Virtual High Schools: Changing Schools, Enduring Principles

A Meeting Sponsored by the Center on Education Policy

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NOTE: *This is not a verbatim transcript of the proceedings of April 19. Instead, it is a detailed summary of the day's presentations and discussion, developed to help the Center on Education Policy write a report about the policy issues and recommendations emerging from the meeting.*

OPENING SESSIONS

Welcome and Meeting Goals
Jack Jennings, Director, Center on Education Policy

The Center on Education Policy (CEP) supports public education, but also welcomes change. Our country needs better public schools. CEP is looking at how changes in public education can improve education not for a select few, but for the vast majority of American children.

This meeting tries to put virtual schools in a context of the essential principles of public education. CEP has identified six essential principles and accompanying questions underlying American public education. It is possible we may have to revise these principles, but we would like to put current and future public policy discussions in the context of answering these questions.

CEP will write a guide to state leaders on virtual high schools, to help them look at this trend in light of these essential principles. The goal is to complete this report by this fall.

[NOTE: *The principles and questions, which were displayed near the podium throughout the meeting, are as follows:*

(1)   ***Effective preparation for life, work, and citizenship.* *Will the proposed reform produce an education of the quality needed to effectively prepare young people: (a) to lead fulfilling and contributing lives, (b) to be productively employed, and (c) to be responsible citizens in a democratic society?***

(2)   ***Social cohesion and shared culture.*   *Will the proposed reform promote a cohesive American society by bringing together children from diverse backgrounds and encouraging them to get along? Will it help to form a shared American culture and to transmit democratic values?***

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(3) ***Universal access and free cost.*** *Will the proposed reform guarantee a public education that is universally accessible to all children within the governing jurisdiction and is free of charge to parents and students?*

(4) ***Equity and non-discrimination.*** *Will the proposed reform provide the same quality of education for poor children as for non-poor children? Will it treat all children justly and without discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, disability, religious affiliation, or economic status?*

(5) ***Public accountability and responsiveness.*** *Will the proposed reform ensure that education supported with public dollars remains accountable to taxpayers and the public authorities that represent them? Will the reform be responsive to the needs of local communities and afford citizens a voice in the governance of their schools?*

(6) ***Religious neutrality.*** *Will the proposed reform provide a public education that is religiously neutral and respectful of religious freedom?]*

Introduction and Overview
Kathleen Fulton, National Commission on Teaching and America's Future

There has been a progression in the virtual learning field. A 1989 report by the U.S. Office of Technology Assessment, *Linking for Learning*, talked about the potential for distance learning, along with the need for more flexible technology. But the report didn't envision the potential created by today's networks with the Internet reaching into every school. Technology went far beyond what people had predicted.

The number of virtual schools varies, depending on which database and which definitions are used. The Distance Learning Resource Network has a listing of virtual schools by different categories. It lists 80 to 90 virtual schools in the U.S. and more in Canada and the rest of the world. Fourteen states have their own virtual schools sanctioned by state government. Other virtual schools are run by school districts (Houston), by colleges (the University of Nebraska at Lincoln), or by consortia (the Virtual High School in Massachusetts). Some virtual schools are state chartered, and some are operated by private for-profit groups. There is a wide range. Virtual schools "are not a novelty anymore." This year, 40,000 to 50,000 students are enrolled in online courses. By 2006, the majority of high school students will participate in online courses in some way.

Virtual schools differ from traditional schools in several ways:
1. Education can be asynchronous (activities occurring at different times).
2. Education can be self-paced (students complete a course when they achieve mastery).
3. Although some virtual schools include face-to-face learning, many don't.
4. There are administrative differences in such areas as the kinds of student supports provided; whether teachers are certified in the state where the school is based; who pays, how

much, and to whom; how students are selected; and how students and teachers are supervised.

Clearly, one size doesn't fit all.

PANEL PRESENTATIONS

Julie Young, Executive Director, Florida Virtual School

The Florida Virtual School began in serving students in 1997 and has received accreditation. Access to the school is free for all Florida students, whether from home schooling, private schools, or public schools.

The school is funded through a legislative allocation -- a fixed amount, which caps the number of students that can be served. All teachers are certified high school teachers. The school develops its own curricula. The school enters into affiliation agreements with all Florida school districts. The school doesn't offer its own diploma, but rather serves the state of Florida.

Lab centers, community centers, and media centers provide opportunities for face-to-face contact among students and teachers. The school also has a staff of "learning managers" who serve as liaisons to all Florida school districts.

The curriculum is "high tech and high touch," requiring a great deal of communication among students, teachers, and parents. Parents are expected to communicate with teachers at least once a month by phone. Learning is offered at any time, place, path, and pace. The typical teacher has a load of 100-150 students who can be at any phase of a course. Some students work at an accelerated pace, while others can take more time to complete a course than a traditional schedule would allow, with approval from their counselor and parents.

