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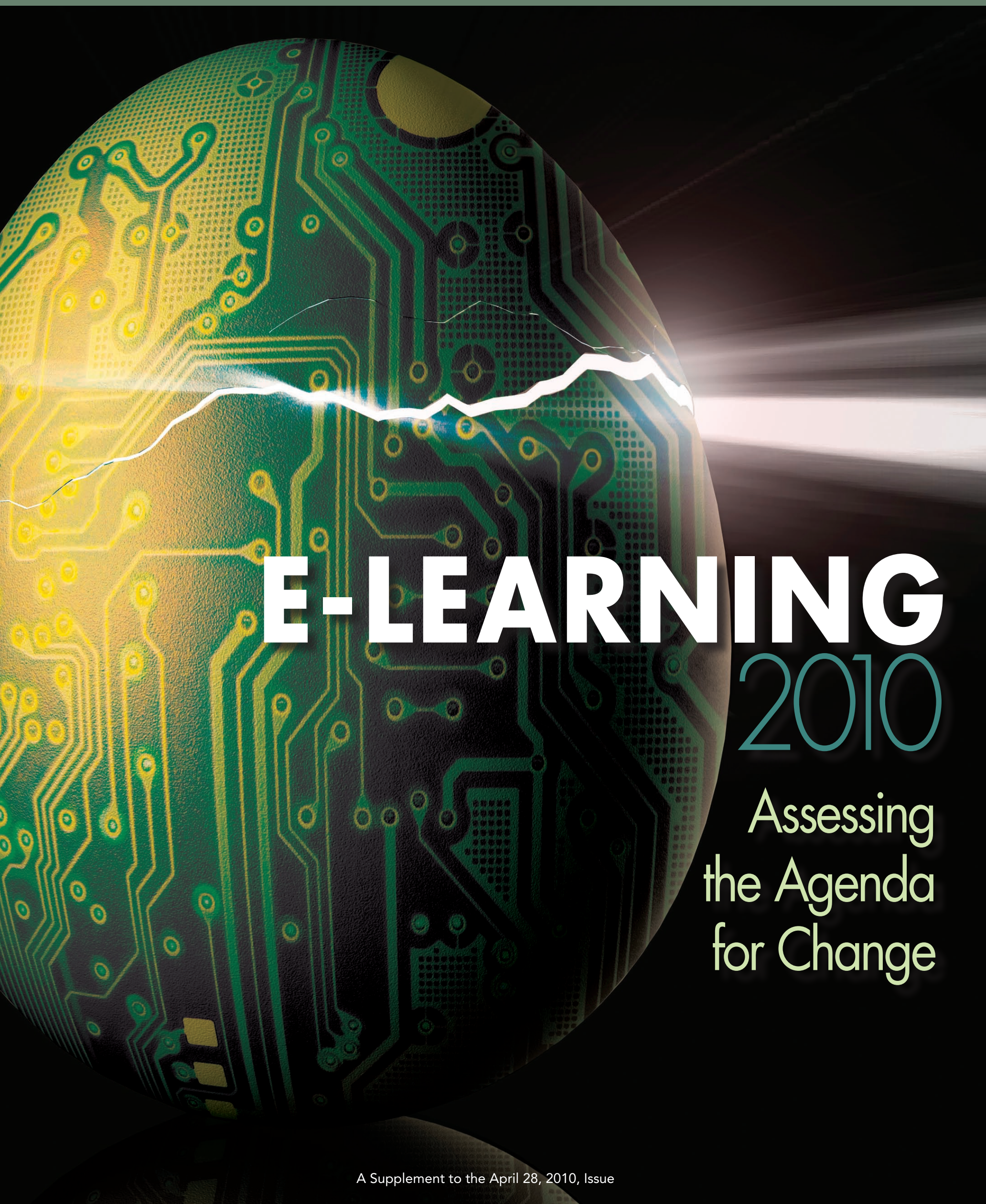

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Assessing the Agenda for Change

A Supplement to the April 28, 2010, Issue

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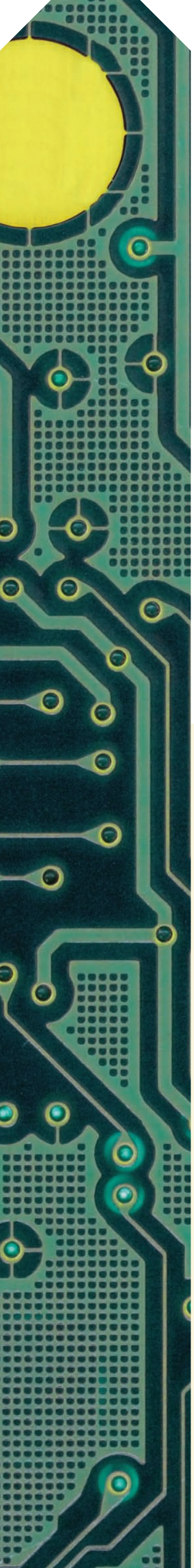

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E-Learning Special Report 2010

Assessing the Agenda for Change

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ONLINE

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Wednesday, April 28, 2 p.m. Eastern Time

Register for this webinar to learn more about how to build online-only courses that meet state standards and engage students, the best ways for using e-courses from outside providers, and how to create a high-quality, multimedia-rich online curriculum.

Featured Guests: Donna Hutchison, chief executive officer, Idaho Digital Learning Academy; Martha P. Rizzuto, superintendent, Tarrant City Schools, Tarrant, Ala.

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On-Demand Webinar: Online Learning in a Hybrid World

This webinar was streamed live on April 8; you can register to view it on your own time. The session outlines how a hybrid model of face-to-face and Internet-based coursework is emerging as the most popular form of e-learning in brick-and-mortar schools, but notes that it takes more than computer access to create a successful hybrid learning program.

Featured Guests: Susan D. Patrick, president and chief executive officer, International Association for K-12 Online Learning; Prakash B. Patel, computer science teacher, Quakertown Community Senior High School, Quakertown, Pa.

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Online Chat: District Strategies for E-Learning

Tuesday, May 4, Noon to 1 p.m. Eastern Time

Sign up to participate in an online chat about how districts are using online courses to supplement their curricula.

Featured Guests: Themistocles Sparangis, chief technology director, Educational Technology, Los Angeles Unified School District, Joanne E. Hopper, director of education services, St. Clair County Regional Educational Service, Marysville, Mich.

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

Virginia Gov. Bob McDonnell signed legislation this month promoting the growth of virtual schools. The new law requires the state to develop policies for approving and monitoring a wide array of private and nonprofit online education providers.

The legislative action in Virginia is the most recent major policy move by a state to expand the opportunities for students to take online-only courses from a variety of providers.

The law mirrors the growth of e-learning across the country and the need to focus on the quality of online courses and whether they meet state standards and push K-12 learning to a higher, more interactive level.

This special report aims to highlight the progress made in the e-learning arena, as well as the administrative, funding, and policy barriers that some experts say are slowing the growth of this form of education. It also examines the trends that are likely to force policymakers to re-examine the current rules of engagement for virtual learning.

Local districts, in particular, are finding that a mix of face-to-face classes and online-only courses, an approach called blended or hybrid learning, is proving to be effective because it plays to students' strengths and weaknesses. *(See Page S4.)*

"The whole notion of schools going blended is something that is going to get more national attention," said Richard E. Ferdig, a research professor at the Research Center for Educational Technology at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio. "There are so many technology resources out there, why wouldn't you want your students to gain access to them?"

Some districts and states are embracing online learning as a so-called "disruptive innovation," in which difficult circumstances force organizations to use tactics that go against traditional approaches or transform them. In the Detroit area, for instance, a local district with a high dropout rate and declining enrollment opened a cyber high school, which is aimed at helping lure dropouts and at-risk students into the district and get them back on track to graduate. The new virtual program has helped draw in new students, increasing enrollment and the state funding that follows students. *(See Page S6.)*

Yet barriers to expansion of high-quality online learning remain. For instance, some state policies limit the growth of online coursetaking. *(See Page S8.)*.

Looking ahead, though, online learning is likely to play a critical role in changing the way K-12 education operates. ■

—KEVIN BUSHWELLER, EXECUTIVE PROJECT EDITOR

Schools Factoring E-Courses Into the Daily Learning Mix

Educators say 'hybrid' approach is taking off because it offers academic classes not otherwise available to many students

BY MICHELLE R. DAVIS

The school district in Notus, Idaho, a town of about 600 residents in the southwest part of the state, is using online courses to offer classes students otherwise couldn't take.

It isn't a stretch to say that the 200 students at Notus Jr. Sr. High School live far away from the kinds of services many people take for granted. But even in their rural Idaho school, students' choices of classes include French and Spanish, college-level study, digital photography, and criminal justice.

That's because Principal Benjamin M. Merrill has created "Pirate Academy," a roster of online courses that students can take as part of their regular school day.

"My kids are so limited in terms of where they live, I thought it was unfair that their courses should be limited," said Mr. Merrill, who was also recently named the superintendent of the 330-student Notus School District #135 and serves as the high school football coach. "Now they get to have the same quality of education because of online learning."

Rural districts, urban districts, and those in between are starting to embrace online classes—and not just as curricular supplements, electives, and advanced courses. School officials are now viewing such classes as an integral part of their offerings, to be factored into daily schedules as much as traditional face-to-face classes.

This blended or hybrid approach is a tactic that experts say is one of the fastest-growing areas of online coursetaking.

The growth of online coursetaking in places like Notus, Idaho, mirrors the national trend. A 2009 report from the Sloan Consortium, a Newburyport, Mass.-based advocacy group for online education, found that the number of K-12 students using online courses rose to more than a million public school students during the 2007-08 school year. That was a 47 percent increase from 2005-06.

"The whole notion of schools going blended is something that is going to get more national attention," said Richard E. Ferdig, a research professor at the Research Center for Educational Technology at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio. "There are so many technology resources out there, why wouldn't you want your students to gain access to them?"

