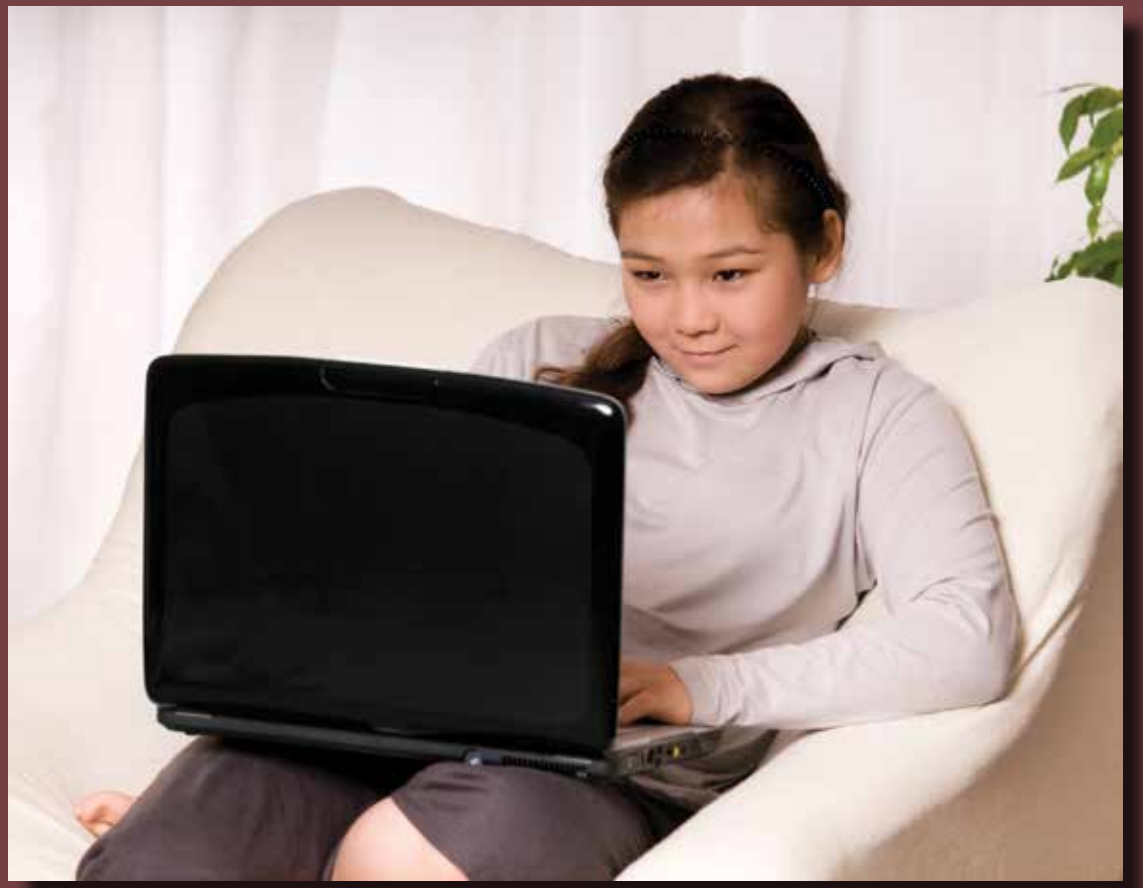
Virtual Education at the K-12 Level in Hampton Roads



VIRTUAL EDUCATION AT THE K-12 LEVEL IN HAMPTON ROADS

Online learning at the K-12 level has grown from a novelty to a movement.
– Gene V. Glass and Kevin G. Welner, "Online K-12 Schooling in the U.S.: Uncertain Private Ventures in Need of Public Regulation" (Boulder: National Education Policy Center, 2011)

Online education has received the most attention at the collegiate level. Some MOOCs (massively open online classes) enroll 160,000 or more students. Less attention has been given to online ("virtual") education at the K-12 level. We do so in this chapter and, in the process, focus on what has been happening in online education in Hampton Roads. **Online education is transforming the experience of public, private and homeschool students alike.**

The number of elementary and secondary students now participating in some kind of formal online education, either full- or part-time, is unknown. All indicators show, however, that their ranks are growing rapidly. A survey by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) revealed that 55 percent of all public school districts had students that were enrolled in distance education courses in 2009-10. Almost three-quarters (74 percent) of these districts planned to expand their distance education course offerings within the next three years (see Table 1). A more recent report, "Keeping Pace With K-12 Online & Blended Learning" (2012), estimated that 275,000 U.S. students attended fully online schools in 2012-13; this reflected a 15 percent annual rate of increase over the past several years.[1]

Virginia is among those states accelerating the pace of growth. Virtual education has been a centerpiece of Gov. Bob McDonnell's "Opportunity to Learn" education reform agenda. In April 2010, the governor signed legislation to develop criteria for virtual school programs in Virginia, and 13 such programs were formally approved as "multidivision online providers" the following year. Also in 2011, the Virginia Council for Private Education (VCPE), the body responsible for monitoring private school accreditation in the Commonwealth, assembled its first list of "state-recognized virtual private schools" (see Table 2). **Beginning with the 2013-14 school year, every Virginia public school student entering the ninth grade will be required to complete at least one online course in order to graduate.** Only four other states (Alabama, Florida, Idaho and Michigan) have a comparable online learning requirement.

McDonnell has stated that "the expansion of virtual school programs in Virginia will enable students all across the state to receive the services of highly qualified, Virginia-certified teachers without being limited by classroom walls."[2] He and other like-minded reformers note that virtual schools allow students to enroll in specialized courses – such as oceanography or Chinese – that otherwise might not be available to them. The nature of online education encourages participants to work at their own pace, an attractive feature for both high-achieving and special-needs students as well as others who may have struggled in a traditional classroom environment. What's more, students in Virginia's most rural localities can access these services as freely as those in the population hubs of Hampton Roads, Richmond or Northern Virginia. From this perspective,

[1] "Keeping Pace With K-12 Online & Blended Learning" (Evergreen Education Group, 2012), p. 5, at: http://kpk12.com/reports

[2] www.education.virginia.gov/News/viewRelease.cfm?id=109

virtual learning potentially represents a revolutionary, democratizing force in K-12 education.

Not all observers are so optimistic. Critics suggest that the promise of virtual learning, particularly at the youngest grade levels, remains largely untested. They point out that virtual learning works well for some students but not for others, and they suggest that not all of the skills and competencies associated with K-12 education are best conveyed online. A further set of concerns has to do with the finances of online education, a lucrative and fast-growing field that is currently dominated by a handful of large, for-profit companies. Initiatives such as Digital Learning Now! (www.digitallearningnow.com) are backed by online learning providers and other software and tech companies that stand to profit handsomely through the expansion of virtual schooling. Thus, many observers have argued for caution before shifting resources away from traditional teacher-student engagement in bricks-and-mortar classrooms.

