

Testimony to the Joint Committee on the Public Schools
Jeanne Allen, President, The Center for Education Reform
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Members of the Committee:

I am pleased to join you today for an information session on the benefits of Online Learning.

My colleagues Michael Horn and Susan Patrick have explained well the theory and the practice beyond online or digital learning, the trends and the science.

You've heard what it is, now I would like to share **WHO** digital learning is, and share some information about the schools that deploy digital learning, the parents who utilize these learning opportunities, and the teachers who lead and instruct digital learning.

SCHOOLS

Total enrollment of virtual and blended charter schools nationwide over time has grown from 37, serving roughly 29,000 students in 2000, to 229 schools serving approximately 151,000 students in 2011.

Virtual Charter School Growth

Year	Total Schools	Total Enrollment
2000	37	29,803
2001	56	53,019
2002	84	66,817
2003	104	72,442
2004	142	83,823
2005	158	91,070
2006	168	94,129
2007	180	100,319
2008	197	105,952
2009	220	119,920
2010	216	148,081
2011	229	151,240

Center for Education Reform Data, January 2012

Not included in these numbers are the state virtual schools. These are traditional public schools using non-traditional delivery methods. They are large and small, like the Florida Virtual School, which through its own programs as well as programs on contract with numerous education providers serves 100,000 part and full time students, and Virtual Virginia, which serves approximately 4,000 students.

In total, 30 states, plus DC have statewide full-time online schools.

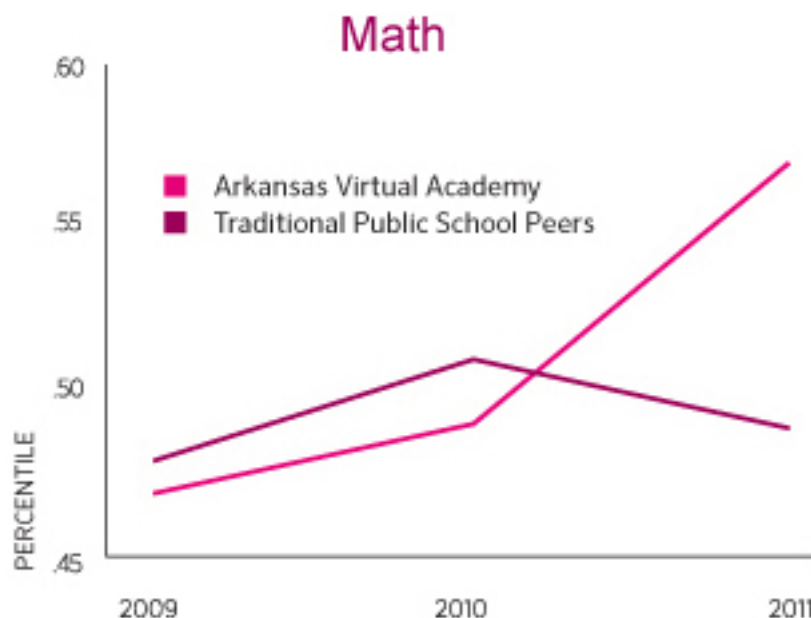
An additional 10 states have other state initiatives. For example, Washington has 15 district programs serving students statewide.

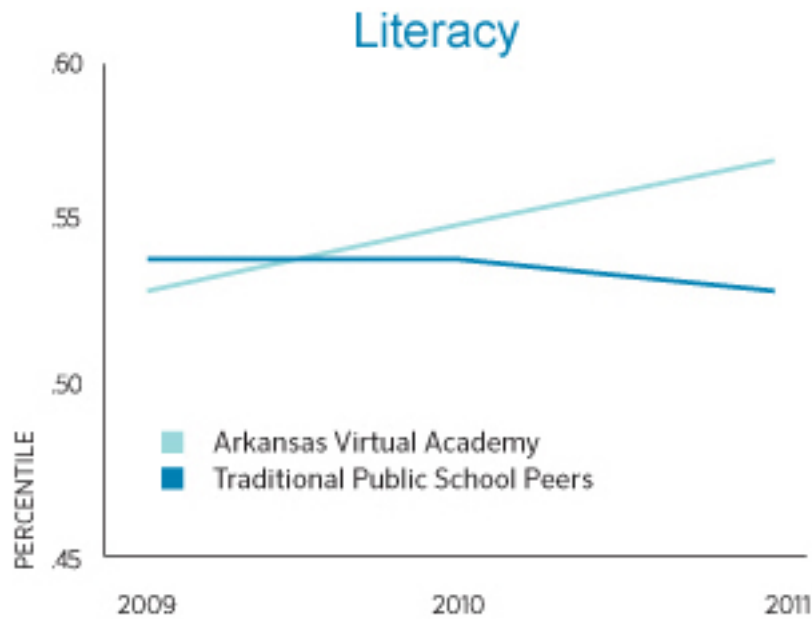
And as you may have already heard, the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that just over half of districts nationwide — 55 percent — had students enrolled in distance education courses in the 2010-2011 school year.

