
Virtually Successful: Defeating the Dropout Problem Through Online School Programs

Virtual schools offer learning options to high-performing students and provide an opportunity for school success to those at risk of dropping out. Ms. Roblyer reviews the characteristics that make for successful virtual school programs.

BY M. D. ROBLYER

GISELLE, an aspiring ballerina, took Illinois Virtual High School (IVHS) courses during her junior year and the following summer in order to graduate early and spend what would have been her senior year touring the country with her ballet troupe.¹ Now, having graduated from her high school, she is taking IVHS Advanced Placement classes to improve her chances of getting into the college of her choice.

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Leslie missed all her courses in

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the second half of her sophomore year because she was pregnant. She was highly motivated to get her diploma but had a lot of courses to make up, a baby to care for, and no money for child care at night, when her school offered credit-recovery courses. In her junior and senior years, she took courses through the Michigan Virtual High School (MVHS) half time in addition to her regular courses. Thanks to the flexible scheduling of MVHS, she was able to do the coursework while caring for her baby and graduated on time, with hon-

schooling is one of the fastest-growing areas in K-12 education. In its 2005 report, the National Center for Education Statistics found that, as of 2003, 36% of U.S. school districts had students participating in virtual courses for a total of more than 300,000 students.³ And this number is projected to explode in the coming decade.

Many students enroll in online programs to take advanced courses or to accelerate the pace of their study, as Giselle did; many others seek credit-recovery courses

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ors. She is currently enrolled in a community college and plans to finish her college degree by taking courses part time.

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A quiet and slightly built youngster, Sidney was a social outcast among the tough, macho youths in his classes and was consistently bullied and harassed. Despite the inhospitable environment for learning, he managed to complete all the necessary courses for high school graduation except one English course, which was offered at his school at night. His mother, fearful of the youth gangs in the area, refused to let Sidney attend night school, so he enrolled in the English class through the Florida Virtual School (FLVS) and is completing the work from his home computer. He is scheduled to graduate with his class.

* * *

IVHS, MVHS, and FLVS personnel confirm that these are not isolated success stories. Rather, they are typical of the reports coming out of these programs, as well from many of the other 19 statewide virtual schools around the U.S.² Students venture down the electronic paths of an online-learning cyberworld so that they may better negotiate the increasingly complex and demanding real-world terrain of contemporary life.

Virtual schools — programs that offer regular school courses in distance-education formats — slipped onto the American education scene under the radar of most educators about a decade ago. Utah's Electronic High School, FLVS, and the Concord Consortium's Virtual High School began operations in the mid-1990s. Today, many people may still not be aware that virtual

like those that allowed Leslie and Sidney to earn their high school diplomas. But there are a variety of other reasons as well. Students turn to virtual schools when their own school lacks the resources to offer the courses they want or need, or when physical handicaps or disciplinary problems prevent them from attending a face-to-face classroom, or simply because they want the flexibility — or sometimes the invisibility — that they feel virtual courses offer. Home-schooled students are also a growing part of the consumer base for virtual courses. So why, in light of their obvious popularity and value, do many policy makers, educators, and parents view virtual schools with suspicion that approaches alarm?

Objections both political and philosophical surround the topic of virtual schools. Claims and counterclaims swirl around issues of funding, credit, certification, and even whether or not the whole idea of learning without the teacher and student being in the same room is socially desirable or morally acceptable.⁴

But one aspect of online schooling on which all agree is that students do not succeed equally well in all programs. As with distance courses in higher education, students tend to fail or drop out of virtual courses at a much higher rate than they do in face-to-face ones. Dropout and failure rates for virtual programs are reported to be as high as 60%-70% in some locations.⁵ These often-reported dropout figures have confirmed the misgivings of the skeptics, who feel that, despite the successes of Giselle, Sidney, and thousands of other students, virtual schooling seldom results in real learning.

However, some virtual programs have very low dropout and failure rates, and their students post better passing rates than those of traditional school programs on

such key tests as Advanced Placement exams.⁶ To document why these programs have such low dropout and failure rates, the directors of five successful virtual schools agreed to share with me their “formulas for success” in a series of interviews. During these discussions, a handful of themes played over and over, like a fugue with variations on the same key points. These school leaders made it clear not only that virtual schools can be as successful as face-to-face ones but that online programs increasingly challenge traditional schools to emulate their “virtual successes” by incorporating online options, services, and teaching strategies into their classes.

