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The Funding of Virtual Schools in Public Elementary and Secondary Education

Luke J. Stedrak, Justin C. Ortagus,
and R. Craig Wood

Introduction

The advent of information technology throughout the United States has revolutionized the educational process and sparked the rapid growth of virtual education at the K-12 level in almost every state such that courses in every imaginable subject can now be offered outside the geographic constraints of school districts and traditional brick-and-mortar buildings. Virtual education for elementary and secondary students has grown into a \$507 million market and continues to grow at an estimated annual pace of 30%.¹ In 2000, there were approximately 40,000 to 50,000 enrollments in elementary and secondary online education courses.² By 2006, the Sloan Consortium reported approximately 700,000 enrollments.³ The overall number of elementary and secondary students enrolled in virtual education courses in the 2007-2008 school year was estimated at approximately 1,030,000—a 47% increase over two years.⁴ Currently, there are an estimated 3,000,000 enrollments in online and blended courses in elementary and secondary education.⁵ With the dramatic growth of virtual education, state policy and funding issues related to virtual schools have become increasingly important. Such issues include, but are not limited to, equity, access, choice, and cost-effectiveness. Yet, little systematic research exists to assist state policymakers in their decision-making. To that

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end, this article presents an overview of the type and funding of virtual education by state as a first step in providing policymakers with much needed information.

State Virtual Education Models

Virtual education and its funding can be classified into three models: (1) centralized; (2) publicly-funded; and (3) privately/publicly-funded. This section describes each of these and places states into the appropriate model. Summary tables provide additional information as to the types of virtual schools and online learning programs available by state, when these were established, and primary funding sources. In addition, examples of each of these models in selected states are described in greater detail.

The Centralized Virtual School Model

The centralized virtual school model is defined as a unified virtual school option for public elementary and secondary education students within a given state—no matter the school district or local authority. Whether full-time or supplemental, state virtual schools are authorized and funded by a state legislature, state education agency, or state board of education. Thirteen states use the centralized virtual school model. Of these, three states—Florida, Michigan, Missouri—also permit private/for-profit and nonprofit alternatives. (See Table 1.) Further detail on the centralized virtual school model in Florida, Idaho, and Alabama is provided in this subsection.

In 1997, the state of Florida created the Florida Virtual School (FLVS),⁶ which has become the largest virtual school in the United States.⁷ FLVS operations are overseen by a governor-appointed board of trustees.⁸ Although the state accommodates private/for-profit and nonprofit alternatives, this is a highly centralized model. Florida statute requires school districts to make virtual education accessible to full-time virtual students from kindergarten through grade 8, or to full-time or part-time students in grades 9-12.^{9, 10} As a method of dropout prevention for high school students who struggle in a traditional classroom setting, the legislature amended the statute to expand virtual instruction coverage to grades 9-12.¹¹ However, state legislators recently reduced per-pupil funding for virtual education by 10%.¹²

Since its inception in 2002, the Idaho Digital Learning Academy, which is the state virtual school, has used a highly centralized model for virtual education.^{13, 14} In 2009, Idaho established new funding provisions, incorporating a blend of virtual and traditional instruction, and allowing school districts to use up to 5% of the funding for teacher salaries through the “total support units” formula to afford teachers the opportunity to offer virtual instruction or blended learning options to their students.¹⁵ The state of Idaho defines a virtual school as “...a full-time, sequential program of synchronous and/or asynchronous instruction primarily through the use of technology via the Internet in a distributed environment. Schools classified as virtual must have an online component to the school with online lessons and tools for student and data management.”¹⁶

Since 2004, all online education activity in Alabama has been mandated through the state virtual school—Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators, & Students Statewide (ACCESS).¹⁷ An annual state appropriation comprises the majority of ACCESS

Table I
States Using a Centralized Virtual School Model

State	Name of State Virtual School	Year Established	Primary Funding Source	Alternatives to State Virtual School
Alabama	ACCESS	2004	State appropriation	None
Florida	Florida Virtual School	1997	State appropriation	Allows private/for profit and nonprofit
Idaho	Idaho Digital Learning Academy	2002	State appropriation	None
Illinois	Illinois Virtual School	2009	State appropriation	None
Kentucky	Kentucky Virtual Schools	2000	State appropriation	None
Louisiana	Louisiana Virtual School	2000	State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education	None
Maine	Maine Online Learning Program	2009	State Department of Education	None
Michigan	Michigan Virtual School	2000	State appropriation	Allows private/for-profit and nonprofit
Mississippi	Mississippi Virtual Public School	2006	State appropriation	None
Missouri	Missouri Virtual Instruction Program	2007	State appropriation	Allows private/for-profit and nonprofit
Montana	Montana Virtual Academy	2009	State appropriation	None
North Carolina	North Carolina Virtual Public School	2002	State Board of Education	None
Wyoming	Wyoming Switchboard Network	2008	State Department of Education	None

