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Delivering Education Direct to the Desktop

By Chris Braunlich

A part of Governor Bob McDonnell's trio of education improvement laws this year was the establishment of procedures for local school boards to contract for virtual school programs – opportunities for students to work with their curriculum and teachers over the Internet, rather than in a traditional classroom.

But the vast majority of Virginians are unfamiliar with online learning. In a November 2009 poll conducted by Braun Research, Inc., only 30 percent of voters were “very” or “somewhat” familiar with virtual schools. And after virtual schools were described, even fewer – 28 percent – “strongly” or “somewhat” favored their use.

Yet, today more than 70 percent of school districts in the United States offer online courses to students. In 2000, there were only 50,000 enrollments in online courses; eight years later that figure was more than one million, and it continues to grow more than 30 percent annually.

Is Virginia at risk of falling behind in this 21st century educational innovation?

Online education offers a variety of opportunities to students and schools systems: Students can now take less-popular courses that might previously have been unavailable for lack of enrollment. Students who want to move forward can experiment with college-level courses. Drop-outs and those who need to retake classes to graduate now have new chances to receive a real high school diploma and get better paying jobs. Hybrid programs combining online courses and face-to-face classes are better able to serve students with unique learning needs. And online programs offer a wide variety of supplemental aids and lesson plans for teachers in the classroom.

School systems can benefit, too. The cost of serving a full-time online student averages about \$6500 nationally vs. a cost of more than \$9500 to serve that same student in a bricks and mortar classroom.

There are several platforms for online programs. The simplest platform is an example like Verizon Foundaton's *Thinkfinity* – recently named a “Best in Tech” website by Scholastic Administrator magazine. It offers lesson plans and supplemental aids for classroom teachers, students and home-school parents that will soon be linked to Virginia's Standards of Learning by grade level and subject.

The oldest example is a state virtual school. *Virtual Virginia*, operated by the state Department of Education, offers more than 60 middle and high school courses ranging from

Latin and AP Art History to Spanish and AP Statistics. But enrollment in Virtual Virginia is capped and has significant restrictions – one reason why, in 2008-09, fewer than 5,000 students were enrolled. In fact, Virginia’s enrollment ranks only midway among states with state virtual schools and is far outpaced by states like Florida, Alabama, South Carolina and Alabama.

Increasingly, however, education is turning to multi-district schools offering full-time coursework. These are frequently operated by Educational Management Organizations like K-12, Inc. (70,000 students) or Connections Academy (20,000 students), freeing up the local school division to focus on its bricks and mortar program and avoid heavy investment in online-delivered course content, technology infrastructure and staff training.

Contracting with K12, Inc., Carroll County Public Schools created the Virginia Virtual Academy for students K-8 more than a year ago, registering students from throughout Virginia. For the 2010-11 school year, nearly 300 students have already registered, and the school will likely cap its registration at 400 – meaning there are plenty of potential applicants who won’t be able to be admitted.

Online education would permit school divisions to create a virtual charter school – still a public school, but one that should be operated with a greater degree of freedom than a traditional public school or even a district-operated Virtual School. A Virtual Charter school might especially be appropriate for multiple school divisions that have students with specific needs (i.e., special education, credit recovery, gifted and talented) but where those populations are too small and/or too geographically dispersed to place in a single bricks and mortar building.

Of growing interest, too, is the concept of “hybrid schools” – those combining both online and face-to-face courses. There has been growing interest in such schools, particularly in developing programs for credit recovery, drop-out recovery and other efforts for at-risk students – particularly at a time when summer school programs are being reduced or eliminated because of budget constraints. Nearly 20 percent of the students taking Florida Virtual School courses do so for credit-recovery. Similar schools and programs are widespread and growing throughout the country.

The increasing use of technology to deliver educational services poses significant new challenges to states in the areas of funding (where does the money come from?) and policy (“seat time” requirements vs. mastery requirements). But the opportunities it offers to students preparing for a 21st century workplace are compelling.

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