WHY SOME VIRTUAL PROGRAMS FAIL

Evidence from research is fairly consistent on what constitutes effective, high-quality virtual courses. Most studies examined postsecondary programs, which have been around longer than secondary school ones, but the quality indicators are always nearly identical to those for K-12 programs. The Southern Regional Educational Board captured these findings in a framework for virtual school quality, based on guidelines established for its Southern Regional Electronic Campus.⁷ The framework lists criteria for judging school and program quality in four categories:

- *Basic assumptions.* For example, it is a basic assumption that teachers are Web-trained and that there is equitable access to necessary resources.
- *Curriculum and instruction.* For example, content of high-quality programs is systematically designed and clearly communicated, and activities are highly interactive and offer opportunities for critical thinking related to course objectives.
- *Management.* For example, high-quality programs provide technical assistance and ensure that student work is secure.
- *Evaluation and assessment.* High-quality programs include assessment and have procedures in place for monitoring students during testing.

Not much new here. Most of these sound like criteria that any courses or programs should meet. But while there is general agreement on what it takes to offer high-quality virtual school courses, three factors account for the disparate results from program to program. The first two are easy to spot, because they relate to the reasons students enter an online program and to the way dropouts are calculated.

First, statewide programs like IVHS and FLVS serve large, diverse populations. In these programs, most stu-

dents (usually about 70% to 80%) are advanced or highly motivated students like Giselle or have a need for course-credit recovery. It is not surprising that programs that enroll a high percentage of at-risk students are much more likely to have high dropout and failure rates. Some programs like IVHS that are known to be successful have higher dropout rates in the summer, when credit-recovery efforts go into high gear. In other semesters, the dropout rate goes down to an average 15%.

A second factor that affects online dropout rates is how and when these rates are calculated. Like regular high schools across the country, methods of calculating dropouts vary.⁸ For example, some virtual programs include in their dropout figures any student who signs up for a virtual course but never completes it. Many of the more successful programs offer a drop period of from two to five weeks and count only students who drop out after that period.

A third reason for high dropout rates in virtual schools is more complicated and reflects the challenge of creating effective learning environments, virtual or otherwise. Some virtual schools have substantial start-up resources to design, implement, and sustain the strategies that make for successful programs, while others do not. Some programs are grant-funded, have temporary or

insufficient numbers of staff, or have little technical support for students when things go wrong — as they invariably do when computers are involved. Of course, this situation parallels that of many traditional schools, which often lack the resources they need in order to do what works well for their students.

WHY SOME VIRTUAL PROGRAMS SUCCEED

The five virtual school directors who shared their “how we did it” stories are listed below, along with their school websites. Clearly, these individuals were particularly inventive and talented educators, as well as excellent managers. Creating a virtual world out of nothing is an achievement in itself; fashioning one that connects with the real world to carry out the functions of a highly effective school is creativity of the highest order. I encourage interested readers to visit the websites of the following schools, listed below along with the name of the person responsible for the online program.

Robert Currie, Director
Michigan Virtual High School
www.mivhs.org

Elizabeth Pape, CEO
Virtual High School, Inc.
www.govhs.org

Donna Vakili, Director
Idaho Digital Learning Academy
<http://idla.blackboard.com>

Matthew Wicks
Director of Virtual Learning
Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy
Steering Committee Member, IVHS
www.ivhs.org

Julie Young, President and CEO
Florida Virtual School
www.flvs.net

Five common strategies for success emerged from discussions with these directors. I present each one below.