The goal of the school is "Access for All." Initially, the students it attracted were mostly "smart kids" with computer science backgrounds. There was a fear that the school would not serve the masses. But it has put considerable time and effort into outreach, including outreach to rural communities and low-performing schools. A top priority is to enroll underserved kids. The school also emphasizes AP course opportunities. It has an AP pass rate of 70%, well above the national average.

Larger districts like Broward County can create their own virtual campus, powered by the state virtual school and using the state school's content and provider. The districts do this on a cost recovery model. The virtual school also receives revenues from leasing its courses out of state.

Teachers are involved with the Florida Learning Alliance, a staff development opportunity with the goal of improved student achievement.

Enrollment totals over 8,200 students for this school year. When the school offered a

"summer start" program, which allows kids to begin courses in the summer, about 7,000 students registered in just 36 hours. This happened in the middle of the night. In four days, the summer program had registered 10,000 students, but it could only serve 3,000. This shows that if you build it, they will come.

Several features make online schooling attractive: choice and flexibility; the opportunities presented to home-schooled, homebound, or hospitalized students; and the opportunities to expand curriculum in public or private schools.

A quotation from the SCANS report speaks to a strength of virtual schooling: "In our current system, time is the constant and achievement the variable. We have it backwards. Achievement should be the constant and time the variable."

Donna Miller, Coordinator, West Virginia Virtual High School

West Virginia addressed how the essential elements of public education can thrive in a new environment. The state had a focus group called Going the Distance, which met in the summer of 1999 to study the issue of distance learning and formulate recommendations to the legislature and state board. Participants in this focus group were given access to online professional development courses and K-12 courses for review. They also took some of these classes themselves. The findings of this group led to state legislation.

West Virginia is a good place for a virtual schooling because it has a significant share of rural students and small schools. State resources are limited and the population is decreasing, trends that have forced public schools to cut staff. As a result, honors courses, AP courses, and some electives are being eliminated. The state wanted to offer high-quality courses to all students. Technology would provide equitable access. In fact, technology can *improve* equity more than face-to-face instruction.

The virtual school legislation passed in 2000. Its main focus was on geographically disadvantaged students. The state set policies for course approval, management, materials, evaluation of pupil progress, technology access, and funding. These policies removed lots of barriers currently in place.

West Virginia doesn't have the resources of funding or staff to create and deliver its own courses. Instead, the state identifies courses that align with state content standards. The state contracts with providers to offer high-quality courses and delivery. This model (called the tuition model) is working well. The state requires that course providers make available their content and delivery platform and provide an online teacher.

The West Virginia Virtual School (WWVS) operates as a broker, evaluator, and selector of providers. It evaluates and approves the courses and negotiates statewide prices. WWVS provides 75% of tuition (and more for some students).

WWVS also collaborates with the Education Technology Cooperative sponsored by the

Southern Regional Education Board (SREB). SREB helped the school identify national-level providers of online courses and facilitated a partnership with the Florida Virtual School. The Florida school is a primary content and course provider.

The start-up year for WWVS was 2000-01. The state already had a technology infrastructure in its schools, including Internet connections and a critical mass of new PC's with multimedia. It could also draw from the state's experience with satellite distance learning and video conferencing to help address policy and management issues. The first year, 344 students were enrolled, with an 85% completion rate. The students came from 21 of the state's 55 school districts and took 33 different courses. A local virtual school contact was named for every K-12 school in the state.

Here are some lessons learned from the pilot:

--A thorough, detailed course evaluation process is needed.
--Agreements with providers should go well beyond tuition costs. They need to target the services to be provided.
--School contacts are integral to increase training opportunities.
--WWVS must design and build a student management system to track progress of its own students.

All of these targeted goals have been accomplished. The state felt the course evaluations were the most important. WWVS developed, identified, and trained content specialists in online teaching and learning. These people then received training about evaluation procedures. The courses were evaluated in terms of their alignment with state standards and according to SREB's checklist of essential principles of quality. This process resulted in a course approval catalog.

In year 2 (school year 2001-02), about 500 students are enrolled from 31 counties and 52 schools. Only 58 students are taking AP courses online. WWVS is undertaking a publicity campaign to increase AP enrollments and to make clear the state will pay for the costs of the course and the AP test for students. Additional students are enrolled in satellite and video courses. Several counties are doing course development, which WWVS must oversee.

WWVS is also doing some internal course development. It is partnering with Florida to develop Spanish foreign language courses to begin in 2002-03. It also needs to develop some social studies and science courses.

WWVS wants to improve data collection and student management. It wants to determine which providers offer the best services to students and make comparisons of the time and effort required to be successful in virtual courses. It also wants to monitor student progress from the state level.

