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Democracy Dies in Darkness

New report on virtual education: 'It sure sounds good. As it turns out, it's too good to be true.'

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The future of education, you might hear some enthusiasts say, is virtual: Online schools have grown significantly over the past decade, as have traditional schools that use online curriculum, and the promise of virtual education is boundless.

Or not.

Virtual Schools in the U.S. 2019, a report published annually by the National Education Policy Center at the University of Colorado at Boulder, looks at the research on this form of education and suggests that some brakes ought to be put on the virtual education revolution.

Why? The report says:

> Many argue 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. These claims are not supported by the research evidence; nonetheless, the promise of lower costs —primarily for instructional personnel and facilities—continues to make virtual schools financially appealing to both policymakers and for-profit providers.

The report, the seventh annual look on virtual education by the NEPC, is in three parts and has a number of authors: Alex Molnar, Gary Miron, Najat Elgeberi, Michael K. Barbour, Luis Huerta, Sheryl Rankin Shafer and Jennifer King Rice.

Molnar is a research professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder and the NEPC publications

director; Miron is professor of evaluation, measurement and research at Western Michigan University; Elgeberi is a graduate student at Western Michigan University; Barbour is associate professor of instructional design for the College of Education and Health Sciences at Touro University California; Huerta is associate professor of education and public policy at Teachers College at Columbia University; Rankin Shafer is an independent writer, researcher and editor focusing on educational leadership and business communications; King Rice is dean of the College of Education at the University of Maryland.

The first part of the report looks at enrollment, performance and student characteristics of full-time virtual and blended schools; the second part reveals what the available research on virtual and blended education shows; the third part reviews recent policymaking relating to virtual schools in the areas of finance and governance, and instructional and teacher quality.

Molnar, who is a co-author and editor of the new report, wrote the following summary of Virtual Schools in the U.S. 2019 for The Answer Sheet.

By Alex Molnar

The report documents the steady growth over the last decade of virtual schools and schools that "blend" virtual learning programs and live classroom experiences.

Since the National Education Policy Center released its first report on virtual schools in 2013, the number of virtual schools included has risen from 311 schools, enrolling slightly less than 200,000 students, to 501 schools enrolling almost 300,000 students. The 2019 report also documents 300 blended schools enrolling over 132,000 students.

Virtual schools are promoted by a collection of groups similar to those currently pushing schools to adopt tech-heavy "personalized learning" programs: philanthropists, the tech industry, and profit-seeking vendors.

Virtual schools advocacy also features the cliched altruistic empowerment rhetoric that has become the hallmark of the digerati. As Edgenuity spokesperson Lauren Nussbaum put it: "Online learning, whether implemented in a school, virtually, or both, empowers and benefits students."

It sure sounds good. As it turns out, it's too good to be true.

Michael Barbour of Touro University California reviewed the research related to virtual schools in the 2019 NEPC report. He notes:

> There is little research to describe the virtual or blended student experience, which has resulted in a lack of understanding of the actual instructional model, the nature of the curriculum, and the type and amount of support employed by these schools. This lack of research extends throughout the field of virtual and blended education – and much of this research is atheoretical, methodologically questionable, contextually

> limited, and over generalized.

In other words, Barbour found little or no pedagogical meat in the research literature to justify the virtual schools marketing sizzle.

It might be argued that the real world results of virtual schooling speak for themselves. And it is easy to imagine that in particular circumstances, given the proper conditions, that some form or another of digital education might benefit particular children.

The available evidence on the overall performance of virtual and blended schools, however, does not paint a sharp, clear, picture of obvious success. Quite the opposite. The picture is at best blurred and painted in muted colors.

In the 2019 NEPC report, Gary Miron and Najat Elgeberi of Western Michigan University analyze the demographic characteristics of virtual schools, as well as how they stack up on state-specific school performance ratings. They found that, overall, virtual schools enrolled substantially fewer low-income and minority students than public schools.

Fewer than 50 percent of virtual and blended schools that had state performance ratings were rated as having acceptable performance. District-operated virtual schools performed better than charter-school virtual schools.

Interestingly, twice the percentage of independent virtual schools received acceptable ratings (59.3 percent), as did virtual schools that were involved with a for-profit Education Management Organization (EMO) (29.8 percent). The overall on-time school graduation rate is 84 percent in the United States. For full-time virtual schools, however, it was 50.1 percent, and for blended schools it was 61.5 percent.

The virtual schools performance findings have been largely consistent throughout the seven annual NEPC reports. Full-time virtual and blended schools consistently fail to perform as well as district public schools. The virtual schools that produce the best results tend to be operated by school districts. Those that produce the worst results tend to be ones in which for-profit operators play a role.

Nevertheless, the for-profit sector enrolls the majority of virtual school students. This suggests that while virtual education may be an academic underachiever, it is a financial success for the companies involved.

Lacking both solid research support and a clear record of achievement, virtual schools should be an area of significant policymaker interest.

Addressing issues such as how to ensure that virtual schools do not exploit vulnerable students and their families by promising academic success but providing subpar educational quality, how to ensure that teachers in virtual schools are highly qualified and have a work environment that allows them to teach

successfully, how to finance high quality education provided digitally, and how best to provide effective accountability and oversight of virtual school programs is vitally important.

In their overview and analysis of state-level policymaking in the NEPC report, Luis Huerta of Teachers College-Columbia University, independent writer Sheryl Rankin Schafer and University of Maryland College of Education Dean Jennifer King Rice found that during the 2017 and 2018 legislative sessions, 85 virtual-schools-related bills were considered in 34 states.

Huerta, Rankin Shafer, and King Rice focused on three policy areas: finance and governance, instructional quality, and assuring highly qualified teachers.

With regard to finance and governance, they found that while some states have attempted "to address the important finance and governance challenges of operating virtual schools, additional research is needed to identify funding and governance practices that will increase accountability, identify efficient and cost-effective best practices, and eliminate profiteering."

They also find that policymaking is "certainly not keeping pace with the dynamic online education marketplace. Our overall legislative analysis indicates little continued progress … in proactively addressing issues related to instructional program quality."

Finally, with regard to teacher quality, they note that "little progress has been made … on issues related to teacher quality in virtual contexts … [and] little attention has been given to the unique challenges related to ensuring an adequate supply of high-quality teachers in virtual schools."

If virtual schools are a reform beacon, it's a beacon that casts a pretty dim light.

The bulk of the evidence related to virtual schools suggests that while virtual education may in some clearly defined and controlled circumstances benefit certain students, it is far from a silver bullet that will somehow produce higher-quality and more equitable education for most students.

Indeed, given the available evidence, the most responsible policy may well be to declare a moratorium on virtual schools until policymakers have the data necessary to make sound decisions about them.