



# HARVARD EDUCATION LETTER

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## Learning Across Distance

**Virtual-instruction programs are growing rapidly, but the impact on "brick-and-mortar" classrooms is still up in the air**

by Kristina Cowan

Online education is undergoing a sea change in the state of Florida. Starting in 2009–2010, any student who meets certain eligibility requirements will be able to attend school virtually, thanks to legislation enacted last July. Florida's 67 school districts will be required to offer full-time virtual instruction for K–8 students and full-time or supplemental instruction for grades 9–12. Districts may develop virtual-education programs themselves or in collaboration with other districts, or they may contract with accredited providers approved by the Florida Department of Education. The mandate is intended to extend a state program that started as a pilot in 2003–2004 to the district level. The pilot program offered only two providers, Florida Virtual Academy and Florida Connections Academy, and capped the number of K–8 students who could enroll in online courses.

Florida's new mandate for districts is only the latest development in a trend that began a decade ago. At that time, according to Susan Patrick, president and CEO of the Vienna, Va.-based North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL), the biggest driver behind online programs was demand for specialized or advanced courses that were otherwise unavailable in local schools. A 2008 report, "Keeping Pace with K–12 Online Learning," commissioned by NACOL and others, defines online learning as "teacher-led education that takes place over the Internet, with the teacher and student separated geographically." The term "distance learning" includes online education (Florida's legislation calls it "virtual" education), but is considered a broader category that includes use of com-

puters, television, or satellites to deliver instruction.

Online education can be synchronous, with teachers and students communicating in real time, or asynchronous, with students working at different times. Some online programs are supplemental, used by students otherwise enrolled in regular classes, while others are full-time, for students working at home. According to the 2008 "Keeping Pace" report, 44 states offer significant full-time or supplemental online-learning options for students, and six states don't offer either.

### Florida is the third state to issue a mandate regarding online learning.

#### One Million and Counting

Though the exact number of students enrolled in online courses is unknown, "knowledgeable estimates" put the figure at 1 million, according to NACOL. Student populations run the gamut, educators say, from advanced students wanting to accelerate to students struggling academically or socially, and may include young mothers, students with

restrictive medical conditions, or those in arts or sports who need flexible schedules. Two of the biggest providers are the Florida Virtual School (FLVS) and Herndon, Va.-based K12 Inc. Founded in 1997 as the country's first statewide online public high school, FLVS delivered 137,000 half-credit courses to approximately 63,600 students during the 2007–2008 academic year; K12 served more than 40,000 full-time K–12 students in 17 states and the District of Columbia. Most state-sponsored programs offer supplemental courses, and course enrollments ranged from a few thousand to about 10,000 in 2007–2008, depending on the state, according to the NACOL-sponsored report.



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Florida is the third state to issue a mandate regarding online learning. In 2006, the Michigan legislature passed a requirement that students spend at least 20 hours learning online before graduation, either by taking an online course or by doing online course assignments in their regular classes. Beginning with the class of 2009–2010, students in Alabama will have to take and pass one “online-enhanced” core or elective course to graduate, which means a course using Internet technology on a regular basis. These online-enhanced courses may be delivered in several ways: through a “teacher-led” experience, with students in a lab at one school receiving video instruction from a teacher located at another school—also known as “interactive videoconferencing”—or through “blended” instruction, where students and teachers are located in the same classroom, with students completing some work online. Students in a blended course might, for example, work outside the classroom in virtual teams with students from other schools or classrooms to learn writing, research, teamwork, and technology skills.

Supporters of these new mandates say the impetus is to help students develop the technological skills they will need in college and to offer courses that might otherwise be unavailable locally. In Florida, expanding choice for parents and students was also a top priority. “This is the wave of the future,” says Connie Milito, chief government relations officer for the Hillsborough County Public Schools in Tampa, Fla. “This is just another way to offer choice to families.”

### Benefits and Drawbacks

As online programs expand, some of the benefits and trade-offs of online education are becoming clear.

Supporters of online education point to flexible scheduling and the ability to tailor courses for each student as the top benefits. Patrick, president of NACOL, says that offering online learning also expands the number of courses available to students and increases their access to highly qualified teachers.

Oakman High School in rural Walker County, Ala., for example, has expanded its foreign-language offerings through online education, according to principal Joel Hagood. In the past, Oakman offered only French, but now the school uses ACCESS (Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators and Students Statewide), a state-sponsored distance-learning initiative launched in fall 2005, to offer Spanish courses—something many parents wanted. Through ACCESS, an Alabama-certified teacher at one school provides instruction to students in another school via interactive videoconferencing and the Internet.

The flexibility of online learning is also a plus for nontraditional students, says Suzanne Williams, a high

school English teacher with the Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow. The online public school based in Columbus, Ohio, serves K–12 students throughout the state. Students are able to create their own schedules, she notes, which is a big help to those with special circumstances, such as teenage parents. Williams says about 20 to 25 of the 160 students she teaches are pregnant or have children.

But others warn of drawbacks. Dennis Van Roekel, president of the National Education Association in Washington, D.C., says when online courses create or extend learning opportunities—such as for a student in rural Alaska taking calculus online—that’s a good thing, but they shouldn’t replace the classroom experience, as the full-time program in Florida would do. “When you start using online courses as a total alternative, you lose all the benefits of the face-to-face interaction, . . . [the] sense of community, social development, and the variety of instructional methods,” Van Roekel explains.

