

Georgia Schools

Virtually Here

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INTRODUCTION

The appearance of Georgia schools is changing. No longer are all Georgia students heading off to school each morning on the traditional yellow school bus. Some students are heading to the Internet via smartphone, tablet, laptop, or desktop.

This is not the only change taking place around the state of Georgia. Georgia citizens made a historical decision on November 6, 2012. The state's voters ratified an amendment to the Georgia Constitution in favor of charter schools. Local school districts no longer hold the power; a state commission will now approve these institutions.

Couple the virtual concept with a charter school and the new product on the market in Georgia is virtual charter schools. Brick and mortar move over; cyber city is virtually here.

This article examines the culminating historical timeline of online learning's birth in the state of Georgia. By examining the two current parties involved in Georgia's cyber learning (Georgia public schools and Georgia charter schools), Georgia's certification process for teaching online, and the recent turn of events in legislature, explanations for how and why Georgia's e-learning environments were founded will be presented, in conjunction with a look of what's to come.

GEORGIA'S VIRTUAL CERTIFICATION

To make the transition from brick-and-mortar teaching to cyber instructing

smoother, the state of Georgia offers teachers an online certification. Starting in 2006, Georgia became the first state to offer certification for online teachers. This certification, according to the PSC Rule 505-3-.85, is in effect to prepare educators to teach in an online environment.

Prior to teaching in the state of Georgia, all Georgia teachers must hold a certificate from the Georgia Professional Standards Commission (PSC). This document from the PSC certifies the teacher's qualifications and classifications.

To receive the online endorsement, candidates must hold a valid teaching certificate and complete an online preparation program. The preparation program or practicum focuses on three standards: instructional technology concepts, online teaching and learning methodology, and online assessments.

The first standard addresses the teacher's knowledge, skills, and understanding of instructional technology concepts. In addition to the instructional technology terminology, candidates are expected to be competent with technology pertaining to online instruction.

The second standard tackles the ins and outs of online teaching and learning methodologies. Through this preparation process, teachers will be able to provide an active, meaningful online learning environment with prompt feedback and clear expectations, while modeling appropriate online behavior. In addition, the teacher will be prepped to be considerate of students with disabilities and aware of cul-

tural differences, all the while encouraging cultural diversity and inclusive learning.

The third standard examines effective online assessments. Here, candidates will demonstrate the creation (and implementation) of valid and reliable assessments in an online environment.

Using this virtual certification, teachers can transition from the little red schoolhouse to the cyber portal. Combine this certification with the training that most online institutions require (and provide) and the virtual instructor is born.

GEORGIA VIRTUAL LEARNING FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

HISTORY

Virtual instruction or Georgia's e-learning took shape in August of 2001, when a need for high school Advanced Placement (AP) classes and core curricular classes arose. With a shortage of qualified staff, the absence of course offerings and scheduling conflicts, the Georgia State Board of Education made provisions for these courses by establishing the Virtual Learning Business Plan.

In October of 2001, the Virtual Learning Business Plan was transferred to Georgia Department of Education's (GaDOE) Technology Services. However, GaDOE tech services had its hands full with the AP Nexus grant. This grant, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE), was designed to increase the number of low-income, disadvantaged students who took AP classes. In collaboration with South Carolina, Tennessee, and Apex Learning (an online AP course provider), Georgia hoped to increase the availability of these AP courses to this specific group of students by offering an online setting.

During the next several years, several school districts in Georgia created their own online learning community, 13 of which convened in Atlanta and worked with Governor Sonny Perdue to produce

the first statewide online program called Georgia Virtual School (GaVS). This cyber school was officially signed into law in May of 2005.

Governor Perdue conducted the first live broadcast after signing the bill. He spoke face to face to an AP class at Winder Barrow High and online to 18 other classes and libraries across the state. The entire event was broadcast live by Georgia Public Broadcasting (GPB).