Virtual Lessons Learned

Over the past few years, schools and researchers have pinpointed some strategies for successfully incorporating online classes into the regular school day, Mr. Ferdig said.

One critical element is providing an in-school mentor—not necessarily a subject-matter expert—who can walk students through any basic academic or technical problems with an online course.

"We've shown time and time again," Mr. Ferdig said, "that the extent to which the face-to-face school provides online mentors is directly correlated to how successful the students are."

At Notus Jr. Sr. High, where all students take at least one online course during the school year, that's the setup Mr. Merrill has adopted. Notus uses online courses provided by the state-sponsored Idaho Digital Learning Academy, or IDLA, created seven years ago by district superintendents who believed that cooperatively they could generate high-level online courses that met state standards. The academy has its own online teaching staff.

The Notus school building has a room equipped with 18 personal computers dedicated to online classes during the regular school day. Since many students in the district either don't have a computer at home or don't have high-speed Internet access, Mr. Merrill said he made it a point to have high-quality computers at school.

During each period of the school day, the classroom may be filled with students taking a variety of different courses. It's staffed by an adult solely assigned to monitor and aid the students in their online work.

"The teacher of the online math course might live in a different town, but the classroom aide can probably answer about 80 percent of the questions," Mr. Merrill said. The online courses have "changed how we do scheduling and how we look at education."

The courses have also saved money. Mr. Merrill said he doesn't have the resources to hire a Spanish teacher, for example, and the IDLA courses cost him only $50 per student per class.

Online in L.A.

But it's not only rural districts seeking out online courses.

Themistocles Sparangis, the chief technology director for the 680,000-student Los Angeles Unified School District, said online courses are some of the most popular options in his district.

The courses are often programmed into school schedules, much as they are in the Notus district, or students take an independent-study approach, working in the library or with a computer teacher during their free time.

Mr. Sparangis said the Los Angeles district, too, has had the most success with online classes when schools provide a facilitating teacher for students in real time as a support, even though the instructor is online.

That facilitating teacher does everything from coordinating lab activities in science courses and helping students get online to overseeing work that's printed out and done on paper, Mr. Sparangis said.

He said the district taps a wide variety of online providers for its courses, including for-profit companies, colleges, and nonprofit organizations.

Students often choose to take online courses during the school day because of a scheduling conflict; because they have a specific interest in a subject not offered at their schools; or for credit recovery,

Photos by Joe Jaszewski

Notus Jr. Sr. High School Principal Benjamin M. Merrill created a roster of online courses that students can take as part of their regular school day.

E-Learning Delivery Debated

Experts weigh 'anytime, anywhere' learning approach vs. fixed time frames for classes

BY IAN QUILLEN

Just as the model of blended learning is pulling the worlds of virtual and brick-and-mortar schools together, new theories within virtual learning are bridging the divide between synchronous and asynchronous instructional methods.

Online educators say they once debated whether to deliver courses synchronously, by allowing access to instruction during a given time, or asynchronously, by allowing access anytime and anywhere. Now, they are designing approaches that meld both methods.

"The online model is really designed to be flexible for the individual student," said Pam Birtolo, the chief learning officer of the Orlando-based Florida Virtual School, or FLVS, which is seen as a trendsetter in virtual education. "I don't know that you can separate the two anymore."

Though synchronous and asynchronous means of instruction are no longer at theoretical odds, considering the benefits of each approach is still important, educators say. And it's especially important to be aware of ways to incorporate both approaches when possible, such as maintaining archives of a one-time live webinar or prompting a message-board discussion around a video presentation.

"I think that asynchronous instruction is made much stronger by blending in some synchronous tools," said Liz Pape, the president and chief executive officer of the Virtual High School Global Consortium, based in Maynard, Mass. "The other thing to keep in mind is that good synchronous [content] has archiving capabilities that enable it to act like asynchronous [content]."

Following are some of the benefits of synchronous and asynchronous instruction, as identified by Ms. Birtolo, Ms. Pape, and three other experts on virtual education.

SYNCHRONOUS BENEFITS

Problem-Solving: The choice to deliver courses synchronously or asynchronously sometimes depends on the subject. In math or the physical sciences, where much of the work is based around problem-solving through logical sequences or equations, immediate, synchronous feedback from an instructor is advantageous.

Christa Ehmann Powers, the vice president of education at Smarthinking, a Washington-based online-tutoring service, said her service's math students overwhelmingly choose synchronous tutoring. "My argument would be that there are certain subjects, given their very nature, that are more relatable or more appropriate for synchronous work," she said.

Discussion Flow: Instructors might want to keep class discussions in a real-time format if the topic is one that requires the teacher to be an active mediator. Students may be very comfortable with e-mail and discussion forums among friends. But they can become hesitant when a teacher tries to step in to such ongoing conversations, said Myk Garn, the associate director of the educational technology cooperative of the Atlanta-based Southern Regional Education Board.

"It takes a very skillful instructor to insert themselves into that [asynchronous] discussion," said Mr. Garn. "It's kind of like the coda to it, and the discussion ends."

Younger Students: As virtual learning expands from the postsecondary level all the way into kindergarten, younger students have become more proficient with the technology needed to take part in virtual learning. But early-elementary pupils who are uncomfortable navigating forums or even using a keyboard to communicate may benefit from synchronous instruction in a webinar format, said John Watson, the primary author of "Keeping Pace With K-12 Online Learning," a study from the Evergreen Education Group, a consulting group based in Evergreen, Colo.

Increased Teacher Access: Synchronous instruction can occur outside of class time and on a one-to-one basis when teachers set online office hours to be reachable by video or online chat. Students who need additional help are often better able to articulate their challenges to an instructor who is giving immediate feedback in that set time-frame, Ms. Birtolo said.

Standardized Testing: While the allure of virtual learning for full- and part-time students is often the flexibility to complete coursework at one's own pace and availability, many virtual courses are still subject to standardized testing. And it's much easier to maintain a test's integrity in a synchronous online format, said Mr. Garn.

Clubs and Socialization: Many of the supplemental organizations that enrich education in regular schools can be replicated in virtual schools through real-time online meetings. At FLVS, said Ms. Birtolo, students participate in Future Business Leaders of America, a science club, and the Model United Nations, among other clubs, through synchronous communication.

Synchronous Archives: Just because instruction is delivered in a synchronous manner doesn't mean it has to disappear into a vacuum. The best synchronous instruction, whether a video lecture, a live chat, or a webinar, can be archived for students to recall in an asynchronous manner, Ms. Pape said.

CASE FOR ASYNCHRONOUS

More Time Better Than Real Time: The most straightforward benefit of instruction that can be accessed at any time is that the learning process is suddenly not constrained by the clock. Students receiving asynchronous instruction who struggle in one subject and excel in another can devote more of their time to comprehending the subject in which they're struggling. English-language learners especially benefit if, for example, they understand the concepts in a science or math course but need time to translate lectures.

And teachers who spark a lively discussion can transfer the momentum to an online forum if the period ends before the debate does.

"In reality, you've extended the class day for the kids," Ms. Pape said. "It's no longer dependent upon the school bell."

Critical Thinking: Just as problem-solving may correspond to synchronous instruction, critical thinking and writing may fit better with asynchronous teaching. Writing may be more personal, making synchronous instruction a bit more threatening, said Ms. Powers. But contemporary models for teaching writing also transfer better to an instructional method that requires students to take more ownership, she said.

"If you're aligned with some of the late thinking on how to teach composition and rhetoric and writing as a process, then that all falls in line," Ms. Powers said.

How Students Live: Today's students live large portions of their social lives through text messages, Facebook posts, and e-mail chains. While teachers may feel more comfortable communicating in real time, their students have a higher comfort level when they can access advice anytime. For example, Ms. Birtolo said, FLVS students increasingly prefer text-message instruction to phone or online audio instruction.

"You can watch the trends that are happening [in the general public] so you can know what the trends are going to be in online learning," Ms. Birtolo said. "The texting thing, that just makes sense."

Less Is More: Teachers who don't teach online sometimes fear communication with students will break down in an asynchronous setting, but online instructors find the need to be proactive actually improves the teacher-student relationship.

"We sometimes hear that 'We know our students online better than in a face-to-face class,' " said Mr. Watson. "The sense, I think, is they have to be so in touch with students because at a distance it helps get them a better understanding [of each other]."

Global Standard Time: Distance learning in some virtual classes involves enrolling students from all over the globe. That international reach can greatly improve discussion on message boards, especially if the course covers world issues in social studies, history, or geography, for example. But when students in the same class are 12 time zones apart, finding a common time for synchronous instruction can be nearly impossible.

Asynchronous Doesn't Mean Slow: The line between asynchronous and synchronous communication is blurred by new communication platforms and by increased time spent on computers. Technically, for example, an e-mail is an asynchronous communication, while an instant message is synchronous. But in both cases, it's the attentiveness of the instructor and the student, rather than the method of instruction, that dictates the time lapse, Mr. Watson said. ■

one of the fastest-growing areas of online course offerings, in which students who have not passed a class can go back and earn credit for it.

"On the credit-recovery side, it adds another dimension to give them the opportunity to learn the content in a different way, which can be more differentiated for their learning style," Mr. Sparangis said.

The seven school districts within the St. Clair County Regional Educational Service Agency, based in Marysville, Mich., are using online courses in a variety of innovative ways, said Joanne E. Hopper, the agency's director of education.

The agency first began using credit-recovery classes in 2008 purchased through an online-course provider, Education2020, based in Scottsdale, Ariz. Now, high schools served by the agency are also using the courses for regular instructional support, Ms. Hopper said.

For example, if students struggle on a particular math unit in a face-to-face classroom, they will be given that part of the online course to do on their own time as review.

Other schools served by the regional agency are considering the use of online courses as a supplement to the face-to-face versions by assigning students who are struggling to do a second hour of the same coursework online. One high school already requires every student to take two hours of online coursework per day; students can schedule it whenever they like, working on it from home or in school, Ms. Hopper said.