The National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) sponsored a study group on E-Learning in October 2001. A good motivator was the group's statement that "Every student is in the front row." The report of the national Web-based Education Commission also

reaffirms the critical role that virtual education will play in the future.

Sue Collins, Chief Education Officer, Apex Learning

Apex Learning is a private company that provides virtual courses, supplementary tools, and AP exam reviews. Students in Apex courses passed their courses just as often as students in traditional instruction. Apex is accredited just like a school, and goes through the accreditation process. Access and equity are key benefits of virtual learning. In 45% of the schools that use Apex's AP courses, these are the only AP course that kids have access to.

Apex has experience in 30 states and 2,100 schools. Some 90,000 kids use their online courses, supplementary tools, or exam reviews. About 50,000 of these students are using AP exam reviews (not actually a course).

Here are some lessons learned from the Apex experience:

--The most successful students are those who take a course for credit.
--Students need to be able to work independently.
--They need to have a clear relationship with the online instructor.
--They need access to online courses at home as well as at school.
--They need to be prepared (in other words, to have the prerequisite courses).
--They need to be able to communicate with classmates and talk with peers.
--A local mentor is needed to guide the experience.

In Apex, the student support system includes an online mentor, the technology itself, and on-site instructors. The instructors must be proficient in online instruction, great communicators, and able to connect over distance. Parents play an important role; they must be willing to monitor student progress and communicate with instructors and mentors.

Should you build or buy your virtual courses? You have to be ready to commit to an online level of instruction and provide technical support. When considering this question, you should look at the following factors: the instructional design required, the degree of interactivity required, the complexity of the subject matter, the uniqueness of content, and the special things about content that make it difficult to explain (like explaining electricity). Certain skills are needed to build your own courses, including knowledge about instructional design, content, psychometrics, correlation skills, and software development. For some elements, you can partner with others, while other elements you need to own yourself.

Outdated policies inhibit the possibilities of virtual education. State lines can also get in the way. Some policy issues to consider are the following:

--Administrative issues. These include the number of contact hours students are required to have, the amount of seat time required, attendance policies, and school calendar issues (for students to be successful they need to understand they won't finish in time if they don't move through the course).

--Funding issues. Most states haven't kept up with funding. One-fourth of all online courses are paid for by parents.

-- Teacher issues. These include certification and work assignment agreements to ensure that students have mentors and online instructors.

--Quality of instruction issues. These include policies for accreditation, policies for reviewing materials (for example, the 6-year textbook adoption cycle is outmoded), the basis for credit, and the alignment with state content standards.

--Equity issue. How do you assure equity in the provision of online education?

The NASBE study has some useful policy recommendations.

Andrew Zucker, Program Manager, SRI International

SRI did an evaluation of the Virtual High School (VHS) sponsored by the Concord Consortium-Hudson Public Schools in Massachusetts. The Consortium started a virtual school in 1996. It is not common for virtual high schools to make their evaluations available, but Concord did, and so did Florida. *[**Note:** Dr. Zucker has authored a book on virtual schools, based on this information and other research, that will be coming out in Fall 2002.]*

The main sources of evaluation data were surveys done over the years that show how things have changed. The SRI evaluators also made visits to and observations in 10 virtual schools. They did special studies comparing face-to-face and online courses. They had an expert panel review courses. And they did interviews with teachers of other online course, along with reviews of the research literature. You can find some of this on their web site, www.sri.com/policy.

Not all virtual high schools are the same. They differ in terms of type of courses, role of teachers, agencies that award credit, and other ways. Most don't award diplomas. Some have face-to-face teachers, while others don't.

The Virtual High School (Concord) model includes these elements:

--It is sponsored by a national consortium of schools. Schools that participate in the consortium can enroll students in the online school.

--Mostly one-semester elective courses are offered. But some courses, including AP courses, are year-long.

--Students are mainly enrolled in face-to-face courses in regular public schools, but are taking one or two courses online.

--A local site coordinator is designated in all consortium schools. These people can look out for local students, help with technology, and serve as intermediaries.

--Intensive training is provided for teachers and coordinators. They are required to take online courses before they fill these roles.

More and more virtual schools are picking up on the fact these last two elements are essential.

The major finding of the evaluation is that this is a successful undertaking. Students, teachers, and schools benefit. Signs of this success are that students are taking courses that would not otherwise be available to them. There is a high degree of satisfaction among participants. There are lots of repeaters among students and teachers, and people are willing to pay for the opportunity. Because the Concord model is successful, others are adopting parts of it.