GEORGIA VIRTUAL SCHOOL (GAVS)

GaVS does not have a physical location, but it does have an address. That address is, however, a URL. And just like any other school, there are host of intricate details. But because the Georgia Department of Education established this entity, the school's set-up is exactly like a Georgia public school, with the exception that it is fully online.

GAVS ACCREDITATION AND CERTIFICATION

Accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), Georgia Virtual School offers middle school and high school level courses across the state in a virtual classroom setting. Equipped with an online media center, guidance support and online teachers, GaVS offers more than 100 courses in core curricular (math, language arts, science, social studies); foreign languages; electives; career, technical and agricultural education (CTAE); and AP studies.

In line with the Georgia PSC, GaVS teachers must possess a valid Georgia teaching certificate and be certified in the appropriate subject area. Teachers must complete a training program hosted by GaVS, as well.

GAVS TIMES AND TUITION

The schedule for GaVS high school is summer, fall, and spring semester courses,

while middle school is summer semester only. Students enrolled in a course during fall or spring may have their tuition covered by their local public schools, while full time equivalent (FTE) monies can be used to cover private and home school students. Tuition for high school is \$500 per Carnegie unit, while middle school costs \$250 per course. All students pay tuition during summer semesters and out of state students must pay full tuition.

CREDIT RECOVERY

Another online experience offered by the GaDOE is the Credit Recovery Program. Here, high school students have an opportunity to retake courses online that they previously failed.

COURSEWORK/SCHEDULE

Core curricular classes and limited electives, mainly health, are offered in a 26 week completion time, with the focus being on fulfilling graduation requirements. Each course contains the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) content, as laid out by the Georgia Department of Education.

The schedule is flexible and not facilitated by a teacher, with the exception of test monitoring. Through the use of web-based learning activities and unit assessments, credit recovery is designed to help students complete state requirements for graduation.

GRADING

A pretest sets the wheels in motion. The results of this exam determine a student's direction. If a score of 85% or higher is attained at the beginning of each unit, the student is allowed to test out, with the unit posttest. But if the pretest score is lower than 85%, the student must review every content item in the entire unit before the posttest is made available again.

To complete a course, students must score 70% or higher on the posttest and final exam (or EOCT). Upon this final grade, credit for the course will be granted and students will then earn credits based on their proficiency and competency of the state standards.

COST

This program is provided free of charge to participating Georgia public high schools. However, no money has been designated for the test proctors or monitors. As such, this cost may be passed on to students.

EXPRESS

ExPreSS is another online learning environment established by GaDOE. It is not a school, per se, but rather a free online tutorial program set-up to help students who were unsuccessful in passing the Georgia High School Graduation Test. This program consists of self-paced modules based on the GPS content areas (science, social studies, English language arts, and mathematics).

GEORGIA VIRTUAL CHARTER SCHOOLS

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Switching gears from public schools to charter schools, the Georgia Charter Schools Association (GCSA) was established in 2001, as a nonprofit corporation whose mission is to advocate and serve all Georgia charter schools. By increasing awareness of charter schools; communicating with state and local officials; networking Georgia charter schools; and advancing the cause of charter schools, GCSA supports school choice, student achievement, collaboration, innovation, communication and accountability (GCSA, 2012).

There are over 100 charter schools in Georgia. These schools are considered public schools, as they receive public funding, have open enrollment, and serve all populations of students (GaDOE, n.d.).

Although similar to public schools, charter schools are different on two main fronts—governance and accountability. The charter school is run by an independent board of directors, as opposed to the public school’s board of education. The other difference is in their flexibility with state and local rules/regulations. This flexibility comes at a price, as charter schools are held to a higher standard of accountability.

As for online charter schools, GCSA lists three as virtual charter schools: Georgia Connections Academy Charter School, Georgia Cyber Academy, and Provost Academy. A brief examination of each follows.