"We think online learning is very critical," she said. "We need to build course offerings that teach more than just rote learning." ■

Detroit-Area District Innovates To Address Dropout Problem

Cyber high school is having success re-engaging dropouts and at-risk students, earning state funds tied to enrollment

BY MICHELLE R. DAVIS

By any measure, the Detroit area's high-school-dropout problem is a crisis.

The Motor City area has one of the highest dropout rates in the country, which experts say contributes to the city's economic stagnation and high crime rate, and strains state and local aid programs.

The dropout rate has a heavy financial impact on the more than 30 school districts in the Detroit metropolitan area, many of which have high percentages of low-income and minority students. As students drop out and others move to suburban districts, local education budgets are slashed even further because state funding is directly tied to student enrollment.

But Westwood Cyber High School, a new online program sponsored by the 2,500-student Westwood Community School District near Detroit aimed at helping struggling students earn their diplomas in virtual classes, is having success re-engaging area dropouts and at-risk students. It is luring students from the Detroit area, and the state money tied to them, into the Westwood district.

"This problem is very, very serious," said Sharif M. Shakrani, the co-director of the Education Policy Center at Michigan State University in East Lansing. "When the economy was clicking on all burners a few years ago, we didn't worry about it as much, because a lot of these students could get jobs. Now that is not the case."

To help combat the dropout problem, Michigan state officials have held dropout-prevention summits, instituted a "dropout challenge" for schools, and pumped millions into school improvements, including support for online courses. With a dropout rate that Mr. Shakrani estimates at 40 percent or higher for the school districts in metropolitan Detroit, many education officials are now watching the Westwood cyber high school program closely to see if its model proves successful.

Enrollment Triples

Students at the cyber high school are often passionate about the projects they choose to work on, eager to collaborate with their peers on schoolwork, and highly self-motivated. But they are also students who in traditional schools were at risk of dropping out.

The cyber high school program uses a blend of online classes, project-based learning, and optional face-to-face support to coax once-reluctant learners to find their inner academic.

"This program addresses the dropout crisis and is a total change of a model of instruction," said Bruce Umpstead, the director of Michigan's office of educational technology. "It hits the sweet spot."

Mr. Umpstead got the idea for the program from a United Kingdom organization that created a similar program for dropouts there, and the Westwood school district agreed to launch the cyber high school program. The predominantly low-income, minority district was losing students and wanted to increase enrollment and address the dropout crisis, Mr. Umpstead said.

Westwood Cyber High was launched in February of last year with 180 students and quickly racked up a substantial waiting list. This year, 540 students are enrolled, many from surrounding districts in Michigan, a state with a strong public-school-choice program allowing students to enroll at schools outside their home districts.

All the students at the cyber high school are deemed at risk of dropping out, said Glen Taylor, the executive director of innovation and state and federal programs in the district and also the director of the cyber high school. The average age of the students is 16½, and they typically arrive on the school's electronic doorstep five credits behind their peers in the educational process.

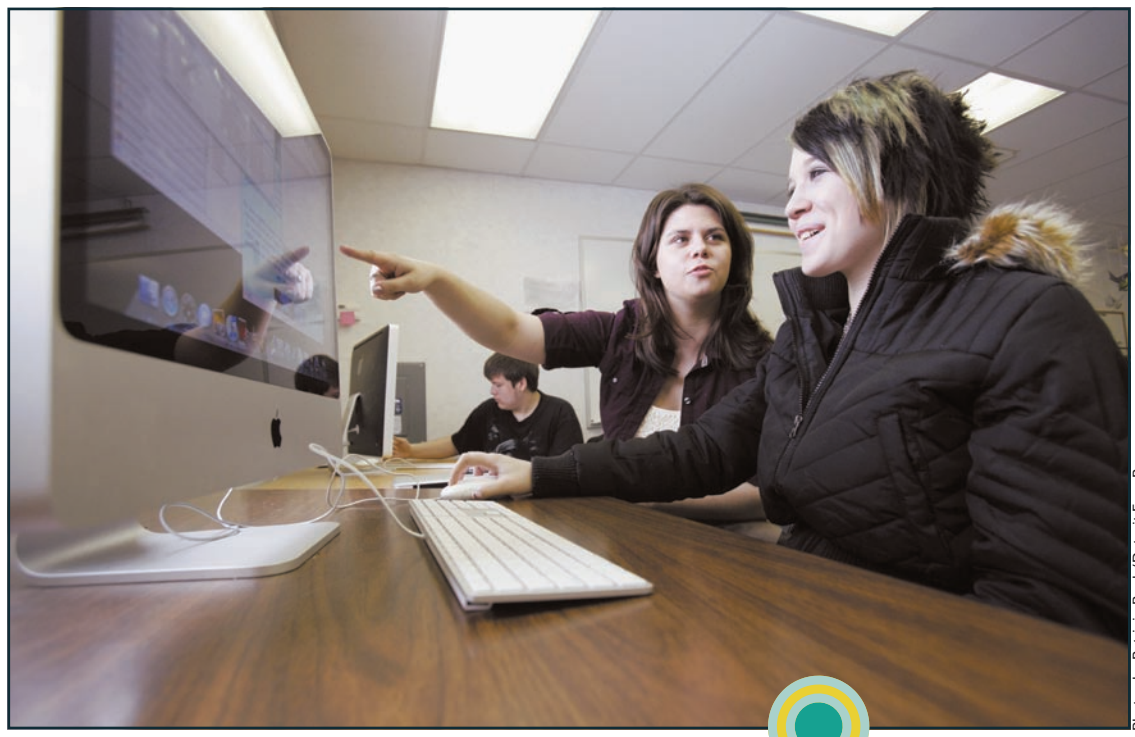
Many of the students are bright, Mr. Taylor said, but were not engaged by a traditional classroom setup.

Each student—called a "researcher" at Westwood Cyber High—is provided with a 20-inch Apple iMac desktop computer. The school also pays for home broadband connections, Mr. Taylor said.

"It was the only way to ensure access to school," he said. "If mom or dad doesn't pay the bill, then students don't have access to school, which is not acceptable."

The school, which operates year round, requires students to log on seven days a week, even if it is just for a few minutes a day. Teachers, called both "experts" and "mentors," are available to help students 24 hours a day, and sometimes late-evening hours can be the busiest, Mr. Taylor said.

Students generally work from home, but most are expected to come in to a central school building twice a week for at least an hour to work face to face with teachers and use some of the higher-level video and audio equipment available.



Photos by Patricia Beck/Detroit Free Press

Emilia Kozak, an adult mentor for Westwood Cyber High, works with Samantha Chapman, 16, a student from Dearborn Heights, Mich., who is taking online classes through the Detroit-area virtual school.

Jeffrey Fleis, 16, also of Dearborn Heights, works on an online class in a building in Inkster, Mich., used by Westwood Cyber High.

Each mentor is assigned six students to shepherd through the education process. The mentors work closely with their students, often one-to-one, make home visits, and oversee how their time is spent at the school. They often work part-time for the cyber high school and may have jobs as face-to-face teachers in nearby districts, Mr. Taylor said.

"Experts," who typically work full time for the school, are teachers highly qualified in a specific content area and closely involved in instruction and assessment of students in their particular subjects.

Meeting State Standards

Westwood Cyber High's educational goals aren't centered around a traditional high school curriculum. In fact, there aren't any classes, as such, Mr. Taylor said. The entire program is aimed at fulfilling state graduation requirements.

"The only way to earn credits is to create learning artifacts that match up to the state standards," Mr. Taylor said.

All the students have real-time access to their transcripts so they can see which of the 96 state standards they have met and which are still outstanding. But the way the cyber high school students meet those standards is not through taking Algebra 1 courses, for example, or American history, or by sitting in front of their computers for a certain number of hours.

In fact, the school received a seat-time waiver from the state to take a different approach and operate based on performance, Mr. Umpstead said.

The cyber high school focuses on project-based learning. Students often choose their own projects to fulfill various aspects of high school graduation requirements. For instance, 16-year-old Ashley Jackson felt writing was her strongest area, so she created a magazine and articles on human trafficking, a subject that interested her. Through that project, she was able to satisfy English standards, writing and research standards, and some general social studies standards, said Anna J. Henning, a mentor and English expert at the school.

"We let them be really creative and explore their interests," Ms. Henning said, "but in some areas they may need more structured, prefabricated projects created by the experts."

One student satisfied some foreign-language requirements by reading and reporting on *The Stranger* by Albert Camus. Another achieved chemistry and visual arts credits for a research project on the process of dyeing hair, Ms. Henning said. Another student has already written 10 chapters of a novel about zombies.

Before enrolling at the cyber high school more than a year ago, Ms. Jackson was on the verge of dropping out. She said she had an undiagnosed learning disability and was behind in her classes.

"It was a horrible feeling, sort of embarrassing, and I didn't want to go to school," she said. "It seemed like everybody was ahead of me, and I was the one in the back of the room who didn't know anything."

At Westwood Cyber High, Ms. Jackson discovered a love of learning, and she said teacher support was critical.

"The teachers know me better, and it's a lot more interactive," she said. "I can log on to school and talk to a teacher one-on-one, which is really important to me. I feel like I have their undivided attention."

On a typical day, she logs on to do schoolwork from about 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. She said she's now on track to graduate on time.

Ms. Jackson said she had concerns at first about her social life at the cyber high school. But she found that the school offers many group projects, and that students often meet on their computer-lab days in a small building used by the district.

Though the cyber high school was launched with a grant of $300,000 from the state through the federal Enhancing Education Through Technology program, Mr. Taylor said the school appears to be sustainable by using the per-pupil payment every public school receives.

The Westwood district, which had been struggling to retain students, is now growing; it has increased enrollment by 33 percent since the cyber high school was launched.