Virtual education is a moving target; its "rules" in Virginia and elsewhere are still being written. Thus far, the enthusiasm for online learning has not always been accompanied by a comparable degree of accountability or transparency. Surprisingly little data are available to document the participation or academic performance of Virginia's virtual students. This chapter provides a snapshot of K-12 virtual education in Hampton Roads in 2013, using the best available information at this point.

TABLE 1

DISTANCE EDUCATION COURSES FOR PUBLIC ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS: 2009-10

Percentage of public school districts with any students enrolled in distance education courses	**55%**
Of these 55% of public school districts...	
Percentage with students enrolled in distance education courses at the:	
High school level	96%
Middle school level	19%
Elementary school level	6%
Percentage indicating that students who were enrolled in regular high school programs were able to take a full courseload in an academic term using only distance education courses	22%
Percentage indicating that students can fulfill all high school graduation requirements using only distance education courses	12%
Percentage that were planning to expand the number of distance education courses offered in the next three years	74%
Percentage indicating that various entities delivered the distance education courses in which students in their district were enrolled:	
Postsecondary institution in the U.S.	50%
Independent vendor in the U.S.	47%
Online charter school administered by their district	4%
Source: National Center for Education Statistics (November 2011), at: http://ies.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2012008	

TABLE 1 DISTANCE EDUCATION COURSES FOR PUBLIC ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS: 2009-10	
Percentage of public school districts with any students enrolled in distance education courses	**55%**
Of these 55% of public school districts...	
Percentage indicating that various entities delivered the distance education courses in which students in their district were enrolled:	
Other schools administered by their district	6%
Their district	18%
Another local school district, or schools in another district, in their state	21%
Education service agencies within their state	16%
State virtual school in their state	33%
State virtual school in another state	6%
Districts or schools in other states	3%
Non-U.S.-based public or private entity	1%
Percentage indicating the types of distance education courses taken by students regularly enrolled in their district:	
Advanced placement	29%
Dual enrollment: College-level courses for which students receive both high school and college credits	47%
Credit recovery: Opportunities allowing students to recover course credits from classes they have missed or failed	62%
Career and technical education	27%
Other types of academic courses	65%
Percentage distribution indicating the primary mode of technology for instructional delivery used in distance education courses taken by students regularly enrolled in their district:	
Internet courses using synchronous instruction: Simultaneous or "real-time" instruction	14%
Internet courses using asynchronous instruction: Instruction not occurring in "real-time"	63%
Computer-based technologies other than the Internet: E.g., district network, CD-ROM	5%
Two-way interactive video: Two-way video with two-way audio	17%
One-way prerecorded video	2%
Source: National Center for Education Statistics (November 2011), at: http://ies.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2012008	

TABLE 2

STATE-RECOGNIZED VIRTUAL PRIVATE SCHOOLS

School Name/Location/URL	Accreditation	Grades	Approximate annual tuition (high school, full-time)	Owned/ operated by
Allied National High School Laguna Hills, CA www.alliedhighschool.com	AdvancED	Grades 9 - 12	$3,350	Allied Business Schools Inc. (FP, privately held)
EdOptions Online Academy Falls Church, VA www.edoptionsacademy.com	AdvancEd	Grades 7 - 12	not posted	Edmentum Inc. (FP, owned by private equity firm Thoma Bravo, LLC)
Griggs International Academy Berrien Springs, MI www.griggs.edu	AdvancEd	Grades K - 12	$2,400	Seventh-Day Adventist Church (NFP)
K12 International Academy Herndon, VA www.k12.com/int	AdvancEd	Grades K -12	$6,995	K12 Inc. (FP, publicly traded)
Liberty University Online Academy Lynchburg, VA http://libertyonlineacademy.com	AdvancEd	Grades 3 - 12	$4,950	Liberty University (NFP)
National High School Duluth, GA http://nationalhighschool.com	AdvancEd	Grades 9 - 12	$199 per month	A unit of Gwinett, Ga., County Public Schools

Sources: Provider websites and the Virginia Council for Private Education, at: www.vcpe.org

Background And Definitions

The concept of "distance education," a mode of instruction in which teachers and students are not in the same location, has existed for many years. Written correspondence courses once dominated the field. In the mid-20th century, schools and universities adopted radio and television as a means to transmit lectures and other information to students across long distances. In the 1990s, the Internet dramatically expanded the possibilities of distance education, as the first fully online courses and schools began to coalesce.

The 2012 "Keeping Pace" report defines online learning as "teacher-led education that takes place over the Internet, with the teacher and student separated geographically, using a web-based educational delivery system that includes software to provide a structured learning environment."[3] Online learning courses are further distinguished either by "synchronous" or "asynchronous" methods of student-teacher interaction (or both). Synchronous communication might include online video, telephone calls or other means of interacting in real time. Online courses that include the most synchronous communication generally require teachers and students to interact live at a regular, given time – not unlike traditional classroom sessions or office hours held outside the virtual world. Asynchronous communication includes email, blogs, posted announcements and online discussion forums. An example of a synchronous method is Old Dominion University's Teletechnet system, which disseminates live televised courses to students throughout Virginia, the U.S. and around the world. Course providers typically promise a given turnaround time (such as 24 hours) for responding to student or parent inquiries, and for grading and returning student work.

Reviewing Table 1, one can see that there are many different types of providers of K-12 online education. In 2009-10, the greatest proportion of public school districts indicated that their students' distance learning courses were delivered by "postsecondary institutions." (Among Hampton Roads universities, Regent University's Early College Program is a well-established provider of online courses to homeschoolers and upper-level high school students.) The next most influential type of online provider identified in the 2009-10 survey included independent vendors such as K12 Inc. and Connections Academy, the two largest providers in the United States today. For-profit businesses such as these dominate the marketplace of full-time virtual schools.

A third important category of providers contains state virtual schools, which include institutions such as the large and nationally prominent Florida Virtual School, as well as our own Virtual Virginia. Virtual Virginia is a leading provider of online courses to students enrolled in Hampton Roads' public schools. Also noteworthy are the numerous public school districts (including, in our region, Virginia Beach, Chesapeake and York County) that have developed their own online courses.

