

Virtual education boom hits the states

March 14 2011, By David Harrison

A few years ago, when he was governor of West Virginia, Bob Wise attended a graduation ceremony at Pickens High School in Randolph County, a tiny school on top of a mountain where the graduating class consisted of only two students. As he was leaving, he asked the principal how the school was able to attract foreign language teachers.

"He laughed and said, 'We have one of the best Spanish instructors in the country.' And I said, 'How could that be possible here on this mountain?' And he pointed to a satellite dish and he said, 'She comes in every day at 10 o'clock from San Antonio, Texas.'

"That's when I learned the power of distance learning," says Wise, now the president of the Alliance for Excellent Education.

Many states are increasingly learning the same lesson. A combination of higher proficiency standards and tighter budgets are prompting school officials to look more closely than ever at online education. In recent years, several states have put forward plans to expand the reach of virtual schools. Most prominent is Idaho, where state Superintendent Tom Luna wants to require students to take online courses in order to graduate.

"Budgets are being cut," says Susan Patrick, president of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning. "We can't do more with less by continuing to do the same thing we've always done."

All but two states now offer online courses to at least some students. In most cases, online courses are blended with in-school courses. But 27

states allow students to attend virtual schools full time. Online courses allow students to work at their own pace, with advanced students moving through the curriculum quickly while others might get more of the attention they need from teachers.

Wise and other education leaders say that without more virtual schooling, it won't be possible to meet President Barack Obama's goal of producing a large majority of [high school](#) graduates ready for college or the work force. At the same time, now that 40 states and the District of Columbia have signed on to common math and English standards, online courses would be more easily transferable from state to state.

Using the Internet allows poorer or more rural districts to have access to more specialized teachers without having to pay big incentives. And in some cases, it makes it possible for teachers to reach more students either in larger classrooms or at home, minimizing costs to school districts. An audit of Wisconsin's virtual charter schools last year found the per-pupil costs of some of the schools were lower than those of traditional public schools, although they were higher in others because of high start-up costs.

Last year, Vermont and Montana launched their first state-run virtual schools, while Michigan and Massachusetts created full-time online programs. This year, Nebraska Gov. Dave Heineman told lawmakers he wants to use \$8.5 million in lottery funds to create an online high school to bring new courses to the state's students. "In rural Nebraska, it can be difficult to hire foreign language, math and science teachers," he said in a January speech. "A virtual high school would allow rural schools and rural communities to survive."

Texas Gov. Rick Perry also has called on lawmakers to expand the state's virtual high school to offer more access to courses and to make it possible for students who have dropped out of traditional high schools to

get a diploma online.

In the last school year, state-run virtual programs clocked roughly 450,000 enrollments, with enrollment defined as one student taking one semester-long course. That's 40 percent more enrollments than in the previous year, according to the International Association for K-12 Online Learning. Most of that growth can be attributed to Florida and North Carolina, which have been aggressively pushing their programs. Florida alone now records more than 220,000 enrollments in its virtual schools.

North Carolina has the fastest-growing rate of increase, and is now up to about 80,000. In 2008, North Carolina officials established a breakthrough by changing the rules to allow students to earn credit for completing a course regardless of how much time they spent in the classroom. North Carolina Virtual Public School CEO Bryan Setser calls that change "a great benefit but also one of our greatest challenges."

With more students signing up for courses and more private education companies entering the marketplace, states need to have a way to certify that virtual courses are rigorous enough, Setser says. In North Carolina, officials have decided to do that by developing the vast majority of the courses themselves and making sure they are taught by state-licensed teachers.

The National Education Association, the country's largest teachers union, has embraced online learning, provided it's taught by licensed and trained teachers and as long as it doesn't completely replace in-school teaching.

"We think that students really benefit from having a classroom experience," says Andrea Prejean, associate director of education policy and practice at the NEA. "Public school is that social net that catches a

lot of things. My third-grade teacher is the person who found out I needed glasses."

Given the rapid growth in virtual education, private online course providers are seeking to exploit their opportunity. They have been pitching their product as a cheaper alternative that does not compromise on the quality of instruction. And they are getting support from some lawmakers.

In Utah, for instance, state Sen. Howard Stephenson is pushing a bill to allow [students](#) to register for online courses taught by certified private providers even though the state-run virtual school system does not approve. A portion of the state's share of per-pupil spending would go to the provider, a measure that opponents have called a backdoor voucher program.

"I stay clear of that argument," Stephenson says. "I just say we're respecting the student's choice in getting online learning."

Elsewhere, school officials have been criticized for their ties to the private sector. Luna, the Idaho superintendent, received 19 percent of his campaign contributions in his re-election bid last year from for-profit education companies, according to the Idaho Statesman.

Luna, a former education official in the Bush administration, says there is no connection between his contributors and his policy proposals, and notes that the state's teachers union contributed to lawmakers who are opposing his proposal to weaken collective bargaining for teachers.

"It stands to reason that the unions will not support me with their money," Luna says. "But people who are supportive of changing education and bringing it into the 21st century would."

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