Introduction: Virtual Schools as Defining Initiative

Educational technologists have speculated for years on how new electronic technologies might revolutionize teaching and learning practices in one of the most traditional of society’s institutions: the presecondary school. Despite the rapid pace of technological developments in the last few decades and the sweeping changes they have made possible in enterprises ranging from auto repair to medical research, K-12 education has proven substantially resistant to these innovations. Until the mid-1990s, the most common observation about technology in education was that it was relatively scarce. Countless studies have been done on why teachers have not integrated new technologies into teaching/learning methods and what can be done to alter this state of affairs (Cuban, Kirkpatrick, and Peck, 2001; Norris, Sullivan, Poirot, and Soloway, 2003).

The digital era of the Information Age, which began when the first Internet browser went live circa 1994, also signaled a remarkable and comparatively rapid change in school’s adoption and use of technology. By 2004, over 90% of all U.S. schools had Internet connections in classrooms (Setzer, Lewis, and Greene, 2005), and 77% of schools reported that at least half of their teachers used the Internet for instruction (Education Week, 2005). But rather than long-anticipated reforms in classroom teaching methods, Web-based communications instead leveraged a radically different approach to course delivery: virtual schooling. In its 2005 report, the National Center for Education Statistics found that 36% of American public school districts had students participating in virtual courses as of 2003 for a total of over 325,000 enrolled (Setzer, Lewis, and Greene, 2005). Based on reported virtual school annual enrolment growth of 50–100% (Watson, 2005, p. 11) and the number of new
state-supported virtual schools each year, subsequent estimates put that figure much higher and predict that the number of virtual school students will explode over the next few years (Wood, 2005).

In just a decade, technology has gone from a tangential role in education to redefining what it means to be “in school.” This chapter explores the rapid trajectory of the virtual school movement from its origins in the mid-1990s to the current and projected issues and policy challenges it faces as an education change agent and a harbinger of school reform.

**Background on Virtual Schooling**

*A Brief History of the Virtual School Movement*

Why has this movement grown so quickly? As Zucker and Kozma (2003) note, “In 1996… few people were predicting the great speed with which virtual schooling for secondary students would catch on … It is rare for education systems to change so rapidly …” (p. xiii). Certainly the vision that drove the first virtual schools was that of more affordable and equitable access to high-quality educational opportunities for students who traditionally lack such opportunities: rural, underserved, and at-risk populations. However, today’s virtual school student is just as likely to be one who prefers the self-pacing and flexibility of “anytime learning” as one who lacks local access to courses needed for graduation (Wood, 2005). Davis and Roblyer (2005) explain it as a timely solution to a widely perceived need:

“The demand for virtual schools is driven at least in part by fundamental changes in our society and the students who inhabit it. As ubiquitous communications and immediate access to information have become more common, learners recognize that learning can be an anytime–anywhere experience. They want educational opportunities that reflect these characteristics. The disconnection between many current educational methods and those possible in an information-connected environment is becoming increasingly obvious. A new kind of student requires a new kind of schooling” (2005, p. 399).

This may help explain why virtual schooling, an educational environment in which K-12 courses and other learning activities are offered mostly or completely through distance technologies, has become one of the fastest growing trends in education. What began as an experiment in educational equity has become a preferred form of instruction for a growing number of students.

Although many descriptions of virtual school history tend to begin with the Concord Consortium School (Fall, 1996, now VHS, Inc.) and the Florida Virtual School (Fall, 1997), the first school was actually Utah’s Electronic High School, which began offering courses in Fall, 1994 (Watson and Ryan, 2006). As Table 1 illustrates, only a handful of states followed suit after the initial programs in Utah, Massachusetts, and Florida until the year 2000, at which time seven additional statewide virtual schools were established. As of Watson and Ryan’s 2007 update report, there are 30 states with major state-led programs or initiatives, including those states with programs in development. More statewide schools are being proposed each year, and there are literally dozens of smaller virtual school programs scattered throughout the U.S. and abroad.