

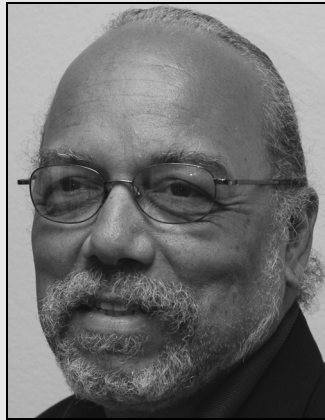
Are Today's Administrators Prepared?

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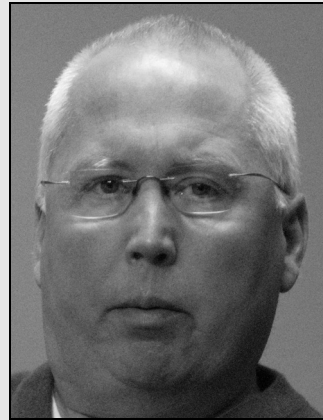
Virtual education is one of the fastest growing areas in K-12 education today. Online education (as it is also referred to) has taken a variety of new forms since the first virtual high school was created a decade and a half ago. There are public and private stand-alone virtual schools, virtual programs that are a component of an existing program, and there are teachers who have incorporated elements of online education into traditional, on-ground instruction (referred to as hybrid or blended).

A recent study, conducted by Project Tomorrow and titled "Speak-Up 2009: Creating our Future Student Survey," indi-

cates that many more high school students are interested in online education than currently participate. One obstacle holding them back is the lack of information about the nature of online education, and another is lack of access to online programs. An earlier study published by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) indicated that about one third of all public school districts had students enrolled in distance education courses of some type in the 2002-2003 school year. That percentage has been growing each year (NCES, 2003). In fact, the January 18, 2010, edition of *eSchool News* published the following data:



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- The state of Florida’s legislature has mandated that every public school district must establish an online program for K-8 and K-12 programs.
- The Center for Digital Education states that currently 27 states have statewide online initiatives.

The rapid growth of these programs has resulted in their identification as a disruptive innovation, and their development trajectory has been from outside the traditional educational program. As a result, school administrators are faced with making decisions about an educational innovation with which they’ve had little experience. It is most common for adults who aren’t as comfortable with online social networking and online environments to be suspicious or distrustful of the quality of education offered by these new programs (George, Hall, & Stieglebaur, 2006).

What do we know about the quality of online education? Everyone can come up with a horror story about a truly bad online experience. Administrators can hear those and assume they apply to all online education. Paradoxically, while everyone also has a story about a truly bad face-to-face classroom experience, most educators will ignore them, focusing on the positive experiences, and make a decision to work in that environment. Administrators need to seek out the success stories involving online education, both for their own education and to have a better understanding of this new approach. Understanding the distinctions between fully-online and blended, asynchronous and synchronous, self-paced and scheduled, and individual and collaborative activities can help explain the range of initially confusing methods. Administrators may be surprised to know about the research that compares online instruction to on-ground instruction and finds that the online instruction is as good or better than the on-ground counterpart.

Specifically, one major study’s results suggested that students who took all or part of their instruction online performed better, on average, when compared to those who took the same course through face-to-face instruction. The impact of these finding is heightened when the study considered those who took “blended” courses—those that combine elements of online learning and face-to-face instruction—appeared to facilitate achievement best of all (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

Well-designed online courses are rigorous. They aren’t impersonal, and they can reach students who might otherwise not have access to such courses. An urban legend floating around proposes that there’s a special type of student who’s successful in online education, and only those students should be allowed to participate in online education. Interestingly there’s not the same belief about on-ground instruction: there’s a special type of student who’s successful in on-ground education. The recently completed National Technology Plan stated the following benefits for students from online learning:

- Provides personalized learning and higher engagement;
- Provides new connections to current content and related activities;
- Supports a broader learning community;
- Extends students learning time;
- Supports a broader assessment of student learning and understanding;
- Supports more effective professional development programs for teachers; and
- Supports better data on learning and understanding (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

Schools and districts retain policies that reinforce seat time as a measure of learning (Sloan Consortium Report, 2009). Educators know that’s not the measure of educa-

tion, but administrators are trained to respect and enforce policies, and find that when faced with policy decisions it's easiest to revert to structuring the learning environment around a seat-time model.