"If you can find a district that's interested in these types of students, it's a wonderful program for them," said Mr. Umpstead from the state office of educational technology. "It enables them to care about students dropping out of our system, but it also creates an economic incentive for them to care." ■

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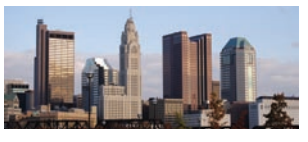

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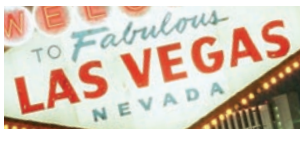

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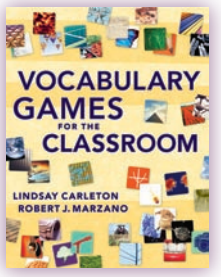

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Virtual Ed. Enrollment Caps Facing Greater Scrutiny

Wisconsin and Oregon, which imposed limitations, are now taking a closer look at the restrictions to see if changes are needed

BY CONSTANCE GUSTKE

Craig Mitchelldyer for Education Week

Christina Martin, a policy analyst at the Cascade Institute in Portland, Ore., argues against virtual school enrollment caps, in part because she believes online schools help save taxpayers money.

Online education enrollment is growing quickly in K-12—about 30 percent a year. So some states have tempered that growth with caps on student enrollment, a legislative move that is now facing increasing scrutiny, educators and experts in the field say.

The two most-cited examples for enrollment caps are in Wisconsin and Oregon, which limited student enrollment in recent years. Both states placed temporary caps on full-time state virtual charter schools to limit fast growth. But they are now studying the programs to determine if caps are still the right approach from both a fiscal and an educational perspective.

E-learning advocates argue that it's going to be harder for states to add caps down the road. Some say that it's a political compromise that other states are trying to avoid. They say the bottom line is clear: Many school districts are threatened by the growing popularity of virtual schools.

"The U.S. Department of Education has pushed to have enrollment caps removed," said Susan D. Patrick, the president and chief executive officer of the Vienna, Va.-based International Association for K-12 Online Learning, or iNACOL. "You'll see fights for those caps to be lifted up."

The Education Department's National Educational Technology Plan, released in March, touts virtual education as one of the key approaches for how schools should use technology to improve learning. And the rapid growth of online coursetaking in higher education is frequently cited by experts as a model for the precollegiate world.

That's why enrollment curbs frustrate online-learning advocates, who think that caps limit student choice and can have a detrimental effect on learning. They say that state policy needs to keep up with online learning that can be brought to scale, and not treat it as an add-on.

"Accountability standards are for this [kind of education]," said Peter Stewart, the senior vice president of school development for K12 Inc., a Herndon, Va.-based online-course provider that works with about 55,000 students across the country. "In many cases, the existing accountability procedures can be adapted. But policymakers aren't sure of this."

Virtual schools in Wisconsin began operating in the 2002-03 school year, and enrollment took off quickly. In 2008, Wisconsin passed an act capping student enrollment in virtual schools at 5,250 total statewide open enrollment.

But that fast growth drew the attention of lawmakers and educators.

"Some of the people who wanted to know how virtual schools operate asked for an audit to see how well they're performing," said Richard G. Chandler, a consultant with the Wisconsin Coalition of Virtual School Families, which opposes the state enrollment cap. "The people who supported the cap argued that they still needed to learn more."

Mr. Chandler added that "some people expressed concern that virtual schools would siphon funds away from brick-and-mortar ones. But the funds follow the student, and the funding works well."

Wisconsin state Sen. John Lehman, a Democrat, supported the cap. "Many folks thought we should encourage kids to be educated in brick-and-mortar schools," he said. "Legislation has a lot to do with quality. You can't have a student sign up and not go to school. Are students participating fully? Are they learning fully? Are taxpayers getting their money's worth?"

There was another key concern: money following students out of a district. Districts with financial struggles were voicing opposition to the virtual schools, as were opponents of home schooling.

'Very Positive Reviews'

But public support appears to be shifting. Wisconsin's virtual charter public schools got favorable marks in the February audit done by the Wisconsin Legislative Audit Bureau. Overall, parents, high school students, and teachers were satisfied with virtual schools—with approval ratings of over 90 percent from all three groups.

The audit also showed that 95 percent of virtual high school students surveyed were satisfied with the availability and amount of contact with their teachers. Also, some experts pointed out that virtual schools proved to be a good value for taxpayers, since 93 percent of the money spent went to teachers and curriculum.

"Wisconsin virtual schools have been received very well, [with] very positive reviews," said Mr. Chandler of the Wisconsin Coalition of Virtual School Families. "I've learned that different settings work well for different kids. It's good to have many options."

Sen. Lehman applauded the results, too. "The test results were pretty good," he said. "You have higher levels of education in parents, and they're focused on the kids' doing well."

Bumping up against the existing cap is Wisconsin's next hurdle. Currently, 3,635 students are enrolled in its virtual schools—about 0.4 percent of the K-12 student population. The cap of 5,250 could be reached by the 2011-12 school year.

"Under current trends, we'll be hitting it soon," said Mr. Chandler. "We don't think that students should have limits. In states where there aren't any caps, maybe one percent of students choose virtual schools."

Oregon offers another high-profile example of how enrollment caps have worked. In 2009, the state passed a two-year moratorium on virtual school enrollments. The twist is that some virtual school enrollments are capped,

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E-Learning Hits Barriers to Expansion

A national e-learning framework would require lifting state policy restrictions now in place

BY CONSTANCE GUSTKE

Many countries are ratcheting up their K-12 e-learning programs. China has digitized its entire system of K-12 courses and so has Mexico. Turkey's online courses now educate 15 million students, compared with 1 million in the United States. And similar pushes are under way in Australia, Europe, India, New Zealand, and South America.

For many U.S. educators and e-learning advocates, a national—or even global—online-learning framework makes good sense. But going national or global will require some catching up and lifting of policy restrictions now in place.

"Online education is a global phenomenon. [But] we're behind the curve," said Michael Horn, the executive director of education at the Innosight Institute, a Mountain View, Calif.-based nonprofit organization that advocates innovative practices in education and government. He is a co-author of the 2008 book *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns*.

The trick is navigating a U.S. school system diced into some 15,000 districts and 50 states, characterized by distinctive academic requirements and varying policy barriers. The resulting silo effect slows down the expansion of online learning across state borders, globally, and even outside local districts, according to experts.

And some states are still lagging way behind others. Vermont, for instance, is just getting its e-courses going, said Susan D. Patrick, the president and chief executive officer of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, or iNACOL. Some big states, like New York, don't have a state virtual school.

"The Northeast is furthest behind," Ms. Patrick said. "And Delaware just quit its funding for pilot programs."

The Southeast and the Midwest, on the other hand, have strong virtual programs in several places.

Demand for online courses from outside providers such as states or private companies is high in small rural school districts in states like Minnesota, because the local districts don't have the resources to offer a wide variety of courses or to build their own online curricula. But their ability to access good online courses will depend on the reach of outside providers of virtual courses.

"In an online world, there's no need to be restricted by geographic borders," said John Watson, the founder of Evergreen Education Group in Evergreen, Colo. "[But] funding is a huge catch. So, online learning will remain limited to statewide levels."

"You can't generalize on how virtual education works best," added Mr. Horn. He believes that "we have to figure out a way not to make it state by state. We have a lot of restrictions in place."

Private Phenomenon?

For example, the Florida Virtual School, or FLVS, provides courses for Florida students in 67 districts, and separately to students from 45 other states and 34 countries. Student course enrollments in FLVS increased from 36,679 in 2004-05 to 154,125 in 2008-09.

Experts say that its strengths include funding that follows student enrollment, rather than relying on state appropriations, and a policy that no student is turned away from taking any online course.

"Florida Virtual School is very student-centered," said Jamie Sachs, the associate director of education technology for the Atlanta-based Southern Regional Education Board.

FLVS is taking the lessons it has learned and is applying them beyond state borders. It sells online courses to other states and countries via a team of content producers, earning licensing fees from courses. The fees are paid per course, not per student, and they are adapted to each state's or country's education standards. However, the school is not a global school. Students in Florida do not take classes with students from other states or countries.

Meanwhile, the state-sponsored Virtual Virginia online school serves students from every school district. The school has a staff of 25 full-time online teachers. Cathy Cheely, the Virtual Virginia program manager, said it discourages the use of part-time teachers who also work in brick-and-mortar schools, but has had to take that approach sometimes to handle online-enrollment spikes.

To use virtual learning more expansively, Ms. Sachs believes in lots of options for students. She encourages traditional schools to look at online courses as blended models, in which online learning is mixed with traditional approaches.

"Online instruction helps teachers use their time more wisely," she said. "A teacher could make a video and have students watch it at home, rather than listening to a lecture in class."