Mark Pudlow, spokesman for public policy advocacy at the Florida Education Association in Tallahassee, Fla., says brick-and-mortar schools expose children to diversity, an important aspect of socialization that’s difficult to recreate online. “When you go to public schools, you interact with [different people] and you get to see how [they] look at the same situation. That’s very important to the health of our nation,” Pudlow says. “I worry that in a virtual situation, even though parents make sure a kid goes to soccer practice or church, it’s not the same as a public school situation.”

### Determining Quality and Effectiveness

Assessing the quality of online programs is a key concern among educators. Most providers are accredited by one of six recognized regional accrediting agencies, and states and school districts review providers before allowing their credits to transfer to school transcripts, says Patrick. Full-time programs are usually responsible for their students’ scores on state assessments required by No Child Left Behind. For those in supplemental courses, the brick-and-mortar school where they’re enrolled is responsible for the tests. Still, NACOL’s research indicates that many states lack sophisticated data on the long-term performance of students taking online courses. According to NACOL’s 2007 “National Primer on K–12 Online Learning,” “A mechanism to track online programs and students is an apparent first-level policy requirement that a surprising number of states have not yet put into place.”

Researchers disagree on whether there is a sufficient body of research on the effectiveness of virtual learning. A 2005 report by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory says the available research seems to show that academically, online students perform as

## Assessing the quality of online programs is a key concern.

well as or better than traditional students. But given the small number of studies, the report notes, "we cannot have real 'confidence' in these conclusions until there is much more support available from high-quality quantitative research."

Dr. Wayne Blanton, executive director of the Florida School Boards Association in Tallahassee, Fla., believes much more research needs to be conducted before drawing conclusions about the effectiveness of online education. "Virtual learning is very young. It's in its infant stage compared to the age of the educational system itself," Blanton says. But Dr. Bror Saxberg, chief learning officer at K12, offers a different take. "To a large extent, that argument should now be over," he says. He believes that ample research shows online learning and traditional education are equally effective, as long as online programs are set up properly, with strong teachers.

In July 2008, the U.S. Department of Education released a guide to help schools evaluate K-12 online-education programs. Because of the rapid expansion of programs and the "dearth of existing research on the topic, it is critical to conduct rigorous evaluations of online learning in K-12 settings to ensure that it does what people hope it will do: help improve student learning," the report says.

### Who Benefits?

Ask Tracy Hall, in her sixth year of teaching with the Florida Virtual Academy (FLVA), who benefits most from online learning and she'll point to two groups: advanced students and struggling students. In a traditional classroom—where Hall taught for six years before joining FLVA—most teaching is geared to those who are academically in the middle, she says, in the hope that advanced and slower students will still learn something. But in an online environment, advanced students can experience higher levels of responsibility and bigger challenges, and they perform very well, Hall notes. Struggling students also benefit from one-on-one time with both teachers and parents in an online setting.

Williams, the teacher with the Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow, agrees that one-on-one support is a boon, especially for struggling students. Students embarrassed to ask for help in front of others in a traditional classroom don't confront that situation online, Williams says. "They can just call me"—and they do, sometimes as early as 7 a.m. or as late as 10 p.m.

"Having been in the classroom, I can tell you that one thing—one strategy, one tool—rarely works for all 30 students," says Hall. "So when you have a child [learning] at home, it's really what works for that one student. All the decisions are made based on what's best for the child. The

## Virtual Learning in Florida

- School districts shall provide full-time virtual instruction to eligible students in grades K-8 and either full-time or part-time virtual courses in grades 9-12.
- Districts are responsible for providing equipment and Internet connections to full-time students, where appropriate.
- Certified teachers must provide at least 85 percent of a student's instruction.
- Students can participate if they were enrolled in public school during the previous year, or transferred into the state within the past 12 months as military dependents.
- Kindergartners can participate only if they were previously enrolled in publicly funded preK programs for disabled children or children of teenage parents, or if they are repeating kindergarten.
- Attendance is recorded daily or at times determined by the local school board.
- Special education students may participate as part of the continuum of services required of each district. However, "not every individual school, including the School District Virtual Instruction Program, is required to have the resources and capacity to serve all students."
- For reporting purposes, a district virtual instruction program is considered one school.

Source: "School District Virtual Instruction Program (HB7067) Questions and Answers," Florida Department of Education.

teacher, parent, school [decide together] what they think is best for the child." Students less likely to benefit from virtual classes are those whose parents aren't active in the process, Hall says. Parents have to commit time and effort to help the child succeed.

Experts across the board tend to agree that online learning is not the best option for every student. Some benefit greatly from online education, while others perform best in traditional classrooms. Clayton M. Christensen, professor of business administration at Harvard Business School and coauthor of *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns*, predicts a blended system will ultimately prevail. "People will still go to school buildings, but much of the learning will be offered online, and the role of the teacher in the physical classroom will change over time from the sage on the stage to the guide on the side—to be a mentor, motivator, and coach," he says. "The teacher will work individually with many students, diagnose what learning needs they have, and help them find the best online course or resources to help them and motivate them. It will be a very different system, but it should be a much more rewarding system for everyone.

"Simply moving monolithic instruction online and delivering it in the same way won't do the trick ultimately," he adds. "The real key and causal mechanism is to make it student-centric—able to customize [instruction] for different students with different learning needs, motivations, intelligences, aptitudes, and learning styles." ■

Kristina Cowan is a freelance education writer based in Chicago, Ill.

## For Further Information

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