Administrators are faced with making decisions about online instruction whether or not they fully understand online instruction or the issues that are attached. For example, who should teach in an online environment? Administrators may be unaware that the pedagogy and skills of a successful online instructor are vastly different from those of their best on-ground teachers. Other administrators might even think that since online instruction isn't as effective as classroom instruction, teaching online would be an appropriate assignment for those teachers considered to be weaker in the classroom.

Thus two options seem to present themselves to address staffing: professional development for existing teachers or hiring teachers who already possess the skills in online instruction and technologies. Before an on-ground teacher becomes an effective online instructor or online course developer, the teacher should successfully complete online professional development that uses the technology and pedagogy for their particular educational program or they should acquire the requisite professional development.

Online course developers need a greater understanding of online pedagogy than does someone who will teach an online course that has already been developed. The online instructor still needs to understand the pedagogy, but doesn't need as comprehensive an understanding of the online delivery technology.

Since the level of professional development required for online education competence is likely not readily available within the district's professional development program, administrators are pushed to consider contracting this professional development to external providers. The leading virtual education programs all

develop and conduct their own online teacher professional development to ensure their staff understand their pedagogical approach and program policies that align with their instructional approach, as that approach evolves.

If administrators are planning to buy rather than build, they should recall the previous comment about the range of educational approaches used in online programs. When choosing to buy online courses, leaders must be sure the vendor's course design pedagogy and the program pedagogy and approach are a match. It is not sufficient to depend on the vendor's sales staff to say their content matches. Outsourcing professional development to a content vendor requires careful investigation into their approach.

The 2009 Sloan Consortium report about K-12 online learning stated these findings (Sloan Consortium, 2009):

- Administrators typically rely on outside online providers, including post secondary institutions, independent vendors, and state virtual schools;
- Eighty-three percent of districts use multiple providers;
- The reliance on outside providers are due to shortages of qualified teachers in high need specialized areas, such as, STEM subjects;
- Districts have inequities in state funding; and
- A lack of foundation exists to determine quality in online providers, online content, or online pedagogy.

If securing appropriate professional development for online teachers is problematic, why not seek and hire teachers who already have the expertise? One of the reasons the leading virtual education programs created their own professional development programs was the lack of existing online professional development. Since those virtual schools were developed in the 1990s and early 2000s, a variety of

providers of online professional development have been established, but only a handful of teacher education programs do more than give a passing nod to online education. Online teaching preparation that is not oriented to a specific virtual education program tends to take a survey approach, and while that exposes the participants to an array of online approaches, it tends to inadequately prepare novice teachers for the specific demands of an online program where they may teach. In recent national reports, such as the National Education Technology Plan (NETP) and the Federal Communication Commission's recent National Broadband plan, teacher education programs have been called upon to increase their emphasis on preparing future teachers for online teaching and learning, even though many current students have grown up with technology (Federal Communication Commission, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

A valuable benefit to having on-ground teachers also teach online, provided they receive quality online professional development, is the change that can take place in the on-ground classroom. Online teaching exposes teachers to new educational approaches and provides the opportunity to think critically and be more reflective of their teaching practice. Susan Lowes conducted research (Lowes, in this issue) on teachers in the Virtual High School program (goVHS.org) that showed the online teaching experience, including the online teacher preparation, had a positive impact

on their on-ground classroom instruction. Not only can online education expand offerings to students, it can also be part of a school improvement program.

There are a myriad of decisions that on-ground administrators make that can have significant impact on the effectiveness of their online education programs. We've only addressed a few. Successful online education programs require a different pedagogical approach than does successful on-ground instruction. The key issue is that online education will only be a second best option to on-ground instruction if it is designed to be so.

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