

Vision for Virtual School Programs in Virginia

Research increasingly suggests that online learning can be as effective and, in some cases, more effective than traditional classroom learning.¹ This finding, coupled with the increasing availability of newer technologies, has led to a dramatic growth in virtual school programs in recent years. Virtual programs offer increased opportunities, flexibility, and convenience. Along with their tremendous potential to meet the unique needs of students and families, virtual programs must reflect the same characteristics of any effective program. In other words, effective online programs require highly qualified teachers, rigorous and appropriate standards-based curricula, meaningful assessments, engaging resources, adequate support, and effective administration.

Since 2001, the Commonwealth of Virginia has invested more than \$525 million in technology infrastructure improvements in the public schools. Coupled with a strong statewide system of academic support built upon rigorous Standards of Learning (SOL), this extensive technical infrastructure establishes an ideal environment in which virtual programs can thrive. In 2010, the Virginia General Assembly passed legislation to ensure that virtual programs in the Commonwealth offer the highest quality instruction and be aligned to state standards.

The following describes characteristics of high-quality virtual school programs. It is intended to provide a vision for establishing and implementing virtual school programs in Virginia.

High-Quality Virtual School Programs

Recent work by the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL), the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), and the U.S. Department of Education define quality online learning programs fairly consistently.

Effective programs, whether offering a complete range of online courses or one single course, should have a strong sense of mission and purpose supported by effective leadership. The curricula should be developed based on current research in best practices for online classes. Various specialists should work collaboratively to develop each course, including curriculum specialists and instructional and technical designers. Course content must be rigorous and match or exceed the content of currently accepted courses taught in traditional school environments. Instructional materials and approaches should be varied and take advantage of the unique properties of electronic media, including student-teacher interaction. The description of the course content, pedagogy, and mechanism for delivery should be clear and accurate so students are aware of prerequisites and expectations. In addition, an orientation

¹R. Smith, T. Clark, & R. L. Blomeyer, *A Synthesis of New Research on K-12 Online Learning* (Naperville, IL: Learning Point Associates, November 2005) <http://www.ncrel.org/tech/synthesis/>.

must be included to help students learn to use the particular course system and be successful in an online class.

Assessment options and requirements must be stated up front, with clearly outlined methods for students to appeal their grades or earned credits. Teachers should provide frequent relevant feedback to students and parents to help students track their progress and make necessary adjustments. As well, teachers, students, and parents must be well informed about federal, state, and local assessment requirements and determine how they will be used in the course and program.

Teachers should be highly qualified, licensed by the Virginia Board of Education, and endorsed in their course content area and have specific, ongoing training in online learning and teaching. Teachers should be assessed regularly for their ability to provide a quality online learning experience, measured in part by measures of student growth and achievement. Providers should provide technical support on a timely basis for teachers and students.

Programs that use a blended approach—with either a parent or educational mentor—must provide training for the mentor. Programs that provide a complete curriculum must provide support services (e.g., academic advising, needs assessment, career counseling) to all students. The online environment must also be safe, secure, and appropriately maintained.

Certain characteristics should be present in every high-quality online program:

- Technology should be used effectively to support the integration of multiple tools and pedagogical approaches. Effective support facilitates communication, collaboration, and learning. The technology must be reliable and properly maintained. Multimedia elements must be age and content appropriate, engaging, and optimized for delivery over the Internet. Effective technology is unobtrusive and intuitive for users.
- The programs must ensure a commitment to equity by providing students with disabilities the necessary accommodations and modifications to access the content. Teachers serving these students should be properly licensed and endorsed. They should also ensure that students from low-income families, English language learners, or traditionally underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities are not excluded from participation and that the content of the materials is diverse to reflect the inclusive nature of the program.
- Data must be gathered and used effectively to inform decisions regarding all aspects of the program, including tracking individual student growth and achievement and adjusting particular teaching methods. The program and courses must be updated regularly to improve student growth and achievement, adjust for technological changes, and stay aligned with the program goals and learning standards. In addition, virtual programs must readily provide appropriate data to stakeholders and solicit feedback on the quality and effectiveness of the programs.

These characteristics of effective online programs form the basis for the criteria and application process for becoming an approved multidivision online provider in Virginia.

Resources

All Web sites were available on May 18, 2010.

<http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/evidence-based-practices/finalreport.pdf>

Means, B., Toyama, Y., Murphy, R., Bakia, M., & Jones, K. (2009). *Evaluation of evidence-based practices in online learning: A meta-analysis and review of online learning studies*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Policy, and Evaluation Development, Policy and Program Studies Service.

<http://www.inacol.org/research/nationalstandards/NACOL%20Standards%20Quality%20Online%20Programs.pdf>

Pape, L., & Wicks, M. (2009). *National standards for quality online programs*. Vienna, VA: International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL).

http://publications.sreb.org/2008/08T05_Onl_Student_Survey.pdf

Thomas, W. R. (2008). *Do online courses work for middle grades and high school students? Online students have their say*. Atlanta: Southern Regional Education Board.

http://publications.sreb.org/2009/09T02_Overcoming_Doubts.pdf

Thomas, W. R. (2009). *Overcoming doubts about online learning*. Atlanta: Southern Regional Education Board.

http://www.inacol.org/research/promisingpractices/iNACOL_PP_MgmtOp_042309.pdf

Watson, J., & Gemin, B. (2009). *Management and operations of online programs: Ensuring quality and accountability*. Vienna, VA: International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL).