

Fast Facts

Promises and Pitfalls of Virtual Education in the United States and Indiana

What —

The CEEP Education Policy Brief, *Promises and Pitfalls of Virtual Education in the United States and Indiana*, examines the current status of public virtual or online education in the United States, with a particular focus on Indiana. The brief explores the two categories of public virtual education, supplemental programs and full-time schools, and also investigates some of the primary issues facing virtual education including funding, program and teacher quality, and oversight and accountability.

Why —

Many educational reformers view virtual schools as a viable alternative for educating public K-12 students and as a means of providing educational programs and opportunities that may not be available to students in their traditional schools and classrooms. Furthermore, virtual education is expanding rapidly across the country. It is estimated that there were around one million online enrollments in 2007, a number which is likely to increase over the next few years. Along with this rapid expansion, virtual education has experienced several obstacles, as regulatory policy and funding have not kept pace with the innovation and variation of online learning.

How —

Issues such as determining equitable funding models, accurately measuring student and program achievement, training and certifying online teachers, and creating or modifying laws to include virtual schools have been some of the major pitfalls facing the development and success of virtual schools. Although steps are being taken in a number of realms in order to overcome such obstacles, more needs to be done. This policy brief discusses how promising steps are being taken and it offers recommendations for education leaders and policymakers to consider for virtual education to prosper and ensure increased educational opportunities and outcomes for all students.

Recommendations —

- State policy should ensure that virtual and traditional education options complement each other in the evolving education and workforce landscapes of the 21st century.
- Current education funding models, such as those based on seat-times, may not be viable for many virtual programs; statewide funding systems must be both fair and flexible in order to handle the variety of educational opportunities available. Models of funding distribution based on a sliding scale of expenditures or by course or credit are two promising models for funding virtual education.
- The student population of a virtual school may differ from the local public school; therefore, course completion rates or comparative scores based on state or national assessment exams may not be accurate indices of program quality. Other methods to quantify and qualify program success, such as improvement models using pre and post assessment data, should be considered.
- Teaching in a virtual school setting takes different skills and strategies than in a traditional school setting. Schools and districts should provide professional development specifically designed for teaching virtual courses, and state policy on teaching certification for virtual education must be explicit.
- In order to provide high-quality, personalized programs of study for students of all backgrounds, needs, and interests, virtual programs should provide proper program structure and support, including challenging courses along with effective learning strategies and other tools needed for success in an online environment.

To read this Education Policy Brief, go to:
<http://ceep.indiana.edu/>