An Open Secret: The Problems with Virtual Schools

It is no secret. The news media is full of reports about problems with cyber schools. Some recent examples include:

- In January 2018, the nation's largest virtual school, Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow (ECOT), closed. There was a subsequent failure to determine what happened to 2,300 of 11,400 students. The school shut down after the state of Ohio found that ECOT had overstated its enrollment by more than 9,000 students, resulting in a $60 million overpayment.

- The Akron Digital Academy quietly closed last month because it could not repay the state the $2.8 million it owed for failing to correctly track enrollment. Akron Public Schools dropped its sponsorship of the school in 2013 due to problems such as poor student performance.

- The state of New Mexico is in the process of shutting down the state's largest virtual school, also for poor academic performance.

An *Education Week* resource, updated through 2017, includes hundreds of news stories, state audits, and reports about online schools, many highly negative, dating back to the early 2000s.

Some of the best and most updated information about these schools is provided in the NEPC's Sixth Annual Report on Virtual Education, titled *Full-Time Virtual and Blended Schools: Enrollment, Student Characteristics, and Performance*. The report provides a census of the nation's full-time virtual schools as well as institutions that blend online learning with face-to-face instruction. The report also includes student demographics, state performance ratings and, where available, analyses of school performance measures.

Michigan public radio station WKAR mentioned the NEPC report in a piece about another

study that found that a quarter of the 101,000 Michigan students enrolled in online classes did not pass a single one. In an interview with the outlet, Gary Miron, author of the Virtual Education report, said: "We need a moratorium right now; we have to stop. No more growth for the schools; no more schools. The schools that are performing extremely poorly, we have to take sound steps to dismantle them."

Ed tech-focused EdScoop devoted an article to the NEPC report's findings, noting that: "While the average ratio in the nation's public schools is 16 students per teacher, virtual schools reported having close to three times as many, and blended schools clocked in with twice as many." In a piece about a rural school district that partnered with for-profit virtual education company K12 Inc., NBC News quoted the report's finding that district-operated online schools tend to perform better than charter school versions. Yet the latter continue to dominate the sector. And despite the highly publicized problems with virtual schools, the sector continues to thrive.

"It's rather remarkable that virtual schools continue to grow even while study after study confirms that these schools are failing," Miron told NEPC. "Students are clearly being negatively impacted when they attend these schools, and revenues devoted to public school systems are being siphoned off to the private companies that dominate this sector."

Why is this happening?

Based on interviews with more than a dozen policymakers, advocates, and researchers, a 2016 *Education Week* report concluded: The reasons are often a mix of weak state regulations, the millions of dollars spent on lobbying, and the support of well-connected allies.

NEPC Resources on Virtual Education

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