A Virtual Learning Revolution

By Michael Van Beek

Technology is changing the face of education. The International Association for K-12 Online Learning estimates that about 1.5 million students enrolled in online courses in 2010, and 25 percent of all college students took at least one online course in 2008. Virtual learning is an innovation that Michigan could use to increase the cost-effectiveness of schools and expand learning opportunities for students.
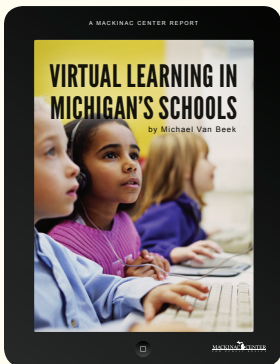
Virtual learning is using digital technology to deliver instruction to students. Sometimes this means students use computer software programs at school instead of the traditional face-to-face instructional model. Other virtual learning programs don't require students to attend school at all — the entire interaction with the teacher occurs over the Internet. Instruction can be delivered in real-time through streaming lectures, and live group discussions can occur using group chat programs. With the power of the Internet, nearly all the interactions that a student might experience in a classroom can be accomplished remotely.

Individualized instruction is one of the key benefits of virtual learning: students are able to master the course material at their own pace. In the traditional classroom setting, teachers are forced to measure and teach to the average pace of the collective class. Virtual learning effectively deals with the fact that not all students learn the same material at the same pace. Students can progress more quickly through lessons they immediately understand and take additional time on other lessons when they need it.

Working in an individualized learning environment through a computer software program or the Internet can set students free from certain levels of peer pressure that may prevent them from realizing their full learning potential. For instance, there's an old teaching adage that "there's no such thing as a stupid question." Every student knows that's a lie. If a student asks a "stupid question," they'll hear about it later from their peers. Conversely, some students might hold back their performance in the classroom for fear of being labeled a "nerd." In a personalized learning environment, however, many of these types of adverse peer pressures disappear as students are free to move through and master the curriculum at their own pace — without having to worry about how their peers will judge them.

Michigan traditionally has been seen as a leader in online learning. Michigan Virtual School was one of the first state virtual schools in the country and currently enrolls more students in virtual learning courses than

Summary

Virtual learning, which can take many forms, can increase student performance and help schools save money. While Michigan has been considered a leader in this field up until now, there are several things the Legislature can do to expand these opportunities to more students and reduce spending.

Main Text Word Count: 748

A MACKINAC CENTER REPORT

VIRTUAL LEARNING IN MICHIGAN'S SCHOOLS
by Michael Van Beek

For more information and to watch a video about virtual learning, please visit www.mackinac.org/14440.

MACKINAC CENTER
FOR PUBLIC POLICY

any other program or school in the state. Students signed up for more than 14,000 different courses offered through MVS in 2009. Additionally, in 2006, then-Gov. Jennifer Granholm signed into law a new high school requirement that all students take at least one online course or "learning experience" in order to graduate.

There are many other examples of virtual learning in Michigan's public schools. "GenNET" is a program run by the Genesee Intermediate School District and grants access to any student in Michigan to some 900 different online courses. GenNET does not actually provide the instruction through these courses, but instead monitors quality and coordinates access and enrollment in the courses. GenNET acts more like a portal to these online courses through a wide variety of online course providers, many of which cost a fraction of what it costs a local district to provide the same course to individual students. Indeed, both GenNET and MVS courses cost a significant amount less than what brick-and-mortar schools spend for similar offerings.

Michigan also has two virtual charter schools that serve students in grades K-12 from all around the state. These two schools began operating last fall and quickly filled their legislatively mandated enrollment cap.

It should be noted that online learning might not be the right fit for every student. Some virtual courses, especially full-time online ones that don't require any regular attendance in a school, are best designed for students who are highly motivated and organized. Having an appropriate amount of support either at home or elsewhere is also important when taking a full-time online course.

Based on the potential upsides that virtual learning can provide for some students, Michigan should make this opportunity available for more students. Current law limits the opportunities students have for using virtual learning, especially if they wish to try a full-time online program. Other states like Minnesota and Florida have policies that enable students and parents a wider range of choices to enroll in online courses, and the demand for these courses has only grown in these states. Michigan should follow suit.

Based on the potential upsides that virtual learning can provide for some students, Michigan should make this opportunity available for more students.

#####

Michael Van Beek is director of education policy at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a research and educational institute headquartered in Midland, Mich. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided that the author and the Center are properly cited.

MichiganVotes.org

STUDENTS FOR A FREE ECONOMY

PROPERTY RIGHTS NETWORK

MACKINAC CENTER LEGAL FOUNDATION

CAPITOL CONFIDENTIAL

EDUCATION REPORT

Privatization REPORT

mackinac media

Michigan Transparency.org

Michigan Science

VIEWPOINT ON PUBLIC ISSUES

MACKINAC CENTER
FOR PUBLIC POLICY