Sources: See Appendix A.

funding. For fiscal year (FY) 2009-2010, the state appropriated \$22.5 million, a decrease from the previous year. However, in 2008, ACCESS became eligible for \$11 million in state education bonds for expansion.¹⁸

The Publicly Funded Virtual School Model

Like centralized virtual schools, publicly funded virtual schools are authorized and funded by a state legislature, state education agency, or state board of education. However, this model differs from the centralized approach in that school districts are afforded the option of choosing from multiple, publicly funded virtual schools as opposed to a single state virtual school. Of the nine states that use the publicly funded model, seven allow both private/for-profit alternatives, while two permit only nonprofit approaches. (See Table 2.) Further detail on publicly funded virtual school models in Arkansas, Ohio, and New Hampshire is provided in Table 2.

Since 2000, the Arkansas Virtual High School (AVHS) has served as the state virtual school.¹⁹ Additionally, the Arkansas Virtual Academy is a full-time, statewide charter school.^{20, 21} The Arkansas Department of Education is the funding source for virtual schools and oversees governance and accountability pertaining to virtual education throughout the state.

From 2007 to 2009, AVHS received funding through an annual state department of education grant of \$740,000. Funding for the 2009-2010 academic year was reduced to \$590,000, which resulted in decreased enrollment.²² The Arkansas Virtual Academy serves grades K-8, but is limited by legislation to 500 students. As a charter school, it receives funds "...equal to the amount apportioned by the district from state and local revenue per average daily membership."²³ This means it is funded through the same student full-time equivalent (FTE) formula as a physical school—\$5,905 per student—but it does not receive any funding from local property taxes.²⁴

Ohio enrolls virtual students through 27 eCommunity schools.²⁵ In Ohio, a "community school" is similar to a charter school. An eCommunity school is a charter school which is computer-based, allowing students to work from home.²⁶ Since 1997, the state of Ohio has supported the inception and expansion of community schools as an alternative to the traditional model of public elementary and secondary education school programs.²⁷

Community schools in Ohio, including eCommunity schools, receive the same state per-pupil foundation formula payments as students in face-to-face programs within a school district. In Ohio, the funding allocation for community schools is set at \$5,718 per pupil.²⁸ Like all other public schools, community schools may seek

Table 2
Publicly-Funded Virtual School Model

State	Centralized Model	Name of State Virtual School	Year Established	Primary Funding Source	Alternatives to State Virtual School
Alaska	No	None	2008	State Department of Education and Early Development	Allows private/for-profit and nonprofit
Arkansas	Yes	Arkansas Virtual High School	2000	State Department of Education Grant	Allows nonprofit
Georgia	Yes	Georgia Virtual School	2005	State Appropriation	Allows private/for-profit and nonprofit
Kansas	No	None	2008	State Department of Education	Allows private/for-profit and nonprofit
Minnesota	No	None	2003	State Department of Education	Allows private/for-profit and nonprofit
New Hampshire	No	None	2007	State Board of Education	Allows private/for-profit and nonprofit
Ohio	No	None	2003	State Department of Education	Allows private/for-profit and nonprofit
South Carolina	Yes	South Carolina Virtual School Program	2007	State Appropriation	Allows private/for-profit and nonprofit
South Dakota	Yes	South Dakota Virtual School	2006	State Department of Education	Allows nonprofit

Sources: See Appendix B.

additional funds from grants, as well as government and private sources. In addition, as charter schools, they may be eligible for state start-up grants and federal planning grants.