Online course providers offer an extensive menu of full-time and part-time programs to address seemingly all conceivable student needs. For better or worse, virtual learning has become a go-to solution for students who don't fit neatly in the academic norm. Advanced Placement and dual enrollment courses are an attractive option for high-achieving students, who can enroll as a means of earning early college credit. At the other end of the spectrum, "credit recovery" has become a similarly influential market niche. Credit recovery courses allow students to make up some or all of the work they didn't master in a traditional classroom setting – thereby providing an additional path for students to graduate or advance to the next grade level. A tour through virtual school websites shows that homeschoolers seeking additional enrichment as well as student-athletes needing to pass NCAA-approved courses are likewise frequent (and frequently sought-after) consumers of online education. Full-time virtual programs typically require a supervising adult to play the role of "learning coach." Particularly at the youngest grade levels, this role can be substantive enough to require a parental commitment not unlike that of homeschooling.

Online courses may be accessed in school, out of school, or both. Many online providers tout mobile applications that allow students to access course material nearly anywhere. Some bricks-and-mortar institutions provide computer lab access – or actual computers or tablets – to their students that enroll in virtual courses. Some online courses' content is entirely electronic; other courses require substantial outside reading, and still others, "off-screen" assignments. Online courses can be used independently, or they can be integrated within a more

[3] "Keeping Pace," p. 7

traditional classroom experience; "blended learning" is the term used to describe this combined approach.

In short, there has been a proliferation of ways that virtual education is redefining the K-12 school experience. We'll now look more closely at some of the virtual initiatives that are most significant to Hampton Roads students.

Virtual Virginia

Virtual Virginia (www.virtualvirginia.org) is the state's provider of distance education. Its roots stretch back to the 1980s, when the Department of Education created the Virginia Satellite Education Network (VSEN) as a means of offering Advanced Placement and world language courses to students across the state. The program's foremost goal was to provide rural and underserved students with courses that otherwise might not have been offered in their districts. Web-based course delivery was added in 2006, leading to the emergence of today's Virtual Virginia.

The 2012-13 Virtual Virginia catalog lists 65 different courses in the fine arts, language arts, mathematics, social studies and world languages for students at the middle school and high school levels. These courses are available to public, private and homeschool students across the U.S., although Virginia public school students take precedence. Virginia public students enroll through their schools, which are responsible for providing any necessary textbooks and supplies, as well as computer access. Participating schools must arrange for a mentor to proctor tests, provide technical support and serve as a liaison for the student, school and Virtual Virginia. Course fees (which are determined by the Local Composite Index) are covered by the students' local school divisions; tuition for Virginia private and homeschool students is $500 per credit.

Virtual Virginia courses are taught asynchronously, with start and end dates that adhere to public school calendars. A program brochure asserts that "all courses are taught by skilled, highly qualified teachers who are fully certified in the subject area and who are experienced in teaching in an online environment. Instructors are available via toll-free phone numbers, e-mail, discussion forums, and our virtual classroom tools."[4] Virtual School Programs coordinator Cheri Kelleher told us that the reach of Virtual Virginia (approximately 7,000 students in 2012-13) has been extended by schools that use the Virtual Virginia learning management system, but provide their own course instructors.

All Hampton Roads school divisions participated in Virtual Virginia during 2011-12; there were 674 course enrollments. As Table 3 discloses, enrollments were largest in rural divisions like Accomack and York counties and large divisions such as Chesapeake and Virginia Beach. Several of the school divisions we contacted indicated they would welcome more Virtual Virginia course openings for their students. Enrollment is initially capped at 15 students per school per course, with additional slots later made available as space allows.

[4] Virtual Virginia 2012-13 brochure, at: www.virtualvirginia.org/counselors/Virtual_Virginia_Brochure.pdf

TABLE 3

VIRTUAL VIRGINIA COURSE ENROLLMENTS AMONG HRETA SCHOOL DIVISIONS, 2011-12

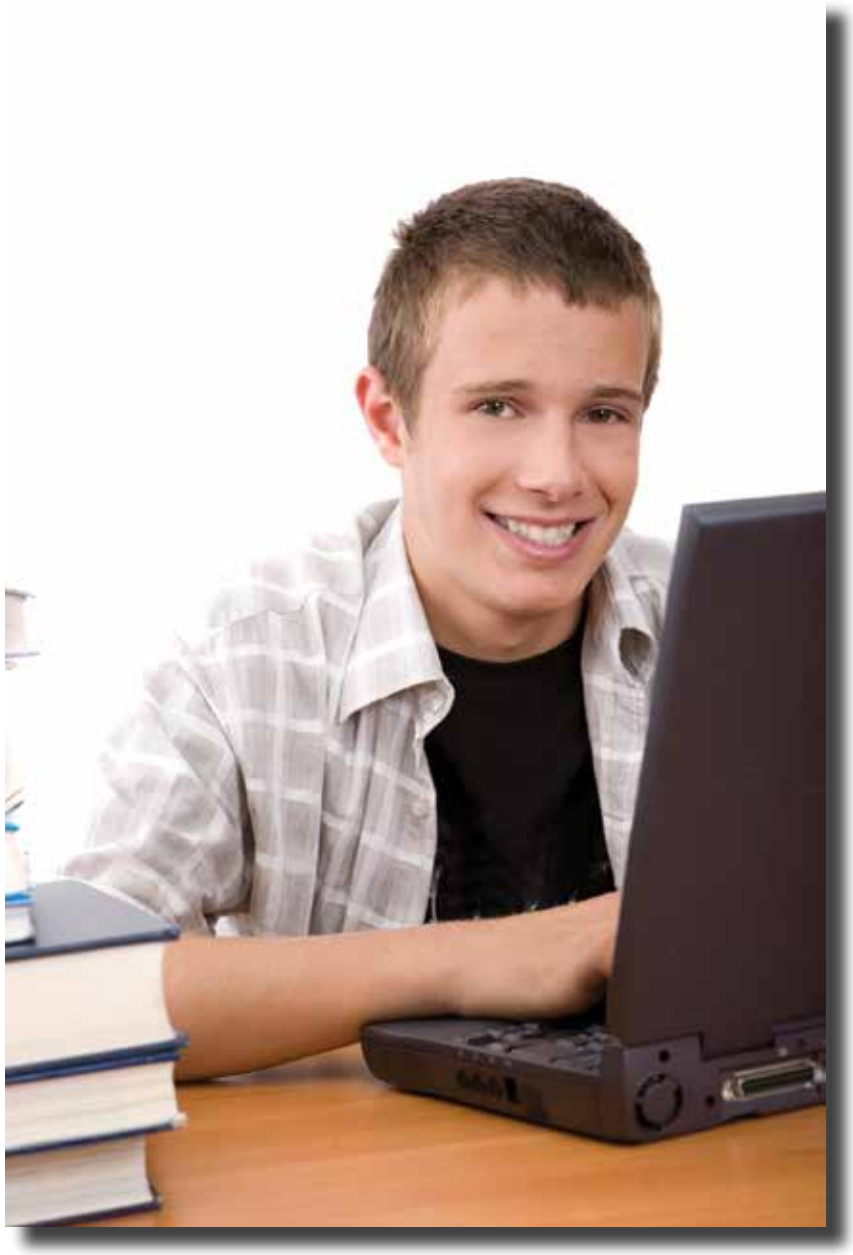
Affiliation	Total
Arcadia High	22
Chincoteague High	17
Nandua High	14
Tangier Combined	18
ACCOMACK COUNTY	71
Grassfield High	2
Great Bridge High	31
Greenbrier Middle	1
Hugo A. Owens Middle	3
Hickory High	3
Oscar F. Smith High	13
Western Branch High	3
CHESAPEAKE CITY	56
Franklin City High	8
FRANKLIN CITY	8
Gloucester High	16
Page Middle	0
GLOUCESTER COUNTY	16
Bethel High	3
Kecoughtan High	9
Phoebus High	6
HAMPTON CITY	18
Smithfield High	34
Windsor High	4
ISLE OF WIGHT COUNTY	38
Mathews High	35