The study also identified some lessons learned that can help other virtual schools:

--The limitations of online schools are evident. This approach is not for everyone. Students must be independent learners, and teachers must be willing to take on different roles.
--The rates of dropouts and stopouts (students who are still enrolled but have stopped doing the work and end up with a D or F) are higher for online courses. This is true at both the postsecondary and secondary levels.
--Today's Internet technology can cause problems for instruction. It is primarily based on written text, and students must be able to type. This is a barrier to those with reading difficulties or limited English proficiency.
--Quality control is costly but vital. One way to address this is to pay "monitors" who go online and monitor what's happening in the courses.
--Standards, such as those produced by SREB, are necessary to help assure quality. The Concord VHS has excellent standards. For example, delivery standards help answer the question, What do schools need to have in place to offer these courses?
--The promise of lower costs is premature. Policymakers are attracted to online learning because they think it saves costs, but there is little evidence of cost savings for quality courses.
--Potential users, such as principals, superintendents, parents, teachers, and students, need good information to make informed choices. They should know what dropout rates are, what is expected of students, how often students and teachers are online, and what the content of the course is.
--Further growth of online schools is likely. On a percentage basis, the number is tiny but the growth is potential huge.

Questions from the Audience and Answers for the Panel

Question: Is content getting better? Is there more of it, and does it cover a wider range of curriculum? Is it available for LEP students?

A. Julie Young: There's a long way to go. Florida developed its own content out of necessity. The state provided funding for R&D; the VHS had $10 million in 3 years and put all of it into content. Content is starting to get better, but until recently, it was pretty bad. It's just getting to the point where content is ADA-compliant. The Florida Virtual School has tried to be cautious. You can't just develop online content because you've developed traditional content. You need to know how kids learn in this mode. You don't just take traditional course content and put it on the web.

Question: This is a reaction to the contention that the lower cost argument is premature.

You need to compare the cost of an online course with what it would cost to provide a full course to those who never had an AP course, for example, but do now. Nobody has talked about universal access, but it is an important issue.

A. Andy Zucker: On the cost issue, the point I was making was that it's not accurate to hype virtual education as a money saver.

A. Sue Collins: It is very expensive for content providers to represent content in different formats for different languages or disabilities. For a company like Apex, it's a hard business decision to create courses that are truly accessible to all. Another problem that national publishers face is in representing content in a way that's suitable for electronic media. National publishers of textbooks haven't really gotten into the notion of providing online content in <u>useable</u> fashion (rather than just putting a printed textbook online).

A. Julie Young: The Florida school enrolls some students from the state school for the deaf and blind. In addition to many deaf children, the virtual school has worked with about 10 blind children, which is promising.

Question: Cost is a problem. Virginia sold the idea of virtual schooling to the General Assembly based on saving money, then the supporters had to go back and ask for more money. Also, is foreign language a state mandate or an elective in West Virginia?

A. Donna Miller: Foreign language is a requirement for high school, and the course we are developing will meet it.

Question: How do you deal with attendance requirements?

A. Julie Young: "We have to convince the powers that be that seat time is a non-workable component of distance education." We can track how many minutes students have been in the system or been on a page, but it's bogus. No one has proved that the amount of time a student spends correlates with learning. Kentucky has clearance not to use seat time. In Florida, we just have a general understanding that it's competency based; in other words, does the student learn and meet the state standard?

Question: But state funding is based on average attendance.

A. Julie Young: You've got to change it.

Question: We are finding that dropout rates depend on the quality of the course. Also, we're learning more about how to reach students who aren't necessarily independent learners. There are places where alternative education kids are taking online courses successfully.

A. Sue Collins: When counselors and principals assign kids to various courses, they need to understand what kids are getting into. Also, independent kids aren't necessarily the brightest ones. Independence shouldn't be equated just with those at the top end. We've looked

at retention, completion, and passing rates. We've found kids who just stop.

Question: I understood that virtual schooling was mainly a rural phenomenon. [*Audience reaction: Not true.*] Around the country, most of the action on high school reform is in urban areas. What's the connection between virtual high schools and efforts to overhaul urban education? We need a different pathway for some kids, ways to attract high-quality teachers to urban schools, and more.

A. Julie Young: In Orange County, Florida, 100% of the schools are 50% overcrowded. A small school there has 2,600 kids. Opportunities for those environments are limitless. We've found that in rural, low performing districts you have to twist arms to get kids in online education, because educators don't think their kids can do it. But we have an explosion in urban areas, because they can't meet students' needs with a class size of 42. One high school in Orange County has 5,500 in a school built for 2,000. All these students don't need to be in the building every day.

A. Donna Miller: West Virginia is a rural state, but we are finding that urban schools are early adopters. It's more difficult to get rural schools to participate. They don't want to expose their students to statewide scrutiny because they fear their students can't handle it.

A. Sue Collins: We need to help people understand the potential of the model, whether urban or rural. Austin has AP teachers at one school but not others. Schools can use online courses to ease these kinds of equity gaps. They can have 30 kids in a face-to-face class, with 12 more online in the same course who come to school once a week.