Approved in 2007 by the New Hampshire Board of Education, the Virtual Learning Academy Charter School (VLACS) is the sole state-wide online-learning program,²⁹ although there is a regional online charter school along with 30 high schools that offer online courses.³⁰ Funding for VLACS is provided by the state board of education and was increased from \$3,830 per full-time pupil in 2008-2009 to \$5,450 in 2009-2010.³¹ In accordance with the New Hampshire General Court, funding for online students follows the student from the resident district to the open enrollment district, and "...[the] pupil's resident district shall pay to such school an amount equal to not less than 80 percent of that district's average cost per pupil as determined by the department of education..."³²

The Privately/Publicly-Funded Virtual School Model

For this model, virtual schools can be funded or authorized by a state legislature, state education agency, state board of education, or private organization. In contrast to the previous two models, this one allows school districts to choose between a publicly funded or privately funded virtual school. Twenty-six states use this virtual school model. Of these, 18 also have a state virtual school. (See Table 3.) Further detail on privately/publicly funded virtual schools in California, Connecticut, and New Mexico is provided in this subsection.

In 1999, University of California College Prep, the state virtual school, was established.³³ Many California virtual schools are supplemental and receive funding based upon average daily attendance (ADA). Charter school law and independent study provisions govern online charter schools in California. In addition, California

has a variety of private virtual school options available to public elementary and secondary education students, e.g., Halstrom High School Online, Laurel Springs School, and Sycamore Academy.

In 2008, the Connecticut Department of Education created the Connecticut Virtual Learning Center which functions as the state's virtual school.³⁴ Initially, the Connecticut Virtual Learning Center received two academic years of funding (2007-2008 and 2008-2009), but the second year of funding was subsequently retracted due to state budget constraints.³⁵ As a consequence, the Connecticut Virtual Learning Center charged \$295 per semester course for public school students, and \$320 per semester for private school and home-schooled students.³⁶

In 2010, the Connecticut legislature passed Public Act 10-111, which served as the state's first piece of legislation related to online learning.³⁷ Alternatives to the Connecticut Virtual Learning Center include the Connecticut Adult Virtual High School, a statewide online program, and a variety of supplementary private school options.

In 2007, the New Mexico legislature passed the Cyber Academy Act creating the state virtual school, Innovative Digital Education and Learning New Mexico (IDEAL-NM).³⁸ In addition to IDEAL-NM, which is funded through the legislature, private virtual schools like Dora Cyber Academy and New Mexico Virtual School serve public elementary and secondary education students throughout the state.³⁹

In 2009, "Graduate New Mexico," an initiative intended "...to sustain New Mexico's growing economy and work force" through the expansion of IDEAL-NM, was created.⁴⁰ Specifically, "...the Public Education Department will make online courses available to up to 10,000 students that need to make up credits to graduate,"⁴¹ to assist in lowering the state's high school drop-out rate.

Table 3
Privately/Publicly-Funded Virtual School Model

State	Centralized Model	Name of State Virtual School	Year Established	Primary Funding Source
Arizona	No	None	2009	State Board of Education
California	Yes	University of California College Prep	1999	State Academic Preparation Program
Colorado	Yes	Colorado Online Learning	1998	State Department of Education
Connecticut	Yes	The Connecticut Virtual Learning Center	2008	State appropriation
Hawaii	Yes	Hawaii Virtual Learning Network	1996	State Department of Education
Indiana	No	None	2005	State Department of Education
Iowa	No	Iowa Online AP Academy Iowa Learning Online	2001 2004	State Department of Education
Maryland	Yes	Maryland Virtual School	2002	State Department of Education
Massachusetts	Yes	Massachusetts Online Network for Education (MassONE)	2003	NCLB Title II-D Competitive Grant
Nebraska	No	None	2006	State appropriation
Nevada	No	None	2007	State Board of Education
New Jersey	No	None	2002	State Department of Education
New Mexico	Yes	IDEAL-NM (Innovative Digital Education and Learning New Mexico)	2001	Legislature
North Dakota	Yes	North Dakota Center for Distance Education	2000	State appropriation and course fees
Oklahoma	No	None	2000	State Board of Education
Oregon	Yes	Oregon Virtual School District	2005	Oregon Virtual School District Fund
Pennsylvania	No	None	2000	State Department of Education
Rhode Island	No	None	2010	State Department of Education
Tennessee	Yes	e4TN	2006	Annually Renewable Federal Grant
Texas	No	Texas Virtual School Network and Electronic Course Program	2007	Legislature
Utah	Yes	Utah Electronic High School	1994	State Office of Education Funds
Vermont	Yes	Vermont Virtual Learning Cooperative	2009	State Board of Education
Virginia	Yes	Virtual Virginia	2005	State Appropriation

Sources: See Appendix C.

