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Virtual Schools in the U.S. 2017

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Introduction

In the five years since the first NEPC *Annual Report on Virtual Education* was released in 2013, virtual education has continued to be a focal point for policymakers. Proponents argue that virtual education can expand student choices and improve the efficiency of public education. In particular, full-time virtual schools (also sometimes referred to as virtual charter schools, virtual academies, online schools or cyber schools) have attracted a great deal of attention. Many believe that online curriculum can be tailored to individual students more effectively than curriculum in traditional classrooms, giving it the potential to promote greater student achievement than can be realized in traditional brick-and-mortar schools. Further, the promise of lower costs—primarily for instructional personnel and facilities—makes virtual schools financially appealing to both policymakers and for-profit providers.

The assumption that virtual schools are cost effective and educationally sound, coupled with policies expanding school choice and providing market incentives attractive to for-profit companies, continue to help fuel virtual school growth in the U.S. There is, however, little high-quality systematic evidence that the rapid expansion of the past several years is wise. Indeed, evidence presented in the NEPC annual reports argues for caution. Nevertheless, the movement toward virtual schools continues to gather steam, often supported by weak

or even dishonest data. For example, as a part of the confirmation hearings for the current Secretary of Education, National Public Radio reported that Secretary Betsy DeVos responded to a written question from Senator Patty Murray using performance data provided by a for-profit corporation that inflated the four-year graduation rates of virtual schools—in some cases by as much as 300%.[1]

The 2017 NEPC Annual Report contributes to the existing evidence related to virtual education, and so to debates surrounding it. It provides objective analysis of the characteristics and performance of full-time, publicly funded K-12 virtual schools; available research on virtual school practices and policy; and an overview of recent state efforts to craft new policy.

In *Section I—Full-Time Virtual and Blended Schools: Enrollment, Student Characteristics, and Performance*, Gary Miron, Charisse Gulosino, Christopher Shank, and Caryn Davidson focus on two specific types of K-12 online and blended learning: full-time virtual schools and blended schools. The authors assigned schools in their study a unique identification code that allowed them to gather complete data about each school from a variety of sources (the National Center for Educational Statistics, individual Departments of Education, and so on). The authors use the terms "full-time virtual school" and "full-term blended school" because they want to link these school types to data sets on school characteristics, student demographics, and school outcomes.

In *Section II—Still No Evidence, Increased Call for Regulation: Research to Guide Virtual School Policy*, Michael Barbour focuses on all forms of K-12 virtual and blended learning. Barbour distinguishes among the different forms of virtual schooling—both supplemental and full-time—and describes the limited reliable research on blended learning programs and blended learning schools.

In *Section III—Key Policy Issues in Virtual Schools: Finance and Governance, Instructional Quality, and Teacher Quality*, Luis Huerta, Sheryl Rankin Shafer, Jennifer King Rice, and David Nitkin use the general term "virtual school" as an umbrella term including all forms of K-12 online learning. When the National Education Policy Center first began this annual examination in 2013, the distinctions among K-12 online learning, virtual schooling and cyber schooling were not as prominent within the academic literature. Additionally, many of the K-12 online learning programs sponsored or supported by State Departments of Education were referred to as virtual schools. Similarly, much of the legislation and policy language used the term virtual (for example, virtual charter school). For these reasons, this annual report was and will continue to use the term *Virtual Schools* in its title. Therefore, unless they are quoting specific language from a given piece of legislation or policy, the authors of this third section will continue to use the term "virtual schools."

Notes and References - Introduction

1 Turner, C. (2017, February 4). Betsy DeVos' graduation rate mistake. *National Public Radio*. Retrieved February 27, 2017, from http://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/02/04/513220220/betsy-devos-graduation-rate-mistake

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