A. Kathleen Fulton: It starts with people doing the same thing in a different way, then later people realize they can do different things they should have done all along.

THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Patricia Albjerg Graham, Charles Warren Professor of the History of American Education, Harvard University

When we think about schooling, we tend to base judgments on our own experience, because we've all been to fourth grade, as historian Carl Kaestle has observed. This morning it might be useful for us to think about the roles we have expected schools to play in America. This morning I will talk about two metaphors to help us understand the role of schooling in America. Then I will turn to the excellent list of six principles of education in America that CEP has developed as a means of judging proposed reforms for schools.

There are two metaphors for the history of education in the U.S. The first is the metaphor of a theatrical stage, the second the metaphor of a battleship. Schools have two constituencies: the society and the children. The theatrical stage metaphor deals primarily with society, the battleship metaphor primarily with children.

In the theatrical metaphor, schools are stages on which the broader society enacts its drama. What society is unable or unwilling to do with adults, it expects schools to do with children. Schools are like the out-of-town tryouts before the social agenda moves to Broadway. The drama is presented in a sheltered setting with children before it is put on with adults. Kids are actors, administrators are directors. Directors want results for their money to show to the backers (the public). Is there a role for improvisation? Or is it scripted?

Public schools are the stage because they involve all constituencies of society and enroll all children (except home schoolers). No other American institution reaches the percentage of the population that schools do. Schools have traditionally been the place where boys and girls were brought together as equals while adults were separated by gender and occupation; where black and white learned together while adult society was segregated by race; where immigrants studied together while parents lived separately; and where kids with disabilities were brought into classrooms while adults with disabilities were excluded from the workforce.

Schools are the place where the next generation learns the rules and values of society. When a government is overthrown, the first thing the new leaders change is the curriculum, to reflect new values. Look at South Africa, China, and Afghanistan. So it was in the U.S. after the Revolutionary War.

Schools serve many functions beside academics. They try out ideas for social organization, mechanisms for social improvement. Sometimes the performance of the actors is lost amid the conflict of the producer, director, scriptwriters, and so on.

The second metaphor compares schools to the large battleships of World War II. They are large, powerful, and cumbersome, and have enormous crews. They are directed by a distant authority. Maneuverability is not their strength. They have not been as effective today because of this. They move when ordered, but with significant delays. The bigger the change of course, the longer it takes to change.

Schools have been directed to change course several times over the past century, according to themes that could be called the four A's:
--The schools of 1910 were expected to *Assimilate* immigrants rapidly to the American way.
--The schools of the 1930's were expected to help students *Adjust* to modern urban, suburban, and industrial life.
--In 1954, schools were expected to provide *Access* to black, disabled, and poor children.
--In 1983, the report *A Nation at Risk* brought the most radical change of all: schools were expected to meet high levels of academic *Achievement* for all.

Only the last goal was tied to learning. It's not that we were opposed to academics in the past; it was always okay for some. But academic achievement for everyone was not a goal until the last 20 years.

Like ships, school efforts were heroic, but the casualties were high. Battleships are not as important a piece of military equipment as they once were. Now they are supplemented by nuclear subs, guided missile destroyers, amphibious aircraft, aircraft carriers, and more. Not all of these work well for all types of battle; each requires different support, depending on the type of engagement. So it is with education. Educational problems that children face differ widely. Solutions must be adaptable to the particular situation. The school battleship needs to be helped by a missile destroyer of community agencies, for example. Battleships alone won't triumph. They need to be abetted by the entire fleet.

Two big ideas have relevance to this morning's discussion.

First, we are talking about virtual high schools and their relationship to academic achievement. We have not been talking about the broader role they play in the educational needs of the nation.

Second, the issue of full versus partial implementation calls to mind the story of progressive education. When it was good, it was very, very good, but when it was bad it was horrid. When progressive education was done with motivated children, affluent homes, and involved parents, and was taught by gifted, creative teachers, it was fabulous. When only some aspects were implemented, it destroyed the curriculum and was terrible. Yet partial implementation of most policies is more common than full implementation.

So, it is important to think about how much of the virtual high school is good and what its deficits are. Some key questions are:

1. How vital is the quality of content? How critical is free access (for example, what if parents have to pay)?

2. How important is training of staff? How easy is it to eliminate personnel like local coordinators when there are online persons?

3. To what extent is the virtual high school supplemental to traditional education, or should it be comprehensive?

4. What are the differences in circumstances today, compared with the 1960's, that make it easier for a for-profit or nonprofit collaboration to develop virtual courses? In the 1960's, private companies tried to go into education and lost their shirts. Why are opportunities better today for companies to go into this?

It's impressive that the American education system has changed and adapted when asked to do so by society. It is better at changing in response to backers and producers than changing on its own.