Table 3 (continued)
Privately/Publicly-Funded Virtual School Model

State	Centralized Model	Name of State Virtual School	Year Established	Primary Funding Source
Washington	Yes	Digital Learning Department, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction	2009	State Board of Education
West Virginia	Yes	West Virginia Virtual School	2000	State Department of Education
Wisconsin	Yes	Wisconsin Virtual School	2008	State Department of Public Instruction Cooperative Education Service Agency

Sources: See Appendix C.

Public school students, including those enrolled in IDEAL-NM and Graduate New Mexico, are funded through the State Equalization Guarantee.⁴² Local school districts receive funding based upon the number of full-time students who attend each school.⁴³ Graduate New Mexico students who enroll in IDEAL-NM courses are students of the local enrolling school district, but IDEAL-NM provides the course content and the eTeacher. The sole cost incurred by a given school or district is a per-student course fee of \$200, which is subsequently applied toward eTeacher compensation.⁴⁴

Other State Virtual School Models

Delaware and New York are classified as states that have virtual school models that do not fit with the three previously discussed in this section. Delaware does not have a state virtual school, a statewide online program, or an online charter school. As a result, no legislation covers virtual schools in the state.⁴⁵ However, in 2008, Delaware established online public elementary and secondary education programs designed primarily for credit recovery, but budget issues have stifled the implementation and growth of virtual schools in the state. Specifically, the Delaware Virtual School was launched as a pilot program, offering six online courses through 27 high schools, serving nearly 300 students.⁴⁶ Due to an \$800 million state budget deficit, the pilot program did not receive funding for 2009-2010.⁴⁷ At present, some districts use vendor courses on a limited basis, and certain high schools participate in the University of Delaware's Online High School—which serves to provide dual enrollment courses for high school students across the state.⁴⁸

Currently, there is no state statute in New York regarding virtual schools. However, a public virtual school exists, as does a private virtual school called the Francis School.⁴⁹ In 2010, the state of New York issued several requests for proposals through legislation that would provide an emphasis on online coursework for public elementary and secondary education students, e.g., student support, professional development, online learning assessment, and the future of online education.⁵⁰

Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to provide an overview of virtual education and its funding by states. The results indicated that all states are engaged in the provision and funding of some form of virtual education for public elementary and secondary education students. Some states, like Utah, provided a virtual education

option, an “electronic high school,” as early as 1994, while others, like Illinois and Maine, created a state virtual school or online learning program as recently as 2009. To provide further clarification, the authors developed a typology of three virtual school models—centralized, publicly-funded, or both privately and publicly-funded. Over half of states use the privately/publicly funded option where virtual schools can be funded or authorized by either a state entity or a private organization. Thirteen states use the centralized virtual school model, which represents a unified virtual school option for public elementary and secondary education students within a given state. Nine states currently use the publicly funded model, one which gives school districts the option of choosing from multiple, publicly funded virtual schools as opposed to a single state virtual school.

The rapid growth of virtual education presents unique challenges to education policymakers throughout the United States. Due to widespread concerns related to access and equity in public elementary and secondary education, educators have continued to seek funding, through legislation, for virtual schools. Whether a state selects a centralized model or allows each student to choose a public or private virtual school option, the promotion and development of virtual schools in the United States has proven to be a primary issue for public education policymakers.

The cost-effectiveness of virtual schools compared to traditional, brick-and-mortar schools is an ongoing issue for state policymakers and school administrators. Given limited data, financial analysis related to long-term return on investment is difficult. The average startup costs for an elementary and secondary virtual school is approximately \$1.6 million.⁵¹ Although these costs are significant, the potential for long-term savings is greater than with a brick-and-mortar school because a virtual school does not have the same operational costs—maintenance, utilities, security—and virtual schools typically have fewer teachers and administrators. At the same time, local school districts face additional overhead costs associated with the rapid growth of virtual education. Second, virtual schools that receive payment from school districts for each student enrolled could add to districts' overhead costs and result in a reduction in efficiency. In addition, when families opt for virtual schools instead of home-schooling, the financial burden shifts to school districts and taxpayers.

One could argue that the unrestricted school choice represented by virtual schools has diluted local political control.⁵² By affording parents and students the opportunity to choose between a virtual school or a traditional brick-and-mortar school, virtual schools have become the *de facto* educational vouchers of the 21st century, ensuring ongoing competition and education reform. However, with the inherent inequity of the digital divide, virtual schools could become the great equalizer, ensuring all students are afforded the same educational opportunities—regardless of socioeconomic status or geographical barriers.

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