New Jersey Virtual Charter is modeled after Florida and uses its award-winning courses, which are aligned to both national and the Garden state’s standards. According to its website, “New Jersey Virtual hires only New Jersey certified high-qualified teachers in their subject areas who hold a standard endorsement. NJVS teachers are experienced in the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards since most are teachers in public schools throughout the State. NJVS follows the same hiring practices required for public school teachers: interviews, orientation, application and résumé, reference checks, credentials on file, fingerprinting, and MOESC Board approval.” Students whose schools approve their enrollment take courses for remediation, promotion or meeting high school graduation requirements.

Yet, New Jersey is one of only 10 states that does not yet have a statewide virtual school.

All of the state virtual charter schools boast student achievement gains. One example given my limited time: when comparing the Arkansas Virtual Academy to Arkansas Traditional Public Schools, University of Arkansas found that the Virtual Academy students exceeded the achievement of their traditional public school peers in math and literacy over the past two years.





STUDENTS

A student enrolled in a full virtual or blended learning environment is 20 percent more likely to have a special need.

He/she is 10 percent more likely to have been lagging in his/her previous school.

Common problems associated with traditional schools reported by students attending are:

- Bullying
- Personally difficult situations that are apparent to everyone
- Being behind
- Being ahead
- Language deficient
- Home bound
- Specialized needs (Olympics, Competitive Sports, the Arts)

Tiernan Hoffman, a rising senior in an Oregon virtual school, said she values the flexibility.

Louisiana gymnast Veronica Sturman was born without most of one hand, but everyday she proves it is not a disability! Virtual schooling allows Veronica to spend hours in the gym perfecting stunts during the normal school day in the Alexandria.

The stories from students are becoming legion. I would like to share just two, from a teacher at Virtual Virginia, that capture the essence of students enrolled in digital learning:

“Kevin called me when phone service returned to his house, but his power still wasn’t on. He wanted to let me know that even though he and his dad had been chopping wood most of the week to keep the wood-burning stove heating the house during the blizzard, he had been able to submit his lab report. Shocked, I responded, ‘How?’ I knew that the mountain counties were buried in snow, out of power, out of school, out of fresh food and out of luck. In fact, his school was out for 15 consecutive school days that winter. This call came during the middle of that.

“He responded that his sister, a doctor, had to drive to treat patients nearby and that he had walked there, turned on her car at the end of a long driveway, tethered her blackberry to his laptop (all powered by her 4 wheel drive) and painstakingly submitted his entire lab report. Kevin was in the 10th grade. His rural school system did not have the funding (or much of a need) to hire many AP teachers and Kevin wanted to take AP classes – lots of them. He now has over 20 college credits and is just beginning his senior year as a veteran online student. His success is not limited to online learning. He won several science competitions including the ISEF in 2012. He was also selected for the LARSS (Langley Aerospace Research Summer Scholars) Bridge (for rising high school/college freshmen/sophomores) research program at NASA. The program was a paid internship for 10 weeks (June-August). He is now a candidate at Harvard.”

“Tiffany struggled in AP Biology online. She had never failed a test before in her entire high school career, until she took her first AP Biology test on biochemistry. She did not feel like she had much background knowledge in chemistry, even though she had taken it in face-to-face school. She strove to do better and took advantage of the live classes and recorded lessons and insisted on getting extension activities to help reinforce content. She passed her AP Biology exam with a 5, but it did not matter. She chose not to skip her freshman biology class. She wanted to learn more. She graduated from Mary Baldwin College with a degree in Biomedical Science and is now pursuing her graduate degree in Nursing from the University of Virginia. “

PARENTS & TEACHERS

According to teachers we have interviewed, “online learning is not for every student, but it does work for most. It allows for self-pacing and studying when students choose to – not at the 8 am bell with everyone else in class. It allows for live, synchronous teaching and brainstorming in addition to ‘flipped’ learning style lessons with recorded lectures followed by kitchen labs that apply newfound knowledge with instructor guidance. Students work together in groups and make friends from different schools and host their own ‘help’ discussion forums where they chat with each other about particular lessons, labs, assignments, and other social topics. It provides students with everything they need to succeed; content, instruction, and support from teacher and peers. “