The six principles CEP has developed to help us judge the value of public education can be related to the four A's which have dominated educational purposes in the last century:

Assimilation, Adjustment, Access, and Achievement. These are all good ideas. We do change, though not swiftly.

Let me conclude by offering a concept of what we want for our children and for our society: Schools should nurture and enhance the wit and the character of the young.

Questions from the Audience and Answer Session with Pat Graham

Question: What's the ability of the virtual high school to promote citizenship, socialization, and personal development?

A. (from Pat Graham unless otherwise noted): Let the virtual high school people answer. We always said it was good for young people to get together (although through our history, the kids who got together were often more like each other than not). We always said that too much individualism in learning is not a good thing. Good virtual high school programs provide opportunities for interaction -- more opportunities than rural high school students had years ago. But will implementation be full enough to make it happen?

Question: Can you separate academic achievement from socialization?

A. The criticism is that our schools have bee stronger on socialization in recent years than on content. Figuring out how to get more academic rigor in schools is the great question schools are grappling with, and whether this is done better when it all occurs in schools or when it involves other settings, too. Schooling alone is a weak treatment for the education of young people, especially adolescents.

Question: There were other competing demands than the four stages you mentioned. We would need a paradigm shift of the public to get education to the place where most of us in this room would want it to go. How did the four stages become a public consensus to shift the paradigm?

A. Virtual high schools are right in the middle of discussing achievement, which is the dominant shift now. But another issue should be tied into the discussion of what virtual high schools can do, namely, to what extent do schools help build a democratic society? The democratic purpose of schooling is the next issue coming down the line, as seen in the work of Lorraine McDonnell and other researchers, and the principles developed by CEP. Education is for the child, the parent, and the state. One way for virtual high schools to do this is for students to engage with others different from themselves because they no longer are limited by geographic proximity.

Question: Community colleges are also wrestling with these issues. Are there any lessons from this system?

A. The parallels are not obvious, but there may be things that we are missing. Now many parents pay for virtual education for enrichment of the traditional curriculum. Does the

virtual school pitch itself as replacing the basics or adding? Community colleges are not associated with high-end academic activities. [*Audience reaction – some disagreement.*] Virtual AP courses are an effort to provide diversity in advanced training.

Question: Virtual high schools prepare students for the world of work. Students can stay in rural areas but use technology as an economic development tool.

A. Students can have virtual high schools as "cosmopolitanizing" experience, while retaining local roots and commitments.

Comment from Julie Young: We need to dispel the idea that virtual schools are for enrichment. Only 10% of the students enrolled are AP students. Masses of students are provided with courses that are not otherwise available. These students would otherwise be disadvantaged, for example, because they don't have a certified math teacher in their school.

Question: Do we need a flagship for virtual schools like the old National Institute of Education, and who would it be?

A. We've failed to build a public constituency for education research. We haven't talked enough about how research makes education better. We're doing a better job of merging quantitative and qualitative analyses.

Question: In the history of education, distance learning is not a new phenomenon.

A. We have gone from slates to silicon. The book was an incredible technological innovation. In the last 50 years, a number of innovations have not been successful. Technology advocates need to have a deeper understanding of the culture and social context in which technology is applied. Only when technologies are not accepted and fail to work do people realize that cultural issues are important.

Comment from Andy Zucker: The most rancorous area of virtual schooling is occurring in Pennsylvania with the cyber charter schools. We haven't talked about that yet today. Virtual schools vary in whether they serve home schoolers.

Comment from Sue Collins: Does a virtual school serve as a supplement to a brick and mortar school or replace it? Apex works almost exclusively with public institutions and fill gaps. There is an entire continuum between the extremes of being in competition with public schools or serving them.

Comment from Julie Young: About 30-35% of Florida virtual high school students are home schoolers, about 7-10% are private school students, and the rest are public school students. It's not an either-or, replace-or-supplement situation. The home-schooled kids being served will not go back to public schools. But Florida has a more friendly policy toward home schoolers than some states. These students can take part in public school sports teams, take a physics class, take the state exam. Florida law prohibits districts from charging home-schooled students

or treating them differently. But these students don't draw full-time-equivalent funding. If they did draw funding, it would become a state burden. This is becoming an issue, because the Florida virtual school is considered a public school.

Question: Our company started out mostly in higher education. Lots of issues have been addressed somewhat in higher education. For example, what's a good research agenda? Is it funding or poaching when for-profit organizations take away public school students? Are virtual offerings supplemental or a full curriculum? What is the actual cost of development and delivery?

A. Pat Graham: There's lots of talk about the demise of the residential college, with adults getting more higher education online. I'm extremely concerned if colleges like Harvard continue to attract mostly affluent students, while people from lower income groups get a distance learning experience to prepare them for a knowledge economy. We reinforce privilege by providing access to a residential experience for elite institutions while finding some other way to get people workplace skills -- if we sort children by their evident or probable destiny. The job of education is to provide as much opportunity as children's talents or temperament will allow. We should be anxious about people getting sorted into different destinies. It's potentially valuable if distance learning won't do that.