TABLE 3

VIRTUAL VIRGINIA COURSE ENROLLMENTS AMONG HRETA SCHOOL DIVISIONS, 2011-12

Affiliation	Total
MATHEWS COUNTY	35
Achievable Dream	4
Heritage High	9
Homer L. Hines Middle	2
J.M. Dozier	1
Menchville High	2
Warwick High	1
Woodside High	3
NEWPORT NEWS CITY	22
Norview High	2
NORFOLK CITY	2
Northampton High	8
NORTHAMPTON COUNTY	8
Poquoson High	44
POQUOSON CITY	44
Churchland High	33
I.C. Norcom High	3
PORTSMOUTH CITY	36
Southampton High	34
SOUTHAMPTON COUNTY	34
King's Fork High	6
Lakeland High	4
SUFFOLK CITY	10
Sussex Central High	1
SUSSEX COUNTY	1
Bayside High	1

TABLE 3 VIRTUAL VIRGINIA COURSE ENROLLMENTS AMONG HRETA SCHOOL DIVISIONS, 2011-12	
Affiliation	**Total**
First Colonial High	5
Floyd Kellam High	14
Frank W. Cox High	1
Landstown High	19
Ocean Lakes High	4
Princess Anne High	42
Salem High	1
Tallwood High	1
VIRGINIA BEACH CITY	88
Jamestown High	9
Lafayette High	9
Warhill High	13
WILLIAMSBURG-JAMES CITY	31
Bruton High	32
Grafton High	17
Queens Lake Middle	3
Tabb High	35
Tabb Middle	12
York High	50
York River Academy	2
Yorktown Middle	5
YORK COUNTY	156
HRETA TOTALS	674
Source: WHRO	



WHRO

Hampton Roads' public media affiliate WHRO is a key facilitator of K-12 virtual education in Virginia, beginning with its operation of Virtual Virginia, which it offers by contract with the Department of Education. WHRO is Virginia's only public media affiliate that continues to offer unique educational services in addition to radio and television programming. WHRO is further distinctive in that it is owned and governed by a consortium of 19 public school systems in the Hampton Roads region.[5] Through WHRO, Hampton Roads teachers and students have access to an exceptionally rich menu of virtual education resources. According to WHRO chief education officer Brian Callahan, these resources played a significant role in Middlesex County's decision to join the consortium (formally known as the Hampton Roads Educational Telecommunications Association, or HRETA) in July of this year.

WHRO, as Table 4 reveals, provides 22 online courses that were developed cooperatively, beginning in 2007, with its owner school divisions. All are aligned to the Virginia Standards of Learning and updated annually. As described by WHRO, the courses are "textbook independent, rich-media infused and modular in nature to allow for maximum delivery flexibility." Divisions may customize the courses however they see fit – as a resource for independent study, as an online course taught virtually to students in multiple locations or even as a kind of electronic textbook in a traditional classroom.

According to WHRO, 1,396 students from 16 of its owner school divisions participated in a WHRO online course in the 2012-13 school year (although in many cases, the electronic course material was taught through face-to-face instruction or a hybrid/blended approach). One can see in Table 4 that Hampton Roads students took 532 WHRO courses in the summer of 2012. These statistics are likely to grow given the new requirement that all Virginia students entering the ninth grade must complete at least one online course in order to graduate. WHRO courses are freely available to its owner school divisions, a perk that is unique to the Hampton Roads region. WHRO does, however, offer the courses to other Virginia school divisions for a one-time fee that ranges between $5,950 and $17,100 (dependent upon the Commonwealth's Local Composite Index for school funding). In a blunt but persuasive pitch, WHRO marketing materials urge these divisions: "Invest once in your online courses, or spend forever. It's your call."

WHRO provides local educators with two different digital media on-demand services that may be used either in conjunction with online courses, or in traditional classroom settings. Since 2002, WHRO has coordinated an annual group purchase of Discovery Education Streaming (http://streaming.discoveryeducation.com/) for all Virginia school divisions; this service offers nearly 50,000 content clips that are correlated to the Standards of Learning. The online learning library eMediaVA (www.emediava.org/) is owned and operated by WHRO; it is free (upon registration) to all Virginia teachers and students, including homeschoolers and those at private schools. eMediaVA is a distribution platform for thousands of "digital learning objects" – self-contained video, audio, interactive and/or graphic elements. It is likewise correlated to the Standards of Learning and can be used for a variety of educational purposes. According to eMediaVA, its content comes from PBS, NPR, NASA, the Smithsonian Museums and "dozens of other nationally recognized sources." WHRO reports more than 685,000 regional views of Discovery Education Streaming in 2011-12. Comparable statistics are not yet available for eMediaVA.

Finally, it is worth noting that WHRO's virtual education initiatives are not limited to K-12 students. WHRO is the state coordinator for Virginia's PBS Teacherline (www.virginiateacherline.org), which offers online professional development courses for teachers, enabling them to earn recertification points (and in some cases, graduate credit at James Madison University). WHRO offers its own professional development courses for teachers as well, including (appropriately) Online Teaching Methodology. In 2011-12, 420 teachers from the HRETA-owner schools registered for an online course through WHRO.

