

Chapter 8

Leading an Online School

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2009, one million secondary level students took online courses in virtual schools throughout the United States. Since their inception twelve years ago, the virtual school movement has grown exponentially, giving rise to the need for transformational leadership of educational practices in a digital world.

The new online schools cannot succeed without visionary leaders who are also instructional leaders, data based decision makers, and student centered advocates. Virtual school administrators are faced with significant challenges in state and local policies, which impact funding and organizational change strategies. Through collaboration with policy makers, teachers, parents, instructional designers, and technology experts, educational administrators can better meet the needs of their diverse online learners.

The case study of best practice in leading an online school looks at New Hampshire's Virtual Learning Academy Charter School (VLACS), because it has an effective administrative team, which supports online learning in both accelerated and credit recovery programs.

CURRENT ISSUES IN ONLINE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Terminology

Distance education started over a century ago with correspondence schools and evolved with changes in technology. By the twenty first century, it became commonly known as courses delivered to remote locations through computer or video

technologies. A relatively new category of distance education is online learning, which relies on the Internet for curriculum and instruction (Rice, 2009). Most online students are in higher education. However, the number of virtual or online schools servicing K-12 students has increased dramatically in the past few years.

Virtual schools are online learning platforms that deliver synchronous and/or asynchronous instruction, usually to secondary level students. The terms "online schools," "cyber schools" and "virtual schools" are used interchangeably for the

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purposes of this study, although the case analyzed is New Hampshire's Virtual Learning Academy Charter School (VLACS) for middle and high school students across this primarily rural state.

Online Education and the Failing High School

Many educational researchers agree that the traditional public high school is not adequately meeting the needs of today's adolescents. One policy analyst recently explained why secondary schooling in the United States has failed, citing the high dropout rate and the lack of improved achievement levels throughout the past century:

"Although graduation rates rose steadily from about 1900 to 1970, the share of public high school students who graduate with regular diplomas four years after starting ninth grade has remained at about 75 percent since then. The National Assessment of Educational Progress found no improvement in reading or mathematics for seventeen-year-olds between 1971 and 2004. Although large numbers of high school graduates are going directly to college, the number completing college degrees has risen much more slowly. The system seems to be stuck, despite the constant efforts of teachers and repeated waves of reform." (Sterns, 2009, p. 212)

An educational administration researcher contends that the situation in American high schools is far worse, claiming that the dropout rate exceeds one quarter and is particularly high among urban African-American and Hispanic young men,

"Nationwide, nearly one-third of high school students fail to graduate with a diploma, with an average of 7,000 dropping out every day. The problem is even more severe among African-American and Hispanic students, with nearly 50 percent not completing high school on time. Overall, in the nation's 50 largest cities, only

53 percent of high school students graduate on time, according to Cities in Crisis 2009: Closing the Graduation Gap, a report issued this year by America's Promise Alliance, a nonprofit founded in 1997 by Gen. Colin Powell and his wife Alma Powell." (Dessoiff, 2009, pp. 44-45)

In response to the failure of efforts to reform education in order to raise achievement levels and lower dropout rates, some concerned educators and parents formed a school choice movement that has gained momentum in the past twenty years, culminating in current support for charter schools on the federal level. A key education policy maker, the editor of the American School Board Journal, comments on the importance of this national advocacy of school choice for leaders at all levels:

"Now, with the Obama administration's open embrace of the charter movement and its tie to Race to the Top funding, choice is poised to have an even more significant and lasting role in how we educate future generations of children...look at emerging developments in the charter, magnet, and virtual school movements." (Cook, 2009, p. 4)

Charter schools have gained this recent support from the President and the Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, who helped to start a massive charter school movement when he was Superintendent of the Chicago schools. With bipartisan support from Democrats and Republicans alike, virtual charter schools are receiving federal start-up monies from sources such as the Race to the Top initiative.

Online charter schools, such as the one discussed in this study, are initiated by varied agencies, both public and private. Some are operated by state education departments, including the Florida Virtual School (FLVS), others are developed by public school districts, and some are part of a consortia of educational institutions. Virtual charter schools are addressing many of the needs of American high school students with their current

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