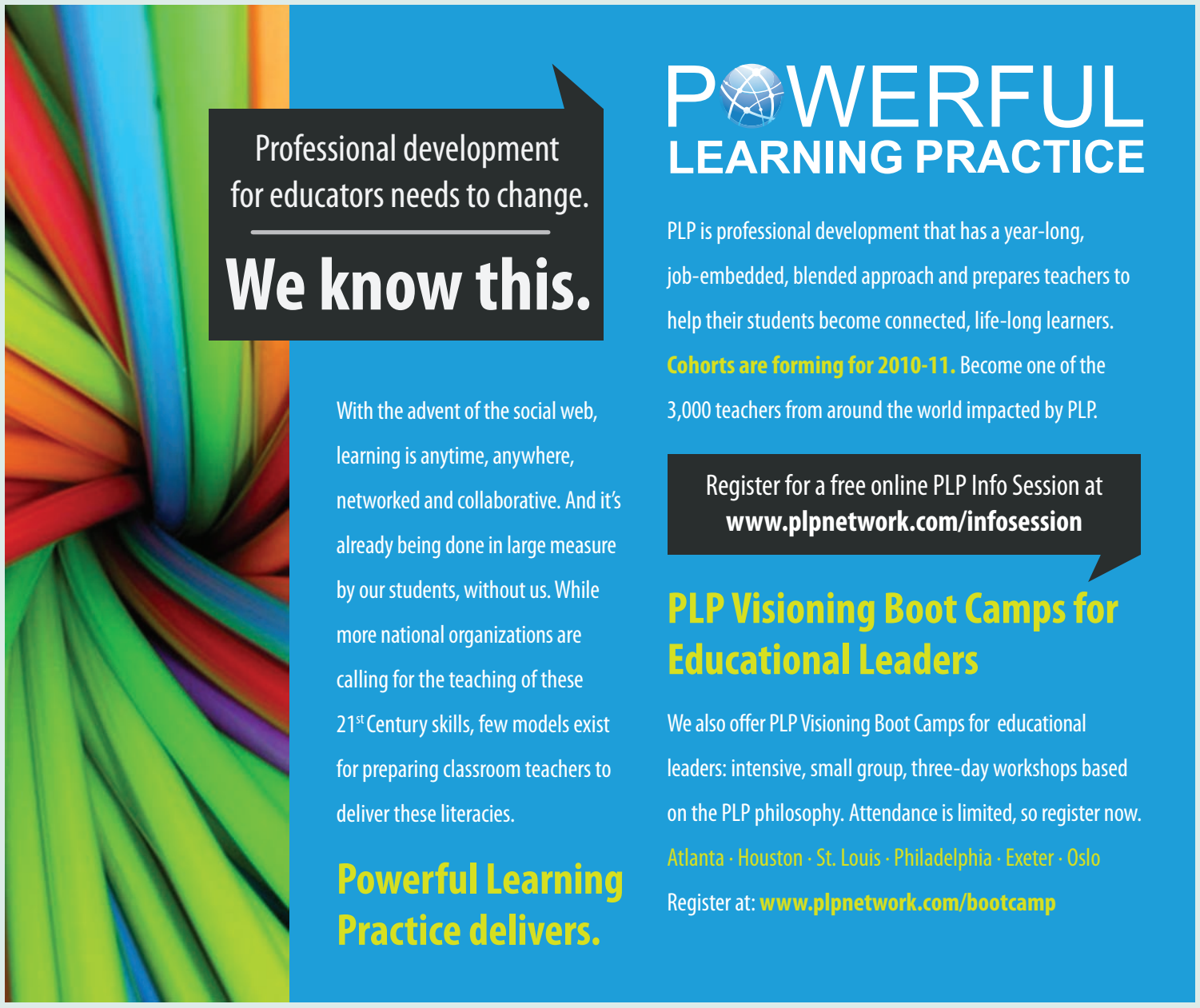
That tactic of using a video works for students who aren't a good fit for virtual schools. They might need more face-to-face interaction.

As it is, private online-course providers are the only truly global ones for now. "Maybe it will become a private phenomenon," Mr. Horn said. "Public systems close their doors at their own peril."

Ms. Patrick agreed. "I don't see [public] virtual schools going nationwide, because they're locally controlled by districts and states," she said.

Yet studying with people way beyond their local communities offers many benefits for students, experts contend, because it's the future of a globalized world. ■

Constance Gustke is a freelance writer based in Stone Ridge, N.Y.



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and others aren't.

"Virtual schools were growing quite quickly," said Christina Martin, a policy analyst at the Cascade Policy Institute, a free-market think tank based in Portland, Ore. "And Oregon needed to take a moratorium to look at governance and equity issues."

The big issue, she said, was fairness. Some students have access to virtual schools because they have a learning coach to stay home with them, while others don't. Also, Internet connections can be costly, and not every family has one. And families have to pay for their own printing.

The result of the moratorium is that there's a waiting list for some Oregon virtual schools.

Still, a year ago, many people thought that the virtual schools would be shut down completely, said Ms. Martin. "The [first] bill was ambiguous," she said. "And it's a relief that things haven't gotten worse. The schools are safe. The bill that was passed wasn't as bad as the original bill. It was shocking. Everyone thought the virtual schools would be shut down."

Ms. Martin argues that virtual schools save Oregon taxpayers money. "On average, we're spending $10,000 per pupil in Oregon per year," she said. "Virtual schools get less than $5,600 per student."

Also in Oregon, online schools have shown solid results. Students in virtual schools score better on standardized testing, on average, Ms. Martin said. "But it's not for families that can't find a learning coach," she added. "An adult must stay with a child during the day and make sure they're doing their work."

And she pointed out that some students do better in a classroom setting.

There's another aspect to consider in both Oregon and Wisconsin. Teachers' unions are concerned that virtual schools could reduce enrollment in regular schools, and that they would lose jobs as a result, some observers say.

"Money flows to online providers and not to face-to-face schools," said Jamie Sachs, the associate director of education technology at the Southern Regional Education Board in Atlanta.

The answer, say experts, is educating teachers that online schools are not a threat and could lead to more career opportunities for them. Online schools can offer more teaching possibilities for teachers who have retired or who leave to have children.

"Virtual schools can keep a lot of people in the profession that way," Ms. Sachs said.

Fiscal Caps Coming?

The Arkansas legislature capped its state's virtual charter school enrollment at 500 in 2009. Originally, virtual education in Arkansas was meant to embrace home-schooled children, but the program is now available to any student, not just home schoolers. As a consequence, nearly 1,000 students are on a waiting list for the Arkansas Virtual Academy, according to the Arkansas Coalition of Distance Learning Families.

K12 Inc.'s Mr. Stewart said that Arkansas' virtual school is a "widely successful one that started as a pilot and proved itself." But, he lamented, it's not now allowed to grow.

"Arkansas is evolving from manufacturing into a new type of economy," said Greg Kaza, the executive director of the Arkansas Policy Foundation, a nonpartisan group based in Little Rock. "Virtual education is part of that process. But there are those who don't understand that vision. They fear what they don't understand." He added that Arkansas, one of the poorest states, must do things differently.

But now a new challenge for virtual schools is emerging: fiscal caps. Cash-strapped states are cutting education spending, and virtual programs are getting hit hard.

Missouri created virtual instruction programs funded by state appropriations. When the line item was zeroed out last year, entire virtual school programs were slated to close, according to experts.

"Fiscal caps are a big trend," said iNACOL's Ms. Patrick. "That's going to be a problem in the next three years. And it's more likely to happen to virtual schools than brick-and-mortar ones, since they have more funding sources." ■

Constance Gustke is a freelance writer based in Stone Ridge, N.Y. She has written for Fortune *magazine, and CBS Moneywatch.com and MSNBC.*

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Lack of Sustainable Funding A Challenge for Online Ed.

Boosters of virtual schooling say new funding approaches should have the money follow the student

BY KATIE ASH

While there are examples of innovative funding models for virtual schools and online course programs, most struggle to secure sustainable, adequate, and equitable funding, experts in the field say.

One of the biggest areas of funding concern for online education advocates is state-led programs, the vast majority of which are paid for through state appropriations. When a state sets aside an appropriation for a virtual school, it inevitably limits the number of students who can enroll in the program and prevents the school from being able to grow beyond a fixed number. *(See related story, Page S8.)*

In addition, being supported through an annual appropriation can make it difficult to count on sustainable funding during tough budget years, when state legislators are forced to make difficult decisions to balance the budget.

And when a legislature appropriates money directly from the state's education budget, it can create competition between the virtual school and local school districts, said Bryan Setser, the executive director of the 50,000-student North Carolina Virtual Public School, based in Raleigh.

"[Districts] see it as taking money from their overall pie," Mr. Setser said.

But he also pointed out that having an appropriation can be helpful when launching a virtual school because it provides a chunk of startup money, which allows the program to "make a big impact."

The Florida Model

One of the most oft-cited examples of an innovative funding model for a state-led program is that of the Florida Virtual School, or FLVS, which began operating in 1997. Last year, the school had 154,125 course enrollments.

"The only state virtual school in the country that has a funding model that is at some level sustainable and allows for growth and planning is Florida Virtual," said John Watson, the founder of the Evergreen Education Group, an online-learning consulting and research firm in Evergreen, Colo.

Two aspects of the Florida school's current funding model sets it apart from other state virtual programs, said Holly Sagues, the chief strategist and policy officer for FLVS.

For one, in Florida, the funding follows the student, and second, FLVS receives funding only if the student successfully completes the course, tying the school's funding to student performance.

"That's why you'll see that Florida Virtual School's enrollment is so much bigger than all the other virtual schools," Ms. Sagues said.

Before 2003, the school operated on an appropriations-based funding model.

"We would figure out how many students we would be able to serve," said Ms. Sagues. "It really does hurt kids, because we had a waiting list a mile long, but we weren't funded appropriately. There was no way for us to grow our enrollment base with that model."

The funding model changed from an appropriations-based mechanism to a per-pupil, performance-based model through legislation that passed in 2003, and during the next school year, course enrollments more than doubled, from 14,000 to 31,000.

Performance-Based Funding

Having funding that follows the student, as well as tying funding to student performance, is an innovative model that encourages continuous improvement in not only students and teachers, but also management, said Susan D. Patrick, the president and chief executive officer of the Vienna, Va.-based International Association for K-12 Online Learning.

"If we're going to have an education system that focuses on student learning, then we need to have funding and policies that focus on competency-based pathways, where students have to demonstrate proficiency before moving forward," she said.

Instead of a performance-based funding model, many virtual schools receive state aid on the basis of seat time—meaning the amount of time a student spends on the course—or attendance, neither of which works well for the online environment, experts say.

"The bottom line is that we're still in a situation where there are plenty of examples where the letter of the law, particularly as it pertains to funding, doesn't really fit well with the online environment," said Mr. Watson, from the Evergreen Education Group.

Part of the appeal of online learning is the flexible schedule it provides, as well as the ability of the student to move at his or her own pace—both of which are curtailed by funding models based on attendance or seat time, he said.