[5] See the chapter on WHRO in the 2011 State of the Region report, at: www.odu.edu/forecasting/state-region-reports/2011

TABLE 4

WHRO ONLINE COURSE USAGE DATA FOR 16 WHRO OWNER-MEMBER SCHOOL DIVISIONS

Number of students enrolled in each course for summer 2012:

Courses	Virtual	Hybrid/ Blended	Face-to-Face
Algebra I	3		
Algebra II / Trig	2		
Biology	32		
Earth Science	64		
Econ and Personal Finance			
English 9	37	14	
English 10	63	14	
English 11	65		
English 12	77	21	
Geometry	61	36	
Health and PE 9			
Health and PE 10			
Oceanography			
Physics			
Virginia and U.S. Government	2	29	
Virginia and U.S. History	12		
World History II			
TOTALS	418	114	

TABLE 4

WHRO ONLINE COURSE USAGE DATA FOR 16 WHRO OWNER-MEMBER SCHOOL DIVISIONS

Number of students enrolled in each course for school year 2012-13:

Courses	Virtual	Hybrid/ Blended	Face-to-Face
Algebra I		15	101
Algebra II / Trig			35
Biology	1		187
Earth Science	7		
Econ and Personal Finance	80	120	64
English 9		21	72
English 10		9	28
English 11	1		16
English 12	1		30
Geometry			45
Health and PE 9			67
Health and PE 10			90
Oceanography	15		
Physics			125
Virginia and U.S. Government	233	33	
Virginia and U.S. History			
World History II			
TOTALS	338	198	860

Source: WHRO

Multidivision Online Providers

A brief tour through the Virginia Department of Education's (VDOE) website reveals that multidivision online providers have assumed a prominent role in the Commonwealth's initiatives to promote K-12 virtual learning. The full definition of a "multidivision online provider" may be found at the VDOE website.[6] In brief, it is a private or nonprofit organization that enters into a contract with a local school board, or with multiple school boards, to provide online courses to K-12 students. A local school board may itself become a multidivision online provider if it offers an online learning program that enrolls a significant number (more than 10 percent) of out-of-district Virginia students.

Table 5 contains a list of the 18 multidivision online providers that were approved in the 2012-13 school year. It is a diverse group of providers, indicating program capacity ranging from 215 to an "unlimited" number of students. All offer high school courses; some offer courses for the middle school and elementary school levels as well. Among the providers are two Virginia school divisions (Chesterfield County and York County), one postsecondary institution (Brigham Young University) and one independent nonprofit organization (The VHS Collaborative). Florida Virtual School is a "private/public alliance" between Pearson, the world's leading education company, and Florida's public schools.

The remaining 14 providers are for-profit businesses of varying types and sizes. Some are privately held or owned by private equity firms; others are publicly traded. Some are a small part of much larger enterprises (most notably Pearson, which owns the Financial Times, Penguin Random House and numerous other publishing imprints and educational services). Most are not just in the business of offering online courses. They or their parent companies may also sell educational software, blended learning objects, digital curricula, interactive simulations, and other kinds of learning tools and services that were mostly unheard of a generation ago. Virtual learning has become a large and lucrative business, and it is still in a phase of expansion and consolidation. Several providers have changed names and ownership since they were first approved by the VDOE two years ago. (For example: EdOptions was acquired by Plato Learning in November 2011; Plato Learning had itself been acquired by the private equity firm Thoma Bravo in May 2010. A new conglomerate, Edmentum, was created in November 2012.)

The VDOE's full criteria for the approval of multidivision online providers are available online.[7] All teachers hired by a provider to teach Virginia students must be licensed in Virginia and the student-to-teacher ratio of an online program may not exceed 150:1. Academic standards must meet or exceed the Virginia Standards of Learning. Multidivision online providers must be accredited by one of a short list of recognized agencies; in practice, AdvancEd is the sole accreditor. Tammy McGraw, director of the VDOE Office of Educational Technology, wrote to us that the department requires "documentation regarding accreditation from all providers as part of the Multidivision Online Provider application process. … We confirm accreditation status as part of our annual monitoring activities and will require documentation again after three years."

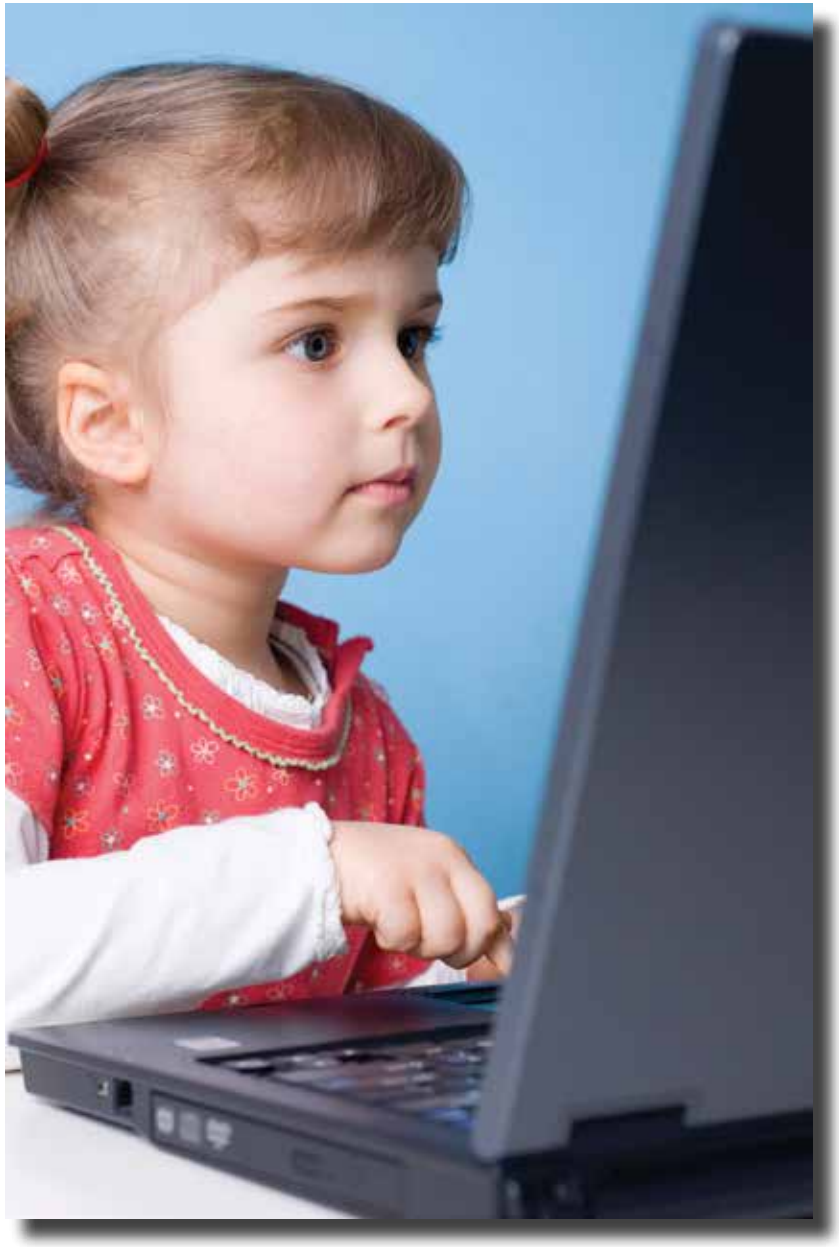
In March 2013, we identified an apparent discrepancy in the accreditation of two of the multidivision online providers that were recognized by the Commonwealth for the 2012-13 school year. AdvancEd reported to us that American Virtual Academy (Flipswitch) was no longer accredited. Three online schools owned by Glynlyon Inc. were accredited – but not, apparently, Glynlyon-Odysseyware. The VDOE did not respond to our inquiry about this discrepancy in its accreditation list.

