Chapter III

Managing Virtual Schools: The Canadian Experience

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Abstract

Although Canada has offered alternative forms of schooling through distance education for over a century, the advent of online schooling options has helped overcome two of the major obstacles: lack of sufficient current resources and lack of regular interaction. Today across Canada, online schooling options tend to be focused at the high school sector. However, in Alberta there are more than 19 schools, most of which offer elementary and secondary courses. The schools mainly serve their local

population, and the issues administrators face include marketing and obtaining infrastructure support and facilities, as well as ensuring quality of curricula and student-teacher interaction, meeting parental concerns, and provision of professional development.

Introduction

Virtual schooling in Canada is a growing phenomenon. A virtual program refers to a series of courses that are offered via the Internet to students in grades 1-12, usually by their local school jurisdiction. It meets the needs of parents who want their children to be involved with the school program but not their peers, and the needs of students who cannot access sufficient credits to complete a high school diploma. It provides opportunities for students who wish to accelerate their programs, and for those who cannot attend a school regularly (due to travelling, illness, incarceration, or activities such as sports, music, etc.). In this chapter, we describe the Canadian experience with virtual schooling, discuss administrative issues and outline trends. We begin with a brief overview of the development of virtual schooling in Canada from its initial development in Alberta in 1996, with more than 20 schooling programs, to its rapid expansion across Canada. Then, we will focus more directly on the virtual schools in Alberta. In particular, we identify the administrative issues that have arisen, that are in some ways unique to online schooling, from admission requirements to course development, and from parent support to funding. We have also included ongoing issues related to educational leadership, such as issues of supervision of teachers, quality of instruction, and provision of professional development. Finally, we outline likely trends and their implications.

The History of Virtual Schooling in Canada

Geography and demographics have combined to make Canada a country where distance is an integral aspect of life. Canada is larger in area than the continental United States, but with only a fraction of its population, the majority

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