quality research evidence. The role of political considerations in driving the expansion of virtual technologies in public education, despite a manifest lack of research support, was examined, and suggestions for the kind of research that policymakers needed were offered.

The 2013 report provided an initial set of research-based recommendations to guide policymaking on virtual education. The subsequent reports will revisit those recommendations to document the degree to which progress is being made toward more sound policies for virtual education in the U.S.

The 2014 report is organized in three major sections. Section I examines the policy and political landscape associated with virtual schooling and describes the current state of affairs related to finance and governance, instructional program quality, and teacher quality. The authors analyze to what extent, if any, policy in the past year has moved toward or away from the 2013 recommendations. Based on an analysis of legislative development across the states, they find that troubling issues continue to outpace informed policy.

Section II reviews the research relevant to virtual schools. It finds that despite considerable enthusiasm for virtual education in some quarters, there is little credible research to support virtual schools' practices or to justify ongoing calls for ever-greater expansion. The author finds: "While there has been some improvement in what is known about supplemental K-12 online learning, there continues to be a lack of reliable and valid evidence to guide the practice of full-time K-12 online learning."

Section III provides a descriptive overview of full-time virtual schools and their expansion based on data gathered from state, corporate, and organizational sources. Details on enrollment include the student characteristics of race/ethnicity, sex, free and reduced-price lunch eligibility, special education designation, ELL status, and grade level. Other information includes student-teacher ratios. In addition, details on student achievement include Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) ratings, state ratings, and graduation rates.

*This is a section of **Virtual Schools in the U.S. 2014: Politics, Performance, Policy, and Research Evidence**, a multipart brief published by The National Education Policy Center, housed at the University Of Colorado Boulder, and made possible in part by funding from the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice.*

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