[6] www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/virtual_learning/virtual_schools/faq.pdf

[7] www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/virtual_learning/virtual_schools/providers/application/criteria_for_multidivision_provider.pdf

On its website, the VDOE maintains a wealth of statistics about the enrollment and performance of Virginia public schools. No data are currently available, however, on these schools' participation in virtual learning. This gap includes how many students are taking online courses either full- or part-time, online course pass rates or other measures of academic achievement, or which divisions have contracted with which online providers. Virginia law states: "By July 1, 2011, local school boards shall post on their websites information regarding online courses and programs that are available through the school division."[8] In practice, however, we found that this information was not comprehensive or easily accessible, or available on many school websites.

Eight of 17 Hampton Roads school divisions responded to our informal survey about their students' participation in virtual learning. All of these school divisions had high school students who were enrolled in online courses; some indicated that a small number of their middle school and elementary school students were enrolled in online courses as well. Virtual Virginia and WHRO were the most frequently cited providers. Most school divisions had contracted with at least one multidivision online provider, although no one provider was clearly dominant throughout the region.



[8] www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/virtual_learning/virtual_schools/divisions/division_model_policies_procedures.pdf

TABLE 5

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION-APPROVED MULTIDIVISION ONLINE PROVIDERS LIST, SCHOOL YEAR: 2012-13

Provider/Location/URL	Accreditation	Program Types	Target Population	Program Capacity	Grades Served	Owned/ Operated By
Accelerate Education Seattle, WA http://accelerate-ed.com	AdvancEd	Full-time, Supplemental, Fully online, Others	Full-time, Credit recovery, Expanded options	215	K - 12	Accelerate Education Inc. (FP)
Apex Learning Seattle, WA www.apexlearning.com	AdvancEd	Full-time, Supplemental, Fully online, Computer-based instruction, Others	Full-time, Credit recovery, Expanded options, Advance placement	Unlimited	Grades 9 -12	Apex Learning Inc. (FP)
BYU Independent Study Provo, UT http://elearn.byu.edu	AdvancEd	Full-time, Supplemental, Fully online, Computer-based instruction, Others	Full-time, Credit recovery, Expanded options, Advance placement	16,500	Grades 7 -12	Brigham Young University (NFP)
CCPSOnline-Chesterfield County Public Schools Richmond, VA http://ccpsonline.ccpsnet.net	N/A	Full-time, Supplemental	Expanded options	2,000	Grades 9 -12	Chesterfield County Public Schools (NFP)
Cambium Education Inc. (Lincoln National Academy) Frederick, CO http://lna.class.com/	AdvancEd	Full-time, Supplemental, Fully online	Full-time, Credit recovery, Expanded options	Unlimited	Grades 9 -12	Cambium Learning Group Inc. (FP, publicly traded)

Sources: Provider websites and the Virginia Department of Education, at: www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/virtual_learning/virtual_schools

TABLE 5

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION-APPROVED MULTIDIVISION ONLINE PROVIDERS LIST, SCHOOL YEAR: 2012-13

Provider/Location/URL	Accreditation	Program Types	Target Population	Program Capacity	Grades Served	Owned/ Operated By
CompuHigh, LLC Morgantown, WV http://compuhigh.com	AdvanceEd	Full-time, Supplemental, Computer-based instruction	Full-time, Credit recovery, Expanded options, Others	2,000	Grades 8 - 12	Compuhigh, LLC (FP)
Connections Academy, LLC Baltimore, MD http://connectionsacademy.com	AdvancEd	Full-time, Supplemental, Fully online, Others	Full-time, Credit recovery, Expanded options, Advance placement, Others	50,000	PK - 12	Pearson PRC (FP, publicly traded)
E2020 Inc. (renamed Edgenuity in 2013) Scottsdale, AZ http://education2020.com	AdvancEd	Full-time, Supplemental, Fully online, Computer-based instruction, Others	Full-time, Credit recovery, Expanded options, Advance placement	7,500	Grades 6 - 12	Weld North, LLC (private equity firm)
EdOptions Online Academy Falls Church, VA http://edoptionsacademy.com	AdvancEd, VCPE	Full-time, Supplemental, Fully online, Others	Full-time, Credit recovery, Others	5,000	Grades 6 - 12	Edmentum Inc. (FP, owned by private equity firm Thoma Bravo, LLC)

Sources: Provider websites and the Virginia Department of Education, at: www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/virtual_learning/virtual_schools

TABLE 5

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION-APPROVED MULTIDIVISION ONLINE PROVIDERS LIST, SCHOOL YEAR: 2012-13

Provider/Location/URL	Accreditation	Program Types	Target Population	Program Capacity	Grades Served	Owned/ Operated By
EdisonLearning Inc. New York, NY http://edisonlearning.com	AdvancEd	Full-time, Supplemental, Fully online, Computer-based instruction, Others	Full-time, Expanded options	15,000	Grades 9 - 12	EdisonLearning Inc. (FP)
Flipswitch (formerly known as American Virtual Academy) Chandler, AZ http://flipswitch.com/va		Full-time, Supplemental, Fully online, Computer-based instruction	Full-time, Credit recovery, Expanded options	100,000	Grades 6 - 12	
Florida Virtual School Orlando, FL http://flvs.net	AdvancEd	Full-time, Supplemental	Credit recovery, Expanded options, Advance placement	100,000	Grades 6 - 12	"Private/ public alliance" (Pearson / Florida public schools)
Glynlyon-Odysseyware Chandler, AZ http://www.odysseyware.com		Full-time, Supplemental, Fully online, Computer-based instruction	Full-time, Credit recovery, Expanded options	Unlimited	Grades 3 -12	Glynlyon Inc. (FP)
K12 Virtual Schools, LLC Herndon, VA http://www.k12.com	AdvancEd	Full-time, Supplemental, Fully online, Computer-based instruction, Others	Full-time, Credit recovery, Expanded options, Advance placement, Others	1,221,000	PK - 12	K12 Inc. (FP, publicly traded)