They are not alone: According to LEAD — the Leading Education by Advancing Digital Commission — which was established to determine how technology can help transform education in America and is co-chaired by Columbia University President Lee Bollinger:

- 96 percent of teachers and 92 percent of parents believe that schools’ integration of technology in teaching and learning is important to the education of American students today
- 54 percent of teachers and 64 percent of parents believe that the role of technology in educating students will become much more important during the next 10 years
- 61 percent of teachers and 63 percent of parents responded that the country is somewhat or far behind the curve when it comes to American public schools’ use of technology in education
- 82 percent of teachers and 71 percent of parents believe a greater use of technology would be helpful in connecting learning inside and outside of the classroom
- 89 percent of teachers and 76 percent of parents would choose to spend \$200 per student for an Internet-connected device over \$200 per student for new science textbooks
- 82 percent of teachers believe that they are not receiving the necessary training to use technology to its fullest potential in the classroom
- 95 percent of teachers and 90 percent of parents believe that home access to high-speed Internet gives students a big or moderate advantage when it comes to classroom performance.

And yet, despite the recognition from members of the legislature, parents and teachers across New Jersey that online learning is an important component of a 21st century education, misinformation and confusion about its intention and its results abound.

MYTHS & REALITIES

Let me address a few of the most common misconceptions about online learning.

MYTH: Online Learning is Only for Gifted Students

In the past, online learning was seen as a tool for gifted students who needed to surge ahead, or for child athletes and actors who had to be away from home for long periods of time. That is simply not the case anymore. Digital learning, because it is individualized to the students' strengths is a great tool for all types of students, including at-risk, those who live in rural areas and don't have many school choice options, or those with special needs. Online learning is a great tool for students who may be behind in their classes, because students can work at their own pace and review subjects that may be difficult for them.

Online schools and blended school programs are offering new options for disadvantaged children in places like Chicago (Chicago Virtual Charter School, YCCS Virtual High School), Cincinnati (Cincinnati Public Schools Virtual High School) and Pennsylvania (Commonwealth Connections Academy).

Rocketship Education (<http://www.rsed.org/>) is a non-profit elementary charter school network that opened the nation's first hybrid school in 2007 with the goal of closing the achievement gap. They operate K - 5 elementary schools that overall serve a population that is 90 percent free-and-reduced lunch and 75 percent English Language Learners. Their schools in California achieved an overall score of 868 on the 2011 Academic Performance Index (API) growth score. The API is based on a scale of 0-1,000 with a score of 800 being the state proficiency target. Three of Rocketship's schools are within the top ten schools serving low-income students in Santa Clara County.

MYTH: Online Learning is Only Available to Families with Computers

Recently, in New Jersey, an online charter school's application was rejected because the state believed that online learning eliminates families without a home computer or Internet access. However, that is not the case. Many schools that offer blended learning, meaning that one or two classes are online and the rest are in classrooms, provide the proper technology, access and computers within the school to facilitate learning. Complete online school programs provide each student with a computer and access to the web so no child is turned away for their socioeconomic status.

MYTH: Online Learning is Cheaper

People believe that because online schooling does not require physical buildings they will be much less expensive than traditional schools. However, online schools do not exist in a vacuum. An online school needs to develop its technological infrastructure and computers and computer programs are costly. In addition, many online programs maintain student-teacher ratios similar to the ratios of traditional schools. For these programs, as with physical schools, a major cost is in teachers and other

personnel, and these costs increase in a linear fashion with the increase in the number of students.

Funding of online education is a complicated and sometimes controversial topic and education policy regarding per-pupil funding has not yet caught up with the reality of the times. Today, online charter schools receive a total of about 30 to 40 percent less in total funding compared to total funds received by traditional schools to educate a full time student. It's estimated that the national average for traditional public schools is about \$10,000 per pupil and only between \$6-7,000 per pupil for online students. (*Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning: An Annual Review of Policy and Practice, 2011*, <http://kpk12.com/cms/wp-content/uploads/KeepingPace2011.pdf>). Clear guidelines for funding online learning need to be established in states so that school districts understand and comply with the policies.