1. *Prepare students for success.* Part of the driving vision of the virtual school movement is the desire to ensure more equitable access to high-quality secondary

courses for all students, especially those traditionally disadvantaged by lack of local personnel and material resources. However, not all students have the skills and dispositions required to take advantage of the relatively freewheeling, flexible formats of virtual classrooms. Many students who sign up for online courses have the idea that they will be easier and faster — a breeze compared to coming to class every day and working under the watchful eye of a classroom teacher. They’re wrong, of course. Usually, virtual courses must meet rigorous standards and often are more time-consuming than face-to-face ones. Perhaps because of these misaligned expectations, even usually high-achieving students don’t always do well in virtual classes.⁹

Good virtual programs anticipate these misconceptions. They provide checklists, self-tests, and, in many cases, no-credit orientation programs to give students a taste of what online learning will be like. “Our students have to complete all parts of our orientation before beginning a regular course,” says Donna Vakili of the Idaho Digital Learning Academy (IDLA). “They have model activities, sample discussion forums, even a simulated exam. It also covers our Acceptable Use Policies and netiquette.” MVHS takes a slightly different approach to preparing students. “In addition to our Online Learner Orientation Tool,” says Robert Currie, director of MVHS, “we have MVHS ‘ambassadors’ who travel around the state to meet with mentors and principals and review students’ characteristics for success. Then it’s up to the school to make sure kids are ready to learn online.”

For some programs, an extended drop period of as long as five weeks takes the place of an online orientation. Students can try out virtual learning, and, if they find it’s not for them, they can drop out with no penalty during this time.

2. *Prepare teachers for success.* Just as good students in regular classrooms aren’t always the best cyberlearners, good teachers in regular schools don’t always make the leap from face-to-face classrooms to virtual ones.¹⁰ Those who operate good virtual programs believe that effective online teachers, mentors, and facilitators are made, not born. Each program has its own rigorous and extensive training, tailored to its own classroom platform and methods, including actually teaching part of an online course with the guidance of a mentor. Elizabeth Pape, CEO of the Virtual High School, Inc. (VHS), says, “Our professional development not only prepares teachers who can effectively monitor and facilitate student work and discussions, we show them how to

build a community of learners out of a group of highly independent people.”

In addition to teacher training, some virtual programs also host face-to-face conferences for their instructors. For example, MVHS offers a summer conference called “Collaboration of the Minds,” in which teachers share their expertise and experiences and give input on what should be included in future inservice activities.

3. *Use interactive, flexible course designs.* Virtual programs tend to emphasize hands-on, project-based assignments that require students to work together. “Our design standards require group and team activities in every course,” says VHS’s Pape. “We teach teachers how to form the teams and foster student-to-student interaction. It’s through interaction that students construct their knowledge.”

“One of the goals of each of our courses is to make sure a student cannot complete it just by sitting at a computer,” says Julie Young of FLVS. “They always have away-from-computer activities; some require experiments or project development, and some involve them in interaction with their local community. We try to allow for a variety of different ways students can show mastery of concepts. We also require substantial student-to-student interaction. This is a real challenge, because we also have rolling enrollment, with students coming into the course at different times. We encourage each student to locate a partner to work with.”

Not all the virtual schools stress this kind of interaction in all courses, however. The IVHS and MVHS programs tend to vary the approach depending on the type of course. “The more flexible you are with the course calendar, the more difficult it is to have high student-to-student interaction,” observes MVHS’s Currie. “Our Flex-90 courses not only have flexible enrollment, they allow students to complete them as quickly as they want.” Matthew Wicks, a member of the steering committee of IVHS, agrees. “Project-based activities are always a conscious part of our course design,” he says, “and high student-to-teacher interaction is emphasized. But we feel that high student-to-student interaction isn’t always possible — or necessary.”

4. *Monitor and support teachers.* An interesting feature in nearly every one of these programs is the combination of high support for teachers in their work with students, along with constant monitoring to ensure that teachers comply with program expectations and standards. Most programs design and test courses ahead of time, so that teachers can focus on teaching, rather than instructional design. Objectives, projects, course

resources, assessments — these are standard for all personnel who will teach a given course. In addition, all programs stress the importance of site facilitators (variously known as curriculum coordinators, instructional leaders, online principals, or mentors) who help teachers handle registration and administrative tasks and, in some programs, help monitor student participation. These facilitating personnel are often the same individuals who monitor the teachers.

Virtual programs set the bar high for teachers’ work with students. Teachers must “be in the course space” most days and reply to student queries and issue grades for assignments in a timely way (i.e., within 24 hours). For example, IDLA requires teachers to prepare a weekly progress report for each student as well as a description of the challenges teachers are meeting in the course. Teachers must telephone students who are inactive.

