Online Learning Can Help States Expand Educational Opportunities, Offerings

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In Nebraska, one rural high school district is the size of Connecticut. Another is so large that it spans two time zones. Neither district has more than 400 students.

And in more than two-thirds of the state’s secondary schools, enrollment is fewer than 200 students.

Much has been made about the challenges faced by these large, sparsely populated districts that make up much of not only Nebraska, but other states in the Midwest: from declining tax bases and population losses, to the struggles they have in offering certain classes or retaining highly qualified teachers. These challenges, too, impact the fiscally strapped states trying to fund and improve K-12 education.

But there may be a technological solution that goes a long way toward addressing some of these problems: a greater use of online education and virtual schools.

“The potential is immense,” says Bill Tucker, managing director of Education Sector [5], an independent education-policy think tank.

Nebraska educators agree, and it is why they have made the opening of a new “virtual school” for seventh- to 12th-graders (run out of the University of Nebraska) a core part of their grant application for federal Race to the Top dollars.

“Our purpose is to equalize the course offerings in our geographically challenged areas,” says Barry Stark, principal of the university’s Independent Study High School.

As part of the virtual school, Nebraska would create a Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Academy. Open to all students, the academy would offer rigorous, college-preparatory STEM courses, with students being taught by highly qualified teachers potentially hundreds of miles away. The online classes would be provided free of charge to students and local school districts.

“Equalizing access” — providing every student with a curriculum that prepares him or her for success in college or the workforce — is viewed as one of the most important benefits of an expanded use of
online education. Tucker also says virtual schools can give struggling students the chance to “catch up” (by taking credit recovery courses), or not fall behind in the first place. If done right, he says, online education personalizes the instructional process for students, who are able to learn at their own pace and receive help outside the traditional school day.

“How do you guarantee access to highly qualified teachers? How do you improve graduation rates when resources are limited? There is no way to do it without taking into account the promise of online learning,” Tucker says.

Online learning can mean different things to different students. Some young people are full-time virtual-school students, while others simply take a class or two. For Nebraska’s STEM Academy, Stark envisions students having a period in which they go to their school’s computer lab to take the online course. The class would be taught remotely by an online teacher, though the local school would also provide some face-to-face support.

State-run virtual schools in Midwest

According to the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center [6], Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wisconsin were among the U.S. states that had state-run virtual schools up and running in 2008-09.

Michigan was the first state in the country to require all high school students to have an online learning experience. In South Dakota, thanks to a grant from the National Math and Science Initiative, the state has begun offering $100 cash awards to students who successfully complete online Advanced Placement courses. And a 2009 report titled “Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning” singles out Minnesota for being one of the first states to require online-learning providers to meet “nationally recognized standards.”

But the one recognized leader in this area of education policy is a state outside the region: Florida. Enrollment in the Florida Virtual School far outpaces any other school of its kind, and Tucker credits a mix of policy decisions and strong leadership as the reason why.

For one, all students are given the choice of taking classes through the state-run school; they don’t need a local school district’s permission. In addition, the virtual school’s funding level is not based on a fixed state appropriation, but on how many students are successfully completing the classes. This performance-based model gives the virtual school an incentive to offer courses the students want or need, and to make sure they succeed, Tucker says. Florida’s virtual school is also now part of the state’s school funding formula, which means it competes with traditional school districts for state dollars. (Early on, a grants-based funding mechanism was used; as a result, funding levels for local school districts were not affected by enrollment in the state’s virtual school.)

States in the Midwest are facing or will face some of the same policy choices as Florida as they look to expand the use of online learning. In Wisconsin, the state’s new Web Academy (launched after the passage of SB 396 in 2008) is structured as a partnership between the Department of Public Instruction and local districts. The academy operates as a supplemental online course provider, which means students remain enrolled in their home districts.
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