MYTH: Online Learning Has No Real Accountability

Online schools that function as public schools, or public programs, are held to the same state and federal standards as other public schools, including participation in state assessment tests, attendance requirements, and other accountability mandates. Online courses are aligned to the same state standards as conventional public schools. They require active participation, require that students take tests, and take attendance. Their teachers are state-certified and must meet existing state standards; their accounting operations must all be documented and audited. Concerns of cheating online is not warranted, because there are ways, using technology to make sure the student is taking their own tests or writing their own papers.

MYTH: Online Learning Isn't Getting Positive Results

According to a study by the US Department of Education in 2010 that did a meta-analysis of online learning studies, it found that students in online conditions performed modestly better, on average, than those learning the same material through traditional face-to-face instruction, with an average effect size of +0.20 favoring online conditions. (*US Department of Education, Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies, September 2010*, <http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/evidence-based-practices/finalreport.pdf>)

In 2010, Florida Virtual School (FLVS), a statewide online school program, showed academic progress and high achievement. Content mastery is measured on end-of-course exams. In 2010-11, FLVS students outperformed the rest of the state with 45 percent receiving above-average scores, compared to only 35 percent. State-approved providers in Florida have consistently been given A's and B's by the state for outstanding performance.

The media unfairly represents online learning, particularly if a school does not make AYP. Because online schools are viewed as a single K-12 entity, if one subgroup fails to make AYP, then the entire school will not. In school districts, because they have a much

larger population, one benchmark can be missed without affecting the district's overall AYP score. Additionally, online schools are seeing a rise in the number of students that are entering below grade level and/or behind in credits after failing in their local school.

For new models like online schools and blended schools, academic growth is a better and more reliable measure of performance, however many states have not enacted a sophisticated growth measure. Many online schools and providers do use assessment tools to measure growth and have shown students are making positive academic gains. More scrutiny is needed when analyzing academic achievement of online schools compared with conventional school districts to make sure an apple-to-apples comparison is taking place.

MYTH: Online Students Have No Social Interaction

Students have as much, if not more one-on-one interaction with their teachers and students in online courses because they are receiving some individualized attention. Shy students thrive in online environments because they feel they can contribute in class without fear of being bullied by other students. Online students also participate in physical education and other extra-curricular activities or field trips with other students. Many online programs are part-time, meaning that the students take only one or two courses online while receiving the rest of their classes in their physical school. This keeps students involved with their classmates to engage face-to-face.

For example, Odyssey Charter Schools (<http://www.odysseyk12.org/>), a K-12 school in Clark County, Nevada, have used a blended learning model since opening in 1999. Their instructional model combines fully online, distance-based curriculum with required on-site attendance. Students attend classes on campus one day a week for four hours, receiving face-to-face instruction and mentoring with highly qualified teachers in classrooms equipped with computer and online access.

Finally, there are also some objections being raised to online and digital learning trends that have nothing to do with money, accountability or success, but with a concern that those involved in delivering schooling through technology are out to make a profit.

To address that we'd need to have another entire hearing dedicated to what profit is in education, how individual funds flow and what is meant when such concerns are raised. However, it is important to note that no one in this room or in this nation that is currently using a cell phone or a computer is innocent of contributing to someone's profit. Whether technologists or publishers have a tax status that allows them to reinvest their profits, or have a tax status that requires them to adhere to a publicly sanctioned, charitable or educational mission, the fact remains that digital learning is here to stay, it is occurring at every level in this state and beyond, and requires a serious understanding of how it can contribute to our bettering opportunities for all children rather than pedantic rejection outright from well-intentioned but defensive groups.

CONCLUSION

Lawmakers across the nation are deliberating how and when to best deploy digital learning models in schools and through reform structures, like charters. They face enormously important considerations – from funding and equity to standards and accountability.

This final piece is perhaps least clear. We can set funding and we can set expectations; schools that are based in bricks and mortar should be treated no differently than schools that deliver instruction via technology, whether in whole or part. Evaluating how well they perform, however, requires intensive data collection and evaluation. As with all reform efforts, the trend today is to ensure that students and teachers be evaluated based on what they accomplish during their tenure with a school. Value-added measures of proficiency and success must drive how we evaluate new learning modalities and ensuring that every child has access to new opportunities should be our primary concern. That can and will happen if states like this one continue to be open to discussion and information that can drive their actions.

Thank you for your time and your efforts on behalf of your state's children.

Jeanne Allen
President
The Center for Education Reform
910 17th Street, 11th Floor
Washington, DC 20006
www.edreform.com
800-521-2118