

Technology Plans and Distance Education

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Most have heard about, and some have read, the U.S. Department of Education's National Educational Technology Plan, titled "Toward a New Golden Age In America Education" (<http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/os/technology/plan/2004/plan.pdf>). If you have not obtained a copy, you should. Actually, it is not bad reading.

One recurring theme of this plan is the importance today and in the future of distance education/e-learning/virtual schools. According to the report,

About 25% of all K-12 public schools now offer some form of e-learning or virtual school instruction. Within the next decade every state and most schools will be doing so ... traditional schools are turning to distance education to expand offerings for students and increase professional development opportunities for teachers. (p. 34)

The report goes on to list and explain seven major recommendations. These seven are:

1. Strengthen leadership
2. Consider innovative budgeting
3. Improve teacher training
4. Support e-learning and virtual schools
5. Encourage broadband access

6. Move toward digital content
7. Integrate data systems

The plan's 46 pages are supplemented by lists of federal activities that support the use of technology in education.

It is interesting that this plan often identifies some aspect of distance education as critical to the future of education. Virtual schools are given special attention as important to the future of American education. It is also significant that the importance of leadership is stressed in the Plan and is the first of the seven recommendations. It is implied that, without enlightened leaders, effective technology implementation will not occur, and without technology schools will continue to fail.

The plan is a starting point. Schools and organizations might use the Plan as they develop their own strategy for encouraging e-learning and distance education. Certainly, more specifics and clear direction for implementation than found in the USDE Plan would be needed.

Distance education has become mainstream—widely practiced, generally understood, and critically important. Distance teaching and learning are innovations, even today, although these two components of distance education are

soon to become regular and expected aspects of education. Our field must now live up to this long sought after importance.

And finally, in this era of grading and rating schools, it is obvious that the school

that does not include instructional technology and distance education in its vision for the future and its planning for today is a school that is outdated and out of touch—a school that is failing.

EVERY EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATION NEEDS AN INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNOLOGY AND DISTANCE EDUCATION PLAN.