

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Virtual schools—educational organizations that offer courses through the Internet—are rapidly becoming part of the landscape of American education. Largely unknown a decade ago, the phenomenon of online education for secondary, middle, and even elementary school students has been fueled by the growth of computers with Internet access in schools and homes. States, local school districts, regional consortia, higher education institutions, nonprofit organizations, and private vendors today offer a smorgasbord of courses and services, many of which are organized into entities called “schools.” These virtual schools include many of the basic components found in “face-to-face” education, including teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors; text-books, schedules, and course assignments; and other instructional resources.

Preserving Long-Held Principles in a Virtual World

Most policy discussions about virtual schools focus on how this new mode of education is changing the delivery, structure, governance, or funding of education. Less attention is paid to how these changes could affect the deeper purposes and principles underlying the U.S. system of public education—in other words, the expectations and ideals that have shaped the American vision of public education for more than a century. These include such purposes as preparing students for life, work, and citizenship, and creating a cohesive society; and such principles as providing universal access and equity in education, and making schools responsive to their local community.

Virtual education is a prime example of a fast-moving trend that could have a major impact on these purposes and principles. Virtual schools are calling into question longstanding ideas about the definition of a public school, the social goals of public education, and local control of public education.

As a national independent advocate for effective public schools, the Center on Education Policy (CEP) encourages policymakers to have an explicit conversation about how virtual schools—or any other far-reaching education reform—will affect the fundamental purposes and principles of public education. CEP supports changes that will help students learn better, but we also believe these changes should be implemented with full awareness of their impact on fundamental principles. This kind of dialogue will help policymakers determine which purposes and principles are worth keeping and preserve them, even in the midst of dramatic change.

To stimulate these types of conversations, CEP has generated a set of key questions, see sidebar inside, that policymakers should ask about major education reforms. These questions are grouped according to a list of six essential purposes and principles of public education developed by CEP after talking with many citizens.

1001 Connecticut Avenue NW Suite 522
Washington, D.C. 20036



Preserving Principles of Public Education in an Online World

WHAT POLICYMAKERS SHOULD BE ASKING ABOUT VIRTUAL SCHOOLS



BY THE CENTER ON
EDUCATION POLICY

Preserving Principles of Public Education

in an Online World

MAJOR FINDINGS

In April 2002, the Center on Education Policy held a conference on virtual schools. Three main findings emerged from that meeting and from the Center's analysis of other research on virtual schools:

- Virtual schools are an important tool for expanding opportunities in public education *if* states implement them carefully, effectively, and equitably.
- Virtual schools should serve as a supplement to and not a replacement for a comprehensive public school education. In the future, as needs change, technologies offer more flexibility, and educators gain more experience and evaluation data from virtual schooling, policymakers could reconsider whether virtual schools could provide a comprehensive education in some situations.
- Virtual schools funded with public money should be held accountable to the same broad principles and policies as other forms of public education in such areas as academic outcomes, equity, and religious neutrality. But in such areas as attendance, scheduling, and funding formulas, states will probably need to revise existing policies to make them workable for virtual schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Center on Education Policy has developed several recommendations to help state and national policymakers create, support, and regulate K-12 virtual schools in ways that will maintain the essential purposes and principles of public education. A longer version of this report contains a fuller discussion of the issues underlying these recommendations and examples of promising practices.

Effective preparation for life, work, and citizenship

- Policymakers should develop clear indicators for evaluating the quality of online education. Some of these indicators should be much the same as those used for traditional schools, such as student academic achievement, alignment of course content with state standards, course completion rates, and teacher qualifications. Others should be specific to online education, such as interactivity in course design, reliability of technology and technical support, and teachers' ability to teach in an online environment.

Social cohesion and shared culture

- Policymakers should insist on frequent, regular, and timely interaction among online students, between online teachers and students, and with facilitators or on-site mentors in the home school to enhance student learning and social interaction.
- State or local administrators should set a maximum number of online courses a student can take in a semester or overall to meet graduation requirements, to assure that virtual education supplements but does not supplant a comprehensive public education experience.

Universal access and free cost

- Policymakers should take aggressive steps to assure that all public school students have equal access to online courses. This should include covering the cost of online courses for low-income students and making available home computers, modems, and Internet access to low-income families.
- States, school districts, and Web-based course developers should make sure that course content, designs, and tools meet federal accessibility standards for students with learning or other disabilities.
- State policies should protect public school districts from losing funds to virtual charter schools or from having to pay for the participation of private or home-schooled children they would otherwise not be supporting. States that choose to include home-schooled children in publicly funded virtual schools should provide separate funding for this purpose.

Equity and non-discrimination

- Policymakers should develop guidelines and safeguards to ensure equitable online learning opportunities for all public school students, not just those who are taking advanced courses or are skilled technology users. States and school districts should provide all students with the supports and technology skills necessary to learn online.
- When developing new courses or selecting existing courses to offer, policymakers should target resources on subjects that serve the greatest number of students or the students with the greatest need of assistance.
- Policymakers should take care not to allow virtual schooling to become a watered-down way to address persistent teacher shortages in schools serving low-income, minority, or rural students.

Public accountability and responsiveness

- Virtual schools that receive public money should be accountable to and overseen by public authorities, such as states or local school districts.
- Parents and citizens should have input into policy decisions that affect the availability, operation, and funding of virtual schools in their communities. States and school districts should make public the average test scores, other student outcomes, and evaluation reports for all virtual schools.

Religious neutrality

- Virtual schools that receive public funds should be held to the same principles of religious neutrality and respect for religious freedom as traditional public schools, such as prohibiting course content that endorses a particular religion.

Key Questions That Policymakers Should Ask about Education Reforms

- 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?
- 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?

CENTER ON
EDUCATION
POLICY **CEP**

Center on
Education Policy
1001 Connecticut Avenue NW
Suite 522
Washington, D.C. 20036

Phone: 202-822-8065
Fax: 202-822-6008
E-Mail: cep-dc@cep-dc.org
Web Site: www.cep-dc.org

Jack Jennings,
Director