FLVS requires each teacher to talk by phone with each student *and a parent* once a month. And the teachers must log the calls. “We monitor our teachers closely,” says Julie Young. “Facilitators look at everything: the phone log database, the type of feedback students are getting, how timely and how fair grading is. They even read e-mails to judge the tone of communication between teachers and students. All teachers are on annual contract, and we review them continually in light of their performance. We want people who buy into our student-focused culture. At the same time, we have very low staff turnover.” In addition, the FLVS per-pupil funding model is unique, making it in the school’s best interest to have highly effective teachers. Its payments from the state are based solely on each student successfully completing courses. This funding model promotes teacher quality and accountability, which are monitored through continual training and mentoring.

“We find it helpful to teachers to get teachers together in the summer to share best practices,” says IDLA’s Vakili. And IDLA also rewards teachers who are able to keep students enrolled and learning. “For students deemed at high risk of failure, teachers get an additional \$50 per kid if they’re active in the course for at least 3 weeks. They get another \$50 if the student completes everything successfully.”

5. *Monitor and support students.* “We recognize we are a choice program,” says FLVS’s Young. “We foster a continuing ‘culture of collaboration,’ in which staff members come together and focus on what is best for each student.” This “students first” perspective charac-

terizes the climate of all these virtual schools. Each program requires that teachers interact personally with each student, and each program provides support tailored to individual student needs. It is easy to see that the amount of person-to-person contact between instructional personnel and individual students exceeds that in many face-to-face programs.

Student success is the focal point of all activities, not just instruction. Flexible registration and pacing options are “customer oriented” to meet students’ schedules. Initial welcoming e-mails and intake interviews help ensure that students will have what they need to learn efficiently. The monitoring and progress reporting systems make sure no one falls through the cracks.

REAL-WORLD LESSONS FROM VIRTUAL SCHOOLS

Scalability is usually the first issue raised with an innovation of this type. Yet these successful schools are not small, pilot projects. FLVS, one of the oldest of the online programs, enrolled more than 21,000 individuals during the 2004-05 school year. In 2005, it began franchising its delivery model to other sites. IVHS enrolled around 5,000 students during this time period, a 53% increase from the previous year, and even larger numbers are projected for future years. MVHS’s test-prep courses alone had nearly 50,000 registrations in a single year.

Despite their rapid growth and the limitations inherent in online communication, successful virtual schools manage to see that students have the skills and materials they need in order to learn and that teachers have the support and resources they need in order to teach. They make courses hands-on and interactive to keep students involved, and they find ways to give each student substantial one-to-one monitoring and tailored attention. At the same time, both students and teachers must meet the highest standards of accountability.

Virtual schools are the latest challenge to our common understanding of “a place called school.” Just as the home-schooling movement showed that students can learn successfully from parents in home settings, virtual schooling shows that they can also learn “anywhere, anytime, and anyplace,” without ever meeting a teacher in person. Both kinds of schooling clearly profit from the absence of issues that often slow learning to a crawl in traditional schools: dealing with the physical plant, behavior problems, special needs, and lack of motivation. Experts are reluctant to predict the demise of brick-and-mortar schools in favor of electron-

ic ones, and brick-and-mortar schools offer many practical benefits that online programs cannot completely duplicate. But the growing popularity of virtual programs indicates that changes may be in store for the way schools of all kinds operate.

Choice and flexibility are clear motivators for students who turn to online courses. Many students of virtual schools could take courses from their local schools, but they choose to take them online. Other students use virtual courses to supplement the selection available in their local schools. Still others, for various reasons, could not complete their high school program without online courses. In light of their growing popularity and the success of programs such as those described here, online options seem destined to become part of the array of services all schools must offer in the competitive education marketplace.

Yet virtual schools could offer even more. Successful online programs have discovered how to bridge the distance between students and schools in ways that make learning both accessible and compelling. Many students have succeeded online who would otherwise have failed and dropped out. Virtual schools are quickly learning how to minimize their own dropout problems. In doing so, they may also show traditional schools how they can better address theirs.

1. All student names mentioned here are pseudonyms.

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