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## **Chapter IV**

# **Distance Learning Success Factors in the RPR Cycle and Virtual School Accreditation Standards**

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## **Abstract**

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*Virtual school administrators and course designers can address the needs of virtual school students using established quality guidelines and standards. The development and implementation of effective distance education happens in an iterative cycle. The three stages in the cycle are: (1) procurement and preparation of the resources necessary to meet the distance education goals; (2) delivery of instruction using the best practices from education, business and research; and (3) analysis of the results*

*of distance education to gauge achievement of the goals. Each stage of the Resources - Practices - Results (RPR) cycle continually revisits lessons learned in the other stages and builds upon the successes realized in the other stages. The success of a web-based virtual school program in part relies on the program's adherence to quality benchmarks. This chapter explores the interconnect among the established success factors incorporated into the RPR cycle and standards published by agencies accrediting virtual schools. A survey of 67 virtual schools in the United States in the spring of 2003 resulted in identification of accrediting standards applied at national, regional and state levels. The standards of seven accrediting bodies are examined, and three are compared to the RPR success factors. Because of the differing foci of the agencies producing the standards, there is variation in the degree to which the standards correspond to the RPR success factors.*

## **Quality in Virtual School Distance Education**

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In its December 2000 report to Congress, the Web-Based Education Commission made high quality online educational content one of its seven critical issues. In order for a student or institution to determine whether quality has been achieved, quality must be defined. Virtual school programs must serve the virtual schools in meeting their goals. A central goal of education is developing independent learners who can capably apply their knowledge to new situations. To ensure that virtual school offerings meet this goal, designers must identify desired learning outcomes, instructional strategies and evaluation methods. Quality indicates that instruction is effective and appropriate. The assessment of quality virtual school programs may include quantitative elements, such as completion rates, student performance and student evaluations of the learning experience. Qualitative dimensions may include ratings of teaching-learning events, materials, learning process, pace, activities, content, usability, accessibility and options offered to students. Performance in each measure of quality depends on the distance education experience being fully appropriate to all users. Seven groups have published accreditation standards that have been adopted by American virtual schools. Three of the groups operate at the national level: the National Private School Accreditation Alliance, also known as the National Private Schools Association; the Accrediting Commission for

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