Question: Cyber charter schools in Pennsylvania caused friction and poisoned the atmosphere for discussion of other virtual education. The state's charter school law has a loophole that allows providers of cyber education to go to any students, including home schoolers, and have unlimited access to public money. If a home-schooled student is not enrolled in a public school district, that student can enroll in a cyber school located anywhere, and if it's a school with a charter, then the charter school sends the bill to the district where the child lives. Without any accountability, the school district is obligated to send money to the cyber school. It's unclear whether the legislators will close this loophole, but it's caused adversarial relations between cyber schools and the rest of public education.

CHARGE TO THE WORKING GROUPS

How Can We Assure That Virtual Schools Support Enduring Principles in American Education?
Jack Jennings

Pat Graham's first metaphor shows that education has many purposes. We should have an up-front discussion about whether these purposes are legitimate and how cyber education fits in. Regarding the battleships, maybe we need supplements for public schools to be more effective, improvements through new technology. So if virtual schools are good, how can we discuss them in this context?

The Center on Education Policy has identified six essential principles of public education, with accompanying questions that policymakers should be asking about education

reforms. Maybe some of these principles or questions should be changed, but this list is our starting point.

[Mr. Jennings read the principles and questions listed at the beginning of this meeting summary]

Everyone will be divided into six groups, one for each of the principles. The group leaders are Tom Davis, Susan Frost, John Mackiel, Maribeth Oakes, Paul Reville, and Bill Thomas.

These groups will first discuss whether these are the right questions. Then the groups will discuss how virtual schooling fits into each question. If the group reaches a conclusion about its assigned questions, then it can go on to discuss other questions on the list.

Consider this: If you were advising state leaders, how would you advise them to frame public policy in light of these questions?

Later in the afternoon, the group leaders will report back to the larger meeting.

NOTE: *For two hours in the afternoon, all the participants met in small group sessions to discuss whether CEP's questions were the right ones to ask about public education and how virtual schooling relates to each question. The participants engaged in a lively discussion and debated many interesting and significant implications of virtual schooling.*

AFTERNOON GROUP REPORTS

Group 1 -- Preparation for work, life and citizenship (Tom Davis)

The group considered some possible omissions from the principles. We considered whether the principles should say something about families, then decided that most of what people proposed adding were not principles.

It's a unique challenge to discuss principles in a legislative environment because many people have already set positions. Also, it would be interesting to look at current policies and put them through the screen of values and principles.

Distance learning has great potential for Principle 1 (preparation for work, life, and citizenship), but we shouldn't rely on it to do all aspects of all principles. For example, it can be good for active learners or different types of learners. Virtual education should supplement, not supplant, other kinds of education.

The principle of preparing citizens for a democracy is problematic, because interactive skills have to come in other ways than online.

How do you evaluate these goals? Most states have standards and tests, and if students in virtual schools perform well on state assessments, it's assumed the quality must be good. But that idea eliminates things not easily tested. Also proponents of distance learning ought to be careful about advocating the elimination of tests.

Our group also identified some potential for harm under the first principle. If learning experiences are divorced from the social context, it can do harm rather than good. We must address the issue of isolation. And we need definite coordination with other classroom activities.

Group 2 -- Social cohesion and shared culture (Susan Frost)

The group was fairly satisfied with the six principles. A possible omission is the phrase "academic achievement," which is nowhere in this list. "Lifelong love of learning" could be another way to put it. Also, the goal is not just understanding American culture, but global understanding. This is especially relevant to the Internet.

For principle 2 (social cohesion and shared culture), virtual schools redefine community to mean a community of learners rather than a geographic community. You can look at differences in people's experiences as a form of communication. Virtual cohesion could be the ultimate melting pot, with the opportunity to have more cohesion and understanding across cultures.

There is also a danger that virtual schools could allow for the ultimate customization and isolation -- a "boutique" culture. If children don't interact and have built in safety nets, it could isolate kids. We need to put in safeguards to make sure this culture doesn't happen.

What kinds of state policies should we have to ensure the idea of universal access?   We have to make sure every child has access to quality distance learning -- that this idea is not just rhetoric. We must go out and recruit low-performing schools and children.

Our group also adopted the stipulation that students enrolled in public school should not take more than two online classes at a time (taken from Florida's policies). So this will give students a mix of experiences. But there should be a caveat that if students could benefit from taking more online courses, they can get a waiver with a counselor's recommendation.

The group talked about possibly requiring community service as a way to make sure that students who take several online courses have some experiences that build social cohesion. Teachers and web-based materials would also have to have cultural diversity.

