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 long-standing 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.
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-poorn 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?