"It's clear in most states that they really haven't figured out a comprehensive, robust, and scalable funding model that's going to apply to online 21st-century schools," Mr. Watson said. "It's not there yet."

One challenge states face when establishing funding models for virtual schools and online programs, said Ms. Patrick, of iNACOL, is "that the data systems and finance systems aren't sophisticated enough" to track funding for each student's individual courses.

Most state-led online programs are supplemental, which means that students may take one or two courses through the virtual route, while earning the rest of their credits at a local school. But state data and finance systems typically can't direct the funding for just one or two classes to a virtual school, while funneling the rest of it to the regular school.

'Significant Costs'

Liz Pape, the president and chief executive officer of the Maynard, Mass.-based Virtual High School Global Consortium, said that the majority of its funding comes from roughly 660 member schools paying their membership fees.

The consortium serves about 13,000 students around the globe and provides yearlong and semesterlong basic courses, gifted and talented courses for middle school students, Advanced Placement courses, and credit-recovery classes.

Classes are taught by teachers from the consortium's member schools.

Virtual charter schools are often funded as traditional face-to-face charter schools, with the state aid following the student, although many virtual schools receive slightly less funding per student, said Jeff Kwitowski, the vice president of public relations for Herndon, Va.-based K12 Inc., an online-course provider that operates its own schools as well as contracts with schools and districts to serve about 70,000 total students.

"One of the greatest benefits of online learning is access to high-quality courses—and more of them—at a good cost," Mr. Kwitowski said. "But while [virtual school] costs may be different, there are significant costs to operating full-time online schools."

Ensuring that students receive adequate and sustainable funding in online programs is essential, he said.

Mary Gifford, the senior regional vice president of the central region for K12 Inc., added: "There is some assumption that [online learning] can just be done on the cheap, and while there are certainly some economies that we can achieve, there are other economies we can't."

"To do it for remarkably less is not going to be fair to those kids," she said. "They're still worth a high-quality public education."

For instance, virtual schools do not have to pay for facilities or utilities but may have higher technological expenses.

In addition, online courses can be replicated and scaled up easily to meet the needs of just a few or several thousand students, which can help cut down on costs.

However, it often takes a large investment initially to develop courses, and high-quality online programs adhere to student-to-teacher ratios comparable to traditional schools', so there are little savings in personnel. ■

Financing Online Learning

The ways online education programs receive funding differ significantly from state to state. Advocates for such programs argue that traditional approaches aren't flexible enough.

Traditional Methods

Annual appropriation—Most state-led virtual programs are funded through an appropriation, which means that the legislature sets aside a specific amount of money for that purpose each year. Although this model can be useful in the startup of such programs, a limited amount of funding can hamper growth and lead to enrollment caps.

Attendance and seat time—In brick-and-mortar schools, the amount of funding a school receives typically depends on attendance or on seat time, which is how long a student spends in class. But this model doesn't work well for online learners, experts in the field say, because it limits the ability of online students to work at their own pace as they complete virtual courses.

New Methods

Funding follows the student—Proponents say this is a more sustainable way of providing funding for virtual schools and online programs because it does not limit the number of students who can enroll. Many states, however, do not have finance and data systems that are able to track student funding closely enough to make this method work at the state level.

Funding based on performance—The Florida Virtual School is only paid once a student has successfully completed a course, thus tying the school's funding to student performance. Advocates for online education contend that this method frees students from time constraints and promotes continuous improvement in students, teachers, and virtual school administrators.

SOURCE: *Education Week*

Accreditation Is Seen as High Priority

To ensure quality and credibility, online schools seek official evaluations by recognized accrediting agencies

BY KATIE ASH

Not all school accreditation agencies are set up to handle the operations of online education providers, but the accelerating growth of virtual schools is prompting many accreditors to adapt to evaluate those types of programs.

"Accreditation is important simply because of a quality-standards issue," said Butch Gemin, the senior consultant for the Evergreen, Colo.-based Evergreen Education Group, an online-learning research and consulting firm. "Is the school really a high-quality school, or is it not?"

To ensure quality and credibility, as well as the transferability of credits from a virtual school to a traditional brick-and-mortar school or postsecondary institution, seeking accreditation from "a viable and recognized accrediting agency" is an important step for virtual schools and other online programs to take, said Mr. Gemin.

The process can take up to several years, during which an outside agency will observe and evaluate a school to see if it meets the accreditation agency's quality standards. Most legitimate virtual schools are accredited by regional accreditation agencies, said Allison Powell, the vice president of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, or iNACOL, based in Vienna, Va.

Those agencies include the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, the Northwest Association of Accredited Schools, the Commission on Secondary Schools of the Middle States Association of Schools and Colleges, and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, as well as the North Central Association and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, which are operated under the umbrella of Advancing Excellence in Education, or AdvancED.

Virtual Considerations

The Northwest Association of Accredited Schools, based in Boise, Idaho, has given its seal of approval to virtual schools and other online programs for over 15 years, said Leonard D. Paul, the associate director of the agency.

All schools—virtual or otherwise—are expected to meet the same core accreditation standards, which include teaching and learning, support, and school improvement standards, he pointed out, but "the indicators that are used to measure success at meeting those standards are developed according to the kind of school program that it is."

"That way, we're looking specifically at the needs that online schools have that might be different from a regular, traditional, brick-and-mortar school," Mr. Paul said.

For instance, an online school does not have to meet the same facilities standards that brick-and-mortar schools do, he said, but those online education programs may need to provide more-extensive technological infrastructure to support instruction and student learning.

The Northwest Association of Accredited Schools also examines how much professional development teachers receive in online teaching, as well as the technical support provided for each teacher and student who takes part in the program, said Mr. Paul.

"We're looking to make sure that materials are reviewed and evaluated regularly, and that they provide opportunities for advancement of student learning," he said. "We also look at such things as policies and procedures for transferring credit that students earn from online schools."

Making sure that credits from a virtual program are accepted by local school districts and are recognized by higher education institutions, for instance, is one concern that accreditation agencies, as well as students and parents, may have. Otherwise, students may not have the option of enrolling in the local district with the credits they've received at a virtual school, or they may not be able to go on to postsecondary study once they've graduated from the online program.

Another consideration is whether the curriculum provided by the virtual school meets the standards of the states in which the students the school serves live, Mr. Paul said.

"Accreditation ensures that online schools are meeting the same kind of educational standards as any other school in the community," he said, "so that people see it as a viable way of offering a K-12 education."

Meeting Online Standards

Claudia Carter, the associate vice president of accreditation for the Alpharetta, Ga.-based AdvancED, said that much like the Northwest Association of Accredited Schools, her agency expects all virtual programs to meet the same standards as any other school it accredits, but what that looks like may vary for online schools.

"We ask all the schools to have policy and procedures on actual instruction," she said, such as how often the teacher should contact the student via e-mail or phone, and what to do if the student isn't logging on often enough. Just as regular schools have procedures to follow if a student doesn't come to class, virtual schools should have policies regarding how to reach out to students who aren't spending enough time with their online courses, Ms. Carter said.

Although there is no set time that each teacher should spend with a student, the school must "allocate and protect instructional time to support student learning" as well as "implement interventions to help students meet expectations for student learning," according to the AdvancED accreditation standards.

In some cases, frequency of contact between teachers and students is easier to evaluate in online courses than in traditional schools, said Ms. Carter, because it is often done through e-mails, Web sites, or online forums, which can provide extensive documentation.

"This is part of quality control," she said. "What assurances do you have that the school is doing everything they can do to support students so they learn and perform at their highest levels?"

Another consideration for virtual programs is assuring the authenticity of students' work, Ms. Carter said. Unlike a brick-and-mortar school, where the teacher oversees student test-taking, often virtual schools need to establish an honor code that students agree to adhere to while completing coursework.

But since, almost inevitably, all students won't adhere to an honor code, some virtual schools are doing more to assure the authenticity of academic work by requiring each student to recruit a proctor—usually an adult other than a legal guardian—to monitor the student's test-taking, Ms. Carter said.

That person typically is someone within the community, such as a librarian, a guidance counselor at a nearby school, or a member of the clergy, she said.

Other virtual schools are using programs like Skype, a Web-based video communication service, to watch students during tests. And some virtual schools arrange for students to travel to testing sites where exams can be administered.

> "Accreditation ensures that online schools are meeting the same kind of educational standards as any other school in the community."
>
> LEONARD D. PAUL
> Associate Director, Northwest Association of Accredited Schools

'Education of the Future'

The Independent Schools Association of the Central States, or ISACS, has not yet begun accrediting virtual programs, said Kevin Rooney, the coordinator of accreditation services for the Chicago-based agency, although the topic was to be discussed in April at a committee meeting.

"Certainly, I think that, looking forward to education of the future, [accrediting virtual schools] is something that all associations ... will have on their agendas," he said.

Some issues, though, need to be hammered out before an agency can begin granting accreditation to virtual schools, he said. For example, each school accredited by ISACS goes through an extensive self-study process that involves a site visit and subsequent report. Figuring out what that means for virtual schools, which may not have a physical site to visit, will be a major difference to be considered, said Mr. Rooney.

David Glick recently founded a private online school called GLBTQ Online High School for students who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning their gender identity or sexuality. Establishing credibility through accreditation was high on the list of priorities from the outset. "For us, accreditation was really critical," Mr. Glick said.

The school is now an "accreditation candidate" for AdvancED, he said, and will be fully approved if it meets all the standards at the end of its two-year candidacy period in January 2012.

Applying for accreditation involves pulling together more than 700 pages of documents that give details of the school's mission, policies, and procedures, Mr. Glick said.

"You tell [the accreditation agency] what your goals are and how you are achieving those," he said.

Apex Learning, a Seattle-based online-course provider, runs the Apex Learning Virtual School, which is accredited by the Northwest Association of Accredited Schools, said Cheryl Vedoe, the company's chief executive officer.

