

Virtual Schools Mandated!

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A recent article in the *Miami Herald* written by Laura Green of the *Palm Beach Post* had the startling title “State Starts Virtual School Mandate.” Mandate is a strong word—a mandate is an order, a requirement, an expectation.

Of course, calling the title startling may be a little strong. Most likely, readers of either newspaper did not give the article or its title more than passing interest. But, educators generally, and distance educators specifically, most likely did a double-take. They knew this article and the state

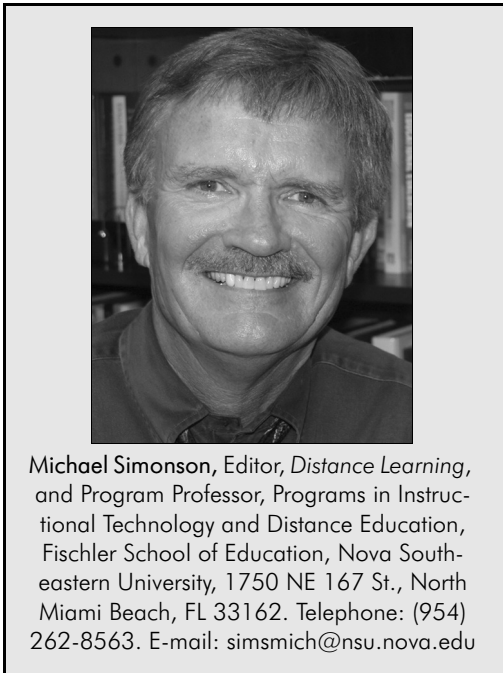
law it discussed were another indicator that distance education had arrived.

Most are very aware of the many Sloan Consortium reports that have documented the steady growth of distance education in colleges and universities. In the 2007 monograph, *Online Nation*, it was reported that more than 3.5 million college students enrolled in at least one online course in 2006, and that most college administrators felt that online education was important to the future of their institutions.

But now Florida has a state law mandating virtual schooling. Mandating, not just planning. Of course, virtual schooling has been important to public education for many years, mostly as an “initiative,” a “plan,” and sometimes even an actual organization, but now we have a state law mandating virtual schooling.

In recent issues of this journal, there have been extensive and interesting articles describing statewide distance education initiatives, such as the Iowa Communications Network, the Florida Virtual School, and Network Nebraska, and there are plans to publish reviews of other large-scale K-12 initiatives like the Digital Dakota Network, and K-12 networks in Wisconsin. Now, however, every school district in a state is expected to have a virtual school up and running within 1 year—a plan “believed to be the most wide-ranging in the nation.”

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The *Herald* article goes on to explain that districts can collaborate with other school districts, create their own full-time virtual schools, or contract with providers that are approved by the state. This must happen in time for the beginning of the next school year—and this virtual school must be K-12, not just a secondary school offering.

Obviously, this mandate is an exciting and positive recognition of the value of the innovation of distance education. Just as obviously, it poses many real problems for educational leaders and administrators—there also is the potential for abuse. Leaders in the field of distance education have the opportunity to “do it right this time.” We must not make grandiose claims or promote unsupported techniques. The literature is clear: distance education works. Learning occurs if teaching is appropriate; it is not the technologies, but rather the methods, approaches, and techniques of

effective course design and instructional delivery that determine learning.

And finally, to mandate is to command or order. And, now in Florida, there has been an order, and because of this order it is likely a new order will be established. At this critical point, we must not forget Machiavelli’s (1532) warning,

There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.

REFERENCES

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