Sources: Provider websites and the Virginia Department of Education, at: www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/virtual_learning/virtual_schools

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Provider/Location/URL	Accreditation	Program Types	Target Population	Program Capacity	Grades Served	Owned/ Operated By
Plato Learning Inc. Bloomington, MN http://plato.com	AdvancEd	Full-time, Supplemental, Fully online	Full-time, Credit recovery, Others	5,000	Grades 6 - 12	Edmentum (FP, private equity firm Thoma Bravo, LLC)
Proximity Learning Inc. (mylanguage360) Austin, TX http://mylanguage360.com	AdvancEd	Fully online, Computer-based instruction, Others	Full-time, Credit recovery, Expanded options, Others	Unlimited	Grades 4 - 12	Proximity Learning Inc. (FP)
The VHS Collaborative Maynard, MA http://www.govhs.org	AdvancEd	Supplemental	Expanded options, Advance placement	150,000	Grades 6 - 12	VHS Inc. (NFP)
York County School Division Yorktown VA http://yorkcountyschools.org/virtuallearning	N/A	Fully online	Full-time, Credit recovery	100	Grades 7 - 12	York County Public Schools (NFP)

Sources: Provider websites and the Virginia Department of Education, at: www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/virtual_learning/virtual_schools

Funding

The initial push to expand online learning in Virginia does not seem to have been accompanied by equally intensive consideration concerning how new full-time virtual schools might best be funded. The Commonwealth's longstanding school funding formula is based upon students attending bricks-and-mortar institutions in the same communities in which they live. Virginia school divisions are funded in part by their localities, and in part by the state. Standards of Quality establish the minimum funding levels. The state contribution to local school divisions is determined by a mechanism known as the Local Composite Index; the wealthier a community, the less it receives in per-student state funding. **How much, then, should the Commonwealth contribute to a virtual school that is attended by students who reside throughout Virginia, and possibly out of state as well?**

The inequities of the current system are readily apparent in the oft-cited example of Virginia Virtual Academy, a full-time, K-8 virtual school located in Carroll County (southwest Virginia) and operated by multidivision online provider K12 Inc. As one of Virginia's poorer counties, Carroll County receives a comparatively large state subsidy. In 2010-11, the state paid $5,612 for each Carroll County student, including those at Virtual Virginia Academy, although just four of more than 350 students actually resided in the county. In some cases, the Commonwealth of Virginia paid more than twice as much per student than it would have paid had these students remained at a bricks-and-mortar school in their home communities. Carroll County kept some of the state money, but more flowed back to K12 Inc. Critics complained that scarce public funds were enhancing the bottom line of a company that had most recently claimed a net income of $21.5 million and also donated generously to Gov. McDonnell's 2009 election campaign and inaugural committee.[9]

The Carroll County example not only raises the issue of how state funds for virtual schools ought to be allocated, but also focuses attention on how much virtual education actually costs. Most observers agree that the day-to-day operation of virtual schools costs significantly less than that of their bricks-and-mortar counterparts. Indeed, cost efficiency is among the frequently touted virtues of virtual learning. Student-teacher ratios are typically much larger and there is no physical building to maintain. On the other hand, the start-up costs necessary to achieve the kinds of economies of scale now enjoyed by a company like K12 Inc. are considerable. Where does this leave us? **One recent report suggests that the price tag of full-time, online education is around 65 percent of that in a bricks-and-mortar classroom.[10]**

Throughout the 50 states, no single funding model prevails for virtual education. Many state virtual schools (like Virtual Virginia) are funded through a fixed line-item appropriation. Others are funded in the same manner as physical charter schools, either at the same or a lower level. Enthusiasts of online learning tend to argue that public funds should follow the student, rather than be linked to a particular locality. A few states, such as Florida and Utah, have begun to link virtual school funding to student outcomes (such as the number of courses passed), instead of traditional measures like seat time or average daily membership (ADM). What does seem clear is that funding mechanisms designed for bricks-and-mortar schools do not transfer neatly to the virtual arena. States that support virtual schools must carefully consider how these institutions can be funded fairly.

The General Assembly has taken up this issue every year since 2011, with no clear resolution in sight. **In 2013, Staunton Delegate Dickie Bell proposed to establish a "Virginia State Virtual School" as a statewide school division. The idea was that students anywhere in Virginia could enroll in this division, selecting from any of the approved full-time programs that are offered by the multidivision online providers.** Online providers would no longer need to contract individually with local school divisions, and the new virtual school division "would be funded through transfers of students' state

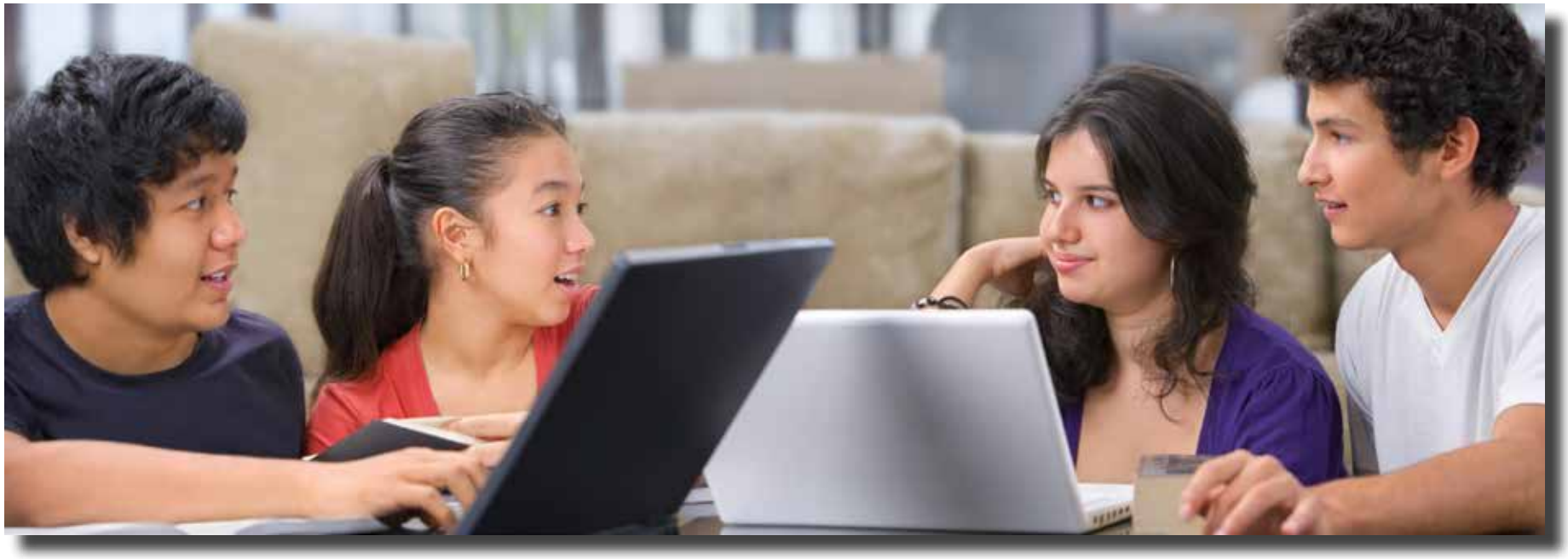
[9] Deirdre Fernandes, "System for virtual academy's funding is flawed, critics say," The Virginian-Pilot, Feb. 21, 2011, at: http://hamptonroads.com/2011/02/system-virtual-virginia-academy-flawed-critics-say; Lyndsey Layton and Emma Brown, "Virtual schools are multiplying, but some question their educational value," The Washington Post, Nov. 26, 2011, at: http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2011-11-26/local/35283370_1_virtual-schools-virtual-education-support-school-choice