"We went through the accreditation process because we wanted to ensure that when schools and districts look to Apex Learning as a provider of online courses and delivering instruction to their students, that they can have confidence that we are meeting the standards," Ms. Vedoe said.

Still, Ms. Vedoe said, accreditation is just one piece to consider when evaluating the quality of an online-learning program.

"There's still more research and review that anybody looking to seek a solution needs to go through," she said, "but accreditation is a good first step." ■

E-Learning in All Shapes and Sizes

Experts emphasize the importance of understanding the various models of virtual education

BY KATIE ASH

One way to distinguish between the wide variety of virtual schools and online-learning programs available is by the type of entity that oversees their operation and control. That source of authority can determine how many students can enroll, where those students come from, and what resources are available for teaching and learning.

Most virtual schools or online programs are operated by a university or college, through a district, by a consortium of stakeholders, through a state entity, by a for-profit company, or as charter schools.

Figuring out the advantages and challenges of each form of operational control depends largely on what state the school or program is located in, observers of the field say. Different states generally have different laws regarding how schools—virtual as well as brick-and-mortar—may be governed.

Starting in the States

One of the best-known forms of online learning is through state-led virtual programs, said Bryan Setser, the chief executive officer of the North Carolina Virtual Public School, which serves about 40,000 students across the state.

Thirty-five states currently operate state-sponsored virtual schools. Being run through the state allows a virtual school program to recruit students from all districts, receive support from entities such as the state department of education, the state school board, and the governor's office, and quickly establish a trusted name and reputation, said Mr. Setser.

"It brings together a lot of stakeholders across the education sector and gives you a lot of organizational validity and credibility," he said. "The other thing is it establishes for you a base of funding and support that is usually ongoing and recurring."

Because state-led virtual schools are so embedded in state-level bureaucracy, however, they often lack the agility and nimbleness that district- or school-level virtual programs may enjoy, Mr. Setser added.

"You can't react with the type of pace or innovation that you could with [other models]," he said.

Also, the vast majority of state-led virtual schools are funded through an appropriations model, which online-learning advocates say does not provide a sustainable path to future growth. *(See related story, Page 11.)*

The Local Approach

Virtual charter schools and district-level virtual programs can often be operated more flexibly than state-led programs, but their reach and scope are largely determined by the laws in each state.

"In the 25 states that allow online-learning programs to be managed through charter schools, some of them have geographic boundaries," said Susan D. Patrick, the president and chief executive officer of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, or iNACOL, based in Vienna, Va.

In California, for example, charter schools can only serve a certain number of contiguous school districts, rather than the whole state, she said.

Still, "a benefit to charter models for online programs is that they are scalable with a funding model that follows the student, except in a few cases where prohibitive state policies create artificial enrollment caps that limit student choice," Ms. Patrick said.

Higher Ed.'s Role

Operating a K-12 virtual school program though a higher education institution may be a natural fit, since colleges already have the resources and structure in place to provide student services, said Marcel Kielkucki, the coordinator of the High School Distance Learning program at Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

"Community colleges do partnerships [with K-12] for many other things," such as career and technical education, he pointed out. The High School Distance Learning program, for one, is helpful for rural districts in the state that may not have the resources to provide a vast array of courses to a small number of students, he said.

"Because of the sheer volume of what we can purchase, we try to work with small districts," Mr. Kielkucki said.

Securing funding to keep the program going, however, can be challenging, he said. "There are limited resources that everyone's looking for at the moment," he said, and some educators may perceive the program as taking resources away from local districts.

Consortium Resources

A virtual school program operated through a consortium of stakeholders can create a community of pooled resources, including a wealth of online teachers with instructional knowledge, said Liz Pape, the president and chief executive officer of the Virtual High School Global Consortium, based in Maynard, Mass.

The consortium's 660 member schools work together to provide professional development and create courses, and the Virtual High School itself is funded primarily through member schools, Ms. Pape said.

At the same time, having so many stakeholders forces the school to continually re-evaluate practices and make sure all consortium members are satisfied with the Virtual High School, Ms. Pape said, which can cause conflict because of competing priorities.

Even so, taking into consideration the viewpoints of a multitude of members spurs the Virtual High School to provide high-quality curricula and instruction while keeping expenses low for member schools, she said.

"It's a challenge that we've been able to successfully meet," she said, "but it's a challenge that always remains that we must constantly be attending to."

Assessing Vendor Value

Vendor-led virtual school programs vary widely, and some for-profit providers, such as the Herndon, Va.-based K12 Inc., contract with school districts to provide services through district-level programs, virtual charter schools, or state-led online programs, in addition to operating private virtual schools.

K12, for instance, serves about 70,000 students.

Similarly, Apex Learning, a for-profit online-curriculum provider based in Seattle, partners with districts to supply online-learning options in addition to operating its own virtual school. Apex Learning serves about 207,000 students.

Working with a private vendor can be beneficial in both public and private school settings, said Mary Gifford, K12 Inc.'s senior regional vice president of the central region for K12 Inc.

Ms. Gifford has helped set up virtual charter schools, district-led online-learning programs, and state-level virtual school operations.

"We have so many schools operating in such diverse environments that we kind of have a little bit of experience doing any odd configuration that you can throw at us," she said of her company.

As a result, "we know how to recruit kids, we know how to recruit teachers, and we have the ability to align curriculum in different states"—processes that can take years to iron out when starting from scratch, she said.

"Another advantage of being with a vendor is that we can leverage resources," said Ms. Gifford, such as partnering with service providers from the private sector.

And because online-learning vendors work with numerous schools, teachers, and students, they can often scale up easily, from just a few students taking a handful of online courses to thousands of online students taking full-time virtual-course loads, she said.

However, educators, students, and parents should do research into how private, vendor-operated virtual schools are run before enrolling in the classes, said Mr. Setser, from the North Carolina Public Virtual School.

"We're teaching and learning first, and they're profit-first, and that's a major difference," he said. "The operational controls that I'm governed by—like a good teacher-to-student ratio, alignment to policies, and proven best practices—they're not." ■

Different Models

State-Led

- Florida Virtual School, serves **71,000** students
- Utah Electronic High School, **7,300**
- North Carolina Virtual Public School, **40,000**

Charter

- Guided Online Academic Learning Academy in Colorado, **600**
- Pennsylvania Virtual Charter School, **4,000**

District-Led

- Karval Online Education in Colorado, **200s**
- Campbell County Virtual School in Wyoming, **73**
- Salem-Keizer Online in Oregon, **1,250**

Vendor

- Apex Learning, **207,000**
- K12 Inc., **70,000**

Consortium

- Virtual High School Global Consortium, **13,000**

College/University

- University of Nebraska-Lincoln Independent Study High School, **2,235**
- Kirkwood High School Distance Learning, **650**

SOURCE: *Education Week*

Links to these schools, organizations, and companies are available at www.edweek.org/go/emodels.

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E-Curriculum Builders Seek A Personalized Approach

Flexibility to address students' varying abilities seen as key feature of high-quality content

BY MICHELLE R. DAVIS

With a wealth of online courses for school districts to choose from, plus an abundance of interactive activities, videos, and digital information to sift through to design such courses, school leaders are embracing a variety of approaches to build online curricula.

Districts are buying online classes from nonprofit and for-profit providers, making their own from scratch, accessing open-source options, or combining all three approaches. Despite often being considered a "new" avenue of education, online-course providers say they're tapping years of experience to determine the leading methods of appealing to students and getting them to interact with online material.

"We're always learning what is most effective and what's not," said Cheryl Vedoe, the president and chief executive officer of the virtual-course provider Apex Learning, based in Seattle. "We're developing a significant body of knowledge from our experience."

Some research has already given schools and course providers a few guidelines on the hallmarks of a good online curriculum, said Cathy Cavanaugh, an associate professor of educational technology at the University of Florida, in Gainesville. One of the most important aspects of an online course, she said, is a direct connection between strategies and activities in the course and outcomes or goals.

"Some districts apply an evaluation process to look at whether a course is designed in a way that aligns it toward leading students to accomplish standards," she said. "That must be a fundamental aspect of the course."

When it comes to instruction, Ms. Cavanaugh doesn't consider an online offering that is solely computer-based, with no teacher support, a true course. "It may be interactive and provide digital assessments, but for K-12 students a course must be moderated and mediated by an online teacher," she said. "The instructor is a key element."

Within an online course, the teacher should play a central role, assessing students, facilitating their engagement and the learning experience, and providing feedback, Ms. Cavanaugh said. There should be a number of ways for students to interact with teachers—everything from e-mail to Skype and instant messaging.

With both teacher- and computer-based assessments, high-quality online courses should be able to provide more differentiated instruction than a student might get in a face-to-face class, Ms. Cavanaugh said.

Apex is thinking hard about how to meet students on those different levels. Nearly all the company's core courses are offered in three versions: advanced, proficient, and a level for students who are struggling to achieve basic literacy.

"We have really found that the most significant benefit of online learning in a digital curriculum is that it can more easily and effectively address the needs of individual students," Ms. Vedoe said.

Focus on the Individual

To customize the company's curriculum, each version of the same Apex course employs different techniques to reach students, Ms. Vedoe said. In the advanced version, there are more opportunities for students to apply and extend what they're learning, and those courses may contain more graded work. The courses aimed at proficient students may have more study sheets, worksheets, and graphic organizers; the literacy-focused courses, while containing much of the same material, may provide more audio of instructional texts, while students read along.

Some philosophies Apex has developed may seem counterintuitive, Ms. Vedoe said. For example, Apex plays down the use of video in some courses aimed at struggling readers, she said.

"The natural assumption is that if you're dealing with at-risk students who have struggled in school, that you want to use more media, video and such, but researchers have found that can be extremely distracting to poor learners," she said. "You want to get them more focused with fewer distractions."