GEORGIA CONNECTIONS ACADEMY CHARTER SCHOOL

Georgia Connections Academy Charter School is a tuition free K-12 virtual school. Approved by GCSA in 2011, the school served K-8 in its first year and expanded to K-12 in the 2012-2013 school year.

This cyber school provides highly qualified, state-certified staff; social and community events; and Connexus, their very own education management system (Connections Education, 2012).

GEORGIA CYBER ACADEMY

Established in 2008 as a program of the Odyssey School, the Georgia Cyber Academy served grades K-9 for 3 years. Then in February of 2011, the state board unanimously agreed to expand the school to Grades K-12 (Georgia Education News, 2011).

The head of the school has referred to Georgia Cyber Academy as an “education support system” for students (Georgia

Cyber Academy, 2012). However, recent allegations regarding failure to provide services to special education students could prove otherwise (O’Connor, 2012).

PROVOST ACADEMY

Approved in 2010 by the Georgia Charter Schools Association, Provost Academy did not open until July 2012. As this is their first year in business, they have not yet been accredited. This institution serves Grades 9-12 online through a student portal. Monitoring of student access to coursework is recorded and attendance is taken through this portal.

Coursework at Provost Academy is based on Georgia Performance Standards, but additional focus is given to electives. Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) are offered to students to “develop the skills necessary to succeed in today’s high-tech world” (Edison Learning, 2012).

Included in the Provost Academy package is a supplemental software subscription that is offered to all students. The program is called Study Island and is designed to help students master Georgia Performance Standards.

GEORGIA’S AMENDMENT 1

Charter virtual instruction may be closer to the norm in the years to come, as Georgians passed Amendment 1 in November 2012. Amendment 1 asked the question, “Shall the Constitution of Georgia be amended to allow state or local approval of public charter schools upon the request of local communities? (Horne, 2012).

THE CHANGE

In the past, charter schools were approved or disapproved by the local school board. If disapproved, the group could go to the State Board of Education. The problem was that if the group was granted the charter by the State, the new

charter school could not receive local tax money. It would receive only state and federal funds (Krache, 2012).

With this new law, charter schools will be approved by a state commission; a charter school that had been denied by the local school board or State Board of Education could be approved.

SUPPORT

Support for the Georgia Amendment came from some unexpected folks, such as Alice Walton, the daughter of Wal-Mart founder Sam Walton. Also, the Koch brothers, billionaires who founded the Tea Party organization Americans for Prosperity, donated support in favor of Georgia Amendment 1. Others that gave included companies that manage charter schools, like K12 Inc., which supports the Georgia Cyber Academy.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

What does this amendment mean for Georgia? Georgia voters who supported the amendment believed that “charter schools give parents more opportunities to be actively involved in their child's education” (Patel, 2012). As such, the idea is that the power of choice was given to the people/parents in deciding what is best in educating their children.

WHY E-LEARNING IN GEORGIA

As technology advances and allows for more user-friendly devices and applications, the thinking is that everything else in life should follow suit. Hence, teaching and learning should move from sticks and bricks to virtual worlds and cyberspace.

Originally the online learning community in Georgia was developed to fill a need. AP classes, core curricular, scheduling conflicts and lack of qualified staff were just some of the reasons named by the Georgia Department of Education for the development.

Team these needs with an individualized education and charter schools surface in the state of Georgia. Charter schools give parents and students an alternative to public schools, by filling the need of quality education on an individual instruction plan.

Establishing “online” charter schools was sure to follow suit. These cyber schools add one more ingredient to the pot—freedom to choose. As these establishments are accessible anywhere/anytime, that convenience adds spice to any student educational life.

CONCLUSION

What happens now? The ratification of the charter school amendment was just the beginning. Freedom comes with a price; it is never free. Parents want the freedom to choose the best education plan for their children. What will it cost?

Will there be a surplus of charter schools, virtual and the like, all clamoring for parents' attention? Are too many choices a bad thing? Let's ask the lunch ladies who serve our students on the five different lunch lines.

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