[10] Christian N. Braunlich, "Students Without Borders: Funding Online Education in Virginia," Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy, November 2011, p. 1, at: www.thomasjeffersoninst.org/files/3/21433%20Virtual%20Booklet.pdf

and local share of the Standards of Quality per-pupil funding, not to exceed $6,500."[11]

House Bill 1555 was an attempt to facilitate student access to full-time virtual schools as well as to create a mechanism by which public education funds would "follow the student." It ultimately did not move out of the House Appropriations Committee. Questions about the constitutionality of creating a separate school district hurt the bill's chances, as did concerns about directing public education funds away from already cash-strapped local school divisions.

Anne Wescott, assistant superintendent for policy and education at the VDOE, told us that the proposal would itself require significant fiscal resources to implement. She said that although both the governor and the General Assembly have looked at the issue of virtual school funding for several years, a viable formula has not yet been found: "I think as time goes on and we have more experience with full-time virtual schools, we'll come up with a solution, but we're just not quite there yet."



[11] Bacon's Rebellion, Jan. 9, 2013, at: www.baconsrebellion.com/2013/01/thinking-outside-the-school-yard.html. See also HB 1555, at: http://leg1.state.va.us/cgi-bin/legp504.exe?131+ful+HB1555+pdf

Outcomes

The discussion about funding reflects some of the ambiguity among educational experts, the media and the public at large about the virtues of online schooling. Many Americans outside the education community were unaware of the field's tremendous growth until the fall of 2011, when Mother Jones, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Nation and The Washington Post all published investigations into the subject, as did the National Education Policy Center at the University of Colorado Boulder.[12] **The authors raised concerns about the quality of many online courses, as well as the degree to which corporate interests had become involved in shaping educational policy. Troubling anecdotes abounded: unsupervised students clicking mindlessly through lessons, or cutting and pasting answers from other sources. Some online teachers reported unmanageable class sizes, or pressure from their employers to pass underperforming students in order to keep course enrollments up and clients satisfied. In too many cases, the practice of K-12 virtual education seemed not to live up to its promise.**

Because the field of K-12 virtual learning is so new, it is largely uncharted territory. This is particularly true of full-time virtual schools. A frequently cited scholarly authority is a 2010 U.S. Department of Education meta-analysis of the many different studies of online learning that were conducted between 1996 and 2008. The somewhat underwhelming main finding of the study? **"Few rigorous research studies of the effectiveness of online learning for K-12 students have been published."** The authors found that "students in online conditions performed modestly better, on average, than those learning the same material through traditional face-to-face instruction," but they also noted that the efficacy of online learning varied substantially across different content and learner types. These conclusions were drawn largely from studies involving undergraduates and older students. The report's executive summary ends with the observation that **"without new random assignment or controlled quasi-experimental studies of the effects of online learning options for K-12 students, policymakers will lack scientific evidence of the effectiveness of these emerging alternatives to face-to-face instruction."**[13]

The K-12 teachers and administrators in our region with whom we communicated were optimistic, but cautious, about the potential of virtual learning. One wrote to us that "eLearning has opened doors and provided opportunities for our students to be successful, responsible, and take ownership of their learning through engaging, interactive instruction. It offers an alternative to the traditional educational setting and makes learning possible anywhere, anytime." Others emphasized that online courses were most successful when presented in a blended learning environment. One wrote: "Students at this level do not usually have the self-motivation to complete an online course without some sort of additional monitoring and oversight by a learning coach. … The use of online content can be very engaging for students. However, it does not begin to replace the value of an effective teacher."

Virtual learning is not a magic bullet, but it is an important resource that can contribute to a strong and well-rounded 21st-century education. As Hampton Roads schools expand their online course offerings, it is critical that they do so in a manner that serves their students' best interests – not merely to trim expenses, or as a means of moving troublesome or special-needs students quickly through the system. Successful online learning initiatives require thoughtful investment, not only in new technologies, but also in curriculum development, teacher training, and student preparation and supervision.

[12] Gene V. Glass and Kevin G. Wehner, "Online K-12 Schooling in the U.S.: Uncertain Private Ventures in Need of Public Regulation" (Boulder: National Education Policy Center, 2011), at: http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/online-k-12-schooling; Stephanie Mencimer, "Jeb Bush's Cyber Attack on Public Schools," Mother Jones, Oct. 13, 2011, at: http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/10/jeb-bush-digitial-learning-public-schools; Morgan Smith, "Online Educators Gaining Both Classes and Critics," The New York Times, Oct. 14, 2011, at: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/14/us/online-educators-make-inroads-in-public-schools.html; Stephanie Banchero and Stephanie Simon, "My Teacher is an App," The Wall Street Journal, Nov. 12, 2011, at: http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204358004577030600066250144.html; Lee Fang, "How Online Learning Companies Bought America's Schools," The Nation, Nov. 16, 2011, at: http://www.thenation.com/article/164651/how-online-learning-companies-bought-americas-schools; Lyndsey Layton and Emma Brown, "Virtual schools are multiplying, but some question their educational value," The Washington Post, Nov. 26, 2011, at: http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2011-11-26/local/35283370_1_virtual-schools-virtual-education-support-school-choice; Stephanie Saul, "Profits and Questions at Online Charter Schools," The New York Times, Dec. 12, 2011, at: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/13/education/online-schools-score-better-on-wall-street-than-in-classrooms.html

[13] U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development, "Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies" (Washington, D.C., 2010) xiv-xviii, at: http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/evidence-based-practices/finalreport.pdf