

Virtual Schools as Hotbeds of Reform



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According to a new report, “Laboratories of Reform: Virtual High Schools and Innovation in Public Education” from the Education Sector, a nonprofit education policy organization, online learning is becoming a model for school reform. The report examines a number of successful online learning programs to conclude that virtual schools are:

- individualizing student learning 24/7
- creating new models for evaluating and assisting teachers
- “pioneering performance-based education funding models.”

The schools examined support traditional programs—supplemental, college prep, or credit recovery—rather than providing students with all of their classes online. Many aspects of the models are like traditional courses, but with all information, such as syllabuses, readings, assignments, and other materials, posted online. Students are expected to log in at least once a day and to meet all requirements. Teachers are expected to answer questions and provide feedback within 24 hours.

The courses can be highly interactive, with students communicating with their teachers and other students, or more self-paced. Further methods to personalize learning include options for different pacing from traditional or extended to accelerated; flexible course start times; personalized, relationship-centered programs to help high-risk students; or additional support through on-site mentors.

Good programs provide specialized training and online student teaching experiences. Because all

course materials and daily interactions are online, it is easier for supervisors to observe, evaluate, and offer assistance to teachers. And there is an expectation that teachers will be observed and evaluated.

Many challenges remain for virtual schools and for their spread across the United States as well as for efforts to scale up the reform aspects. The report offers four areas of policy recommendations addressing these, but what can individual schools and districts do? If your school or district offers online courses already, this report can give you many ideas for improving your program and ideas for effective policy for which to advocate.

If not, you should consider starting your own program or participating in one. The report highlights practices you should look for that personalize learning and ensure high-quality teaching as well as high rates of successful completion. I would think that encouraging another blended approach of providing online tools for face-to-face classes is also a promising way to prepare teachers and students for virtual learning.

The report hints at another huge potential for reform through changing teacher practice. An independent evaluation of the Virtual High School had 75% of the responding teachers report that online teaching changed the way they taught. Many reported that their practice encouraged “increased student participation, independent learning, and more effective use of questioning strategies.” It does appear that virtual schools could lead the way to school reform.

To download the full report, go to http://www.educationsector.org/research/research_show.htm?doc_id=502307e. ■

By Anita McAnear

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