Joy Smith, the chief development officer at the Florida Virtual School, or FLVS, based in Orlando, said the state-sponsored school's courses offer a variety of paths for students in accessing material contained in an online course.

For instance, a middle school critical-thinking course, designed to enhance students' analytical skills and to impart academic and life skills, allows students to enter as a "reader, writer, thinker, or learner," she said. Though students ultimately must complete each course path—the thinker path, for example, teaches goal-setting and looking at how to learn from failure—students are permitted to choose the way they go through the online course.

Allowing them to choose makes students feel as if "they have ownership" over their learning, Ms. Smith said. "We don't tell them what to do. We give them opportunities to pick what they're interested in."

Ms. Smith said FLVS is also doing more project-based learning within courses, using projects that build on each other. For example, a FLVS health course requires students to either create a Web site, commercial, or article that teaches teens about community wellness. Whichever project a student chooses, each activity takes them step by step through the process of creating, say, an article, by coming up with a topic and creating an outline.

Emphasizing project-based learning helps address the issue of academic integrity, so students can't copy and paste from Internet sites or look up yes-or-no answers, Ms. Smith said. Though it's impossible to completely prevent students from plagiarizing, using project-based learning makes it more difficult than using a multiple-choice assessment that could allow students to search easily for answers, she said.

Designers of FLVS courses also make sure that whether the course is biology or a foreign language, there are certain cohesive components so students consistently feel comfortable with the way material is presented. Tabs run across the top of each course for easy navigation, and most are laid out in a way that Ms. Smith describes as learn, practice, and assess.

The Florida Virtual School emphasizes a "mixed" approach to building the courses. The course designers use videos, for example, from the Silver Spring, Md.-based Discovery Education or try to find other high-quality applications already created and then add their own material.

"Our first attempt is to find something that we can wrap our instructional strategies around," Ms. Smith said.

The interactivity of the FLVS courses is also a high priority. Students might be asked to research a topic together and present viewpoints, or they might debate an issue or contribute to group discussions. An Advanced Placement course about the environment, for example, has students plan a "green" vacation together, Ms. Smith said.

E-Curriculum Do's and Dont's

Building online curricula that engage students and work for Web-based classes takes more than just digitizing the coursework used in a face-to-face classroom. To connect with students and keep their interest in the online world, experts have developed a list of do's and don'ts for crafting online curricula.

DO:

- Make sure online courses meet state standards.
- Provide multiple points of entry for the material, including text, video, and audio.
- Use games and simulations to engage students.
- Use wikis, blogs, message boards, and chat rooms to encourage students to interact with one another and the teacher.
- Seek feedback from students about the features they like or don't like in online courses.
- Review established courses annually to update them with new features or make sure links are still current.

DON'T:

- Include large blocks of uninterrupted text for students to read on their own.
- Distract students with too many multimedia bells and whistles for a particular lesson.
- Use fancy graphics or animation just because they're the latest digital fads. (Make sure new features advance the curriculum.)
- Include critical information likely to be tested in optional parts of the course.

To better understand what is working or not working in its online courses, Ms. Smith said FLVS makes it a point to survey students regularly. Students are clamoring for ways to use their mobile phones, for instance, so the Florida school is working on embedding opportunities to use smartphones into some courses.

Custom-Built Courses

Though schools often have their students take courses from online schools such as FLVS or purchase courses from companies like Apex, some decide to build their own.

Mary T. Schlegelmilch, the e-learning supervisor for the 46,000-student Omaha, Neb., public schools, said she often focuses on looking for multimedia applications that will pique students' interest. "We're looking for new creative technology that will engage students in the learning process," she said.

Ms. Schlegelmilch said the district learned quickly that "you can't just put worksheets and a textbook online," particularly when an online course is being developed for students seeking credit recovery to make up for courses they've failed.

"If a student fails in a regular classroom and you give them the same thing again but just online, you're not going to get anywhere," she said.

Elements of a course need to be kept to short, manageable nuggets—no 50-minute videos, she said.

To build their own courses, district curriculum supervisors in Omaha first look at open-source options, such as the National Repository of Online Courses, a nonprofit group based in Marina, Calif., that provides free, high-quality online courses. Next, they might turn to other organizations—such as the National Geographic Society— that offer high-quality materials even though they aren't free.

The Omaha district often buys what Ms. Schlegelmilch calls "learning objects"—a video, simulation, animation, or podcast—and builds a lesson around those objects.

She said many of the textbooks the district already owns have online versions, which also have supplemental materials that can be incorporated into an online course.

Chris Rapp, the former curriculum director at the Boise-based Idaho Digital Learning Academy who now works for the Evergreen Education Group, said curriculum specialists at the academy build their courses in a similar manner, looking for learning objects that work within the lessons they're trying to create.

"We try to cherry-pick the best stuff," he said.

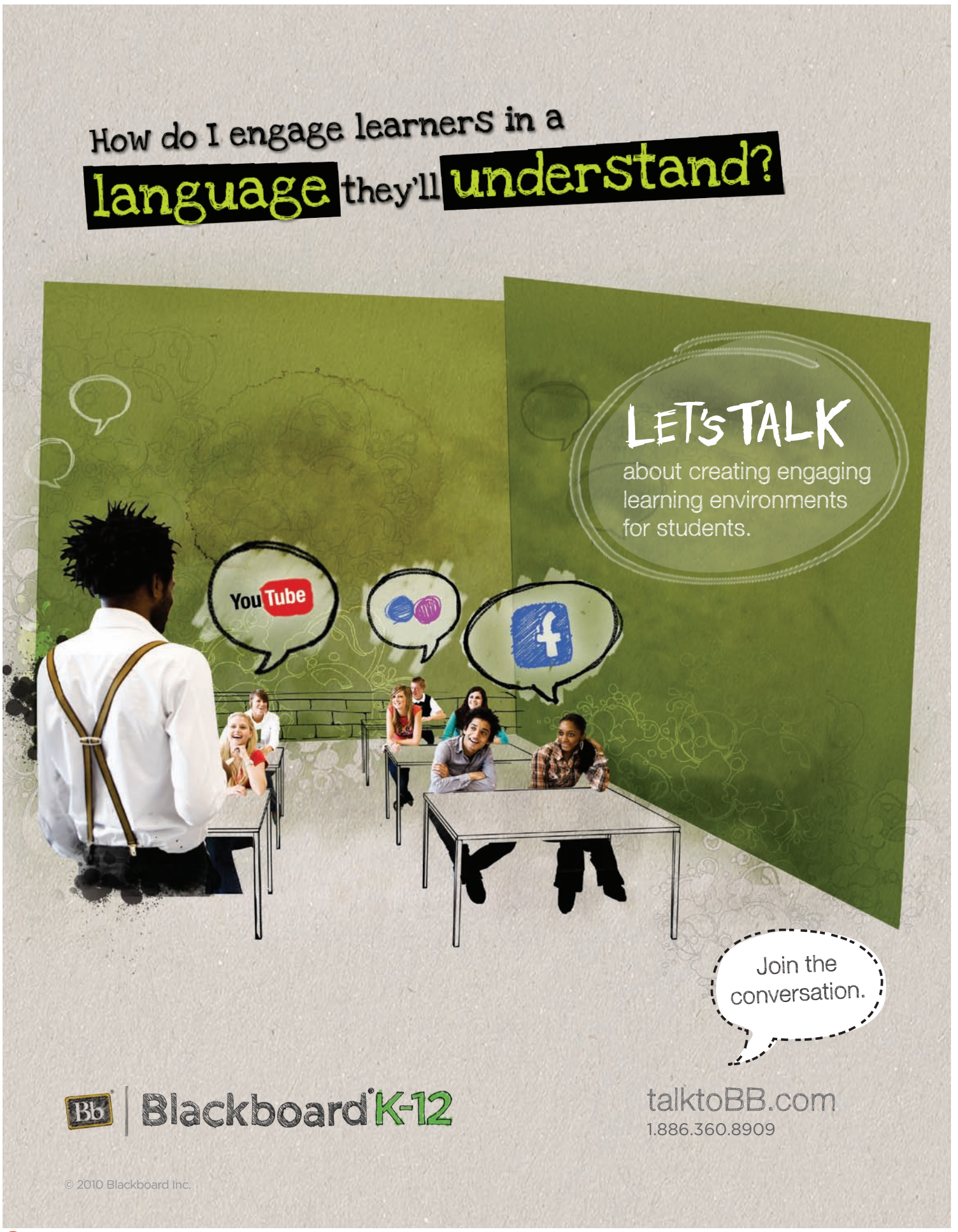
He cited a simulation the state-sponsored online school bought from ExploreLearning, a Charlottesville, Va., company that sells simulations aimed at grades 3-12. That simulation mimics a common live lab experiment in which students study the effect of a sprig of seaweed placed into a vial with a snail, compared with a vial containing just a snail. The students put vials in the light and the dark and measure the effect that the oxygen produced by the seaweed has in keeping the snail alive. With the simulation, students can try all the scenarios, but don't have to wait days or weeks to see the outcome, Mr. Rapp said.

Much of online-course creation is based on boosting interaction with students, Mr. Rapp said. "Whenever we build a course, we think about how the student is interacting with the content, with the teacher, and with other students," he said. "Everything is designed around making those things occur."

Themistocles Sparangis, the chief technology director for the 680,000-student Los Angeles Unified School District, said his district gets courses from local universities and from Apex Learning, but also creates its own.

The first step in evaluating courses is to make sure they meet the academic standards for California, he said. Mr. Sparangis said he, too, puts an emphasis on feedback and cooperation in online classes. He said online courses can capture a detailed picture of students' participation by examining how often they log in to a course, how much time they spend online, how they progress through the course material, and the extent of their participation in chats, blogs, and wikis.

"In a traditional classroom, the teacher has to engage in many techniques to monitor engagement: moving around the room, checking student body language, listening to their group conversations," Mr. Sparangis said. "In the online world, I can monitor electronically in much more detail. It's a powerful tool." ■



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