The state should help districts and parents determine what constitutes a good online curriculum. If everyone is taking a high-quality physics course, a certain cohesion comes from that. Part of this process could involve taking teachers who aren't AP-certified and putting them together with those who are. Distance learning can expand cohesion and shared culture (and shared excellence). This is full, ideal implementation, but it could go awry if these issues aren't addressed.

Group 3 -- Universal access and free cost (John Mackiel)

Principles 1 and 2 speak to the what of public education; principles 3 through 6 speak to the how. The group believed all six questions were legitimate. People were glad the principles referenced children and culture, which are often missing from education reform.

When you talk about choice, the discussion often comes down to vouchers. The group concluded that technology is one more medium to accomplish goals of choice. We talked about the fact that because we can do something for some children, does it make necessary to do it for all? We concluded yes, we should make it available to all, although this doesn't mean that all will participate.

Policy barriers aren't always discovered until we implement something. But technology will bring about greater productivity

Group 4 -- Equity and non-discrimination (Maribeth Oakes)

The group noticed that the first two principles on the list are purposes of education and look different from the last four, which are more like the means to achieve a purpose. The group also noticed there was nothing in the principles about content, and this ought to be remedied. There was also nothing about character.

 Tension exists between the needs of the individual and the needs of society. This list is mostly about societal needs. Our group had a discussion about the term "American culture." No one was quite sure what this meant. Some disagreed with its inclusion, while others agreed. We do need to recognize the tension between the desire for a unifying culture and the reality in our nation of many cultures.

Overall, we have to take a good look at building infrastructure to provide access for all children. We also need the human infrastructure. There is an equity reason why schools are moving into virtual learning, but we need to address problems associated with poverty by providing adequate support systems. Virtual schools could provide the same level of equity as brick and mortar schools.

Several issues emerge about training of teachers, counselors, and parents for virtual education.

We need to study who virtual education helps and who may be left behind. With the right work, the concept can be nondiscriminatory. We need to make sure course content is also bias-free. Generally society is moving toward more equitable technology access, but we must do more.

Group 5 -- Public accountability and responsiveness (Paul Reville)

The group was supportive of the principles as a whole. Some people had reservations about principles 2 and 6. A substantial portion of a policy maker's constituency would not support principle 2 (social cohesion and shared culture). There were also reservations about principle 6 (religious neutrality), because many people feel that parents should be empowered to participate in schools with a religious orientation.

Our group also suggested adding the concept of safety and security to the principles.

In the discussion of principle 5 (public accountability and responsiveness), there is a tendency to say we're not doing this right in traditional schooling, so why should we hold virtual schools to a higher pathway? But if you're going to create a new path, you need to be pro-active and describe accountability in a way that seems fair and reasonable, rather than waiting for the public sector to do it in response to a crisis or scandal. Then virtual schools would be stuck with draconian measures.

So the question becomes, if the measure is not seat time but mastery, how do you determine mastery? E-learning poses new accountability challenges. Will virtual schools be accountable to local officials? Already there is a fair amount of local sign-off with current virtual schools. Our group agreed there needs to be a set of delivery and construction standards, as well as performance standards for virtual schools. We felt that the strategy of standards and assessments fits well as a framework for e-learning. Proponents could say, let's just apply the same standards that we have for all schools and align virtual education with state goals.

Virtual schools also can get into the domain of jobs, unions, and teacher work roles.

Group 6 -- Religious neutrality (Bill Thomas)

The group looked at the opportunities that Web-based education provides to allow kids to interact with others from diff religious backgrounds.

Some issues we need to be mindful of include the following:

1. Should virtual schools be religiously neutral in order to receive public funds? Should they be able to use the same policies that address religion in brick and mortar school (after reviewing those policies)?

2. Do virtual schools need to be held to different standards regarding religion? Our group concluded they should not.

3. What if some elective courses are based on topics of religion? For example, Brigham Young University offers online courses being taken by high school students, but the religious courses are clearly identified. This university also has a high integrity of content in other academic areas and in courses that aren't religious, even though the courses are being offered by a religious institution.

4. There is little data and or oversight of the home-schooled population, and little oversight of charter schools. For charter schools, religion could be a subsidiary reason for seeking a charter. We must pay attention to these issues up front; we can't just be reactive. We must anticipate issues at the state, local, and national policy levels.

The Internet allows for expansion of religious information. It allows kids to experience other religions, especially kids who come from environments where everyone tends to be the same. But some content areas get into controversial topics, such as biology and bioethics. Will states review and screen this content? What are the policy implications?

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Jack Jennings

It appears that the groups thought the principles were basically on the mark, but with some modifications, which the Center on Education Policy will consider. As the main outcome of this meeting, the Center will produce a document that will target state policymakers. Thank you for your active participation and contributions to this meeting. We will see that each of you receives a copy of the report when it is completed.