Summary of Research

Abstract

As society changes and develops, and technology continues to play an increasing role in everyday life, many school districts are choosing to respond to this flow of digital information. The use of courseware to support teachers and students has emerged, and the number of distance-education programs or online virtual schools has grown rapidly in recent years. Attempting to fill the gap between traditional education and home-based schooling, these online schools work to provide parents and students with a variety of viable options that include structured curricula, pacing guides, and numerous course offerings at scheduled or unscheduled times. The purpose of this study was to define virtual schools and identify a variety of options. After a review of the literature, researchers completed a comparison study between different virtual schools and programs primarily focused near metropolitan areas in one midwestern state, looking at the structure, student population, and use of each school/program to identify trends. This research encompassed secondary qualitative data gathered from the school/programs’ virtual handbooks and websites. Both a comparative descriptive research design and qualitative analysis were used to categorize and compare data.

Keywords: online school, online program, virtual education, distance learning, choice

Introduction

Many school districts currently include a distance-education program in their offerings to students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), distance education courses are “courses that are credit-granting, technology-delivered, have either the instructor in a different location than the students and/or have the course content developed in, or delivered from, a different location than that of the students” (U.S. Department of Education, 2012, p. 1). This growing class option has, in many cases, morphed into entire clusters of education programs being offered online, often called virtual schools. Most commonly defined as “an entity approved by a state or governing body that offers courses through distance delivery – most commonly
using the Internet,” virtual schools have become the norm in some parts of American education (Barbour & Reeves, 2009, p. 402). As a precursor to answering questions about why students are electing to attend virtual schools and whether or not they are finding success in these environments, an exploration of a few virtual schools and programs in the area focused on the structures, levels of students, and offerings. Through a review of the literature and a comparison study of a small number of virtual schools and programs in the Midwest, this research seeks to understand the inner workings of online education.

**Review of the Literature**

**Instructional Options**

Although virtual schools tend to have many traditional elements such as administration, staff, curriculum, parent conferences, special education, and sometimes even field trips, they are original in the way they provide instruction. In general, there are three main categories that define the way a virtual program is run: (1) independent, (2) asynchronous, (3) synchronous (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). Independent environments typically include students teaching themselves the material with parental supervision and minimal teacher involvement. The asynchronous method requires the student to interact with the curriculum and requires the teacher to be more involved in providing feedback and formative performance evaluations (Barbour & Reeves, 2009); however, the teacher and the student will not meet together in a classroom environment. Lastly, the synchronous method attempts to recreate an authentic classroom environment for the online community of students and teachers.

**Student Population**

Despite the numerous schooling methods, staff and student personalities may play a role in the success of virtual school students. According to Roblyer and Marshall (2003) (as cited in Davis & Roblyer, 2005), “students who have been successful in traditional classrooms are not always as accomplished in virtual ones” (p. 400). Distance education allows school districts to meet the needs of certain student groups, including those who are driven to take Advanced Placement (AP) and college-level courses, who are hospitalized or homebound, who have been removed from the school for reasons of suspension or incarceration, or who tend to travel due to athletics or family situations (p. 407). Online programs can also support homeschooled students and their families.

Lastly, virtual schools have been a viable option for students who were not previously successful in traditional environments, as well as students wanting to supplement their current curriculum with a variety of course options (Barbour & Reeves, 2009, p. 408).

**Methodology**

**Virtual Schools and Programs**

In Kansas, virtual schooling can take two avenues. Districts that have a separate administrative staff for the entity, and elect to have it in a separate “building,” are called virtual schools. The districts that support students and families within their existing school structures are titled virtual programs. A comparison study was conducted using two virtual programs and three virtual schools within the state of Kansas to determine similarities and differences between the five schools/programs, as well as to determine similarities and differences between traditional and online schooling. Online searches of Kansas virtual schools were used to identify the websites. Schools and programs were chosen based on their location in Kansas, connection to an accredited school district, and their use of a detailed website that would provide relevant data to the researchers. Three virtual school websites and two virtual program websites were identified for use in this comparison study.

**Virtual programs.** Maize Virtual Preparatory School, an online program within the Maize Unified School District 266, offers students in grades K-10 a blended program that features both traditional and virtual instructional elements. iQ Academy Kansas, a fully-accredited virtual program, housed within the Manhattan-Ogden Unified School District 383, offering students in grades 7-12 a STEM+ (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) curriculum focus.

**Virtual schools.** Lawrence Virtual School and Lawrence Virtual High School are both publically-funded schools, within the Unified School District 497, Lawrence Public Schools, offering students in grades K-12 a flexible online experience. Learning2 eSchool of Wichita, an accredited public school, within Unified School District 259, Wichita Public Schools, provides grade-specific offerings to K-12 students. Insight School of Kansas is an accredited
virtual high school, housed within Spring Hill Unified School District 230.

**Procedures**

The procedures closely followed a comparative descriptive research design. Qualitative topics for investigation were generated from links on the webpage. The information found on these sites was instrumental in the construction of a table of information that informed the study.

**Data Analysis**

Results were analyzed using a qualitative analysis, categorizing the data found on the virtual websites into sixteen general themes. From there, the researcher was able to identify overlap between the various schools and programs. Looking at these general themes, the researcher pinpointed specific similarities and differences noted in the data, creating categories of comparison.

Using this process, the main elements identified were (1) demographics, (2) curriculum, (3) school/program format and instruction style, (4) enrichment and social interaction, (5) eligibility and enrollment, (6) technology and materials, (7) support teams, (8) time requirement, and (9) recruitment.

**Results**

Sixteen categories emerged to provide the researchers with a basis for comparison. In general, there are many similarities in tuition, technology and materials, social interaction, and course offerings.

After categorizing website findings into a table of information, researchers found that 11 of the 16 variables contained some information from all five schools/programs. The remaining five variables were present in at least one of the schools/programs but not all five. Basic demographic information can be represented by four of the 11 variables: accreditation, tuition, dual-enrollment, and grade level. All five virtual schools/programs, although varying in grade level offerings, host tuition-free programs for Kansas residents. Curriculum composes a large part of the collected data, and it appears that many of the school districts have adopted outside curriculum packages. These include Calvert, STEM+, APEX, and K12. Three of the five schools/programs speak of a blended school format where students complete assignments and learn both online and offline. The other two schools/programs seem to have a completely computer-based curriculum. All five virtual schools/programs are intentional about hosting face-to-face opportunities for social interaction and academic enrichment. Field trips and local outings/events are found within each virtual school/program’s schedule. All schools/programs specifically note that virtual teachers are licensed and experienced. Virtual school/program teachers are readily available to help students and parents via numerous avenues of communication. All of the virtual schools/programs identify parents as learning coaches or supporting guides. The time requirement for a virtual school/program student was mentioned by four of the five schools/programs. Although time will be influenced by a variety of factors, on average a student needs to spend between four and six hours on school work per day. Recruitment is loosely used to categorize information found on the websites that identifies the types of students that attend the virtual school/program or why students should attend the virtual school/program. Four of the five schools/programs identified homeschooled families or families who would like to be actively involved in their child’s education as possible future students.

**Discussion**

After reviewing the research in virtual education, this comparison study set out to identify similarities and differences in the 16 variables previously mentioned. The high number of options available within the different virtual environments allows students choice and ownership within their education program. How schools/programs offer their curriculum must be considered: two-way video conferencing is common within smaller school districts and web-based learning is more common in larger districts, but the number of communication options has increased as virtual schools have evolved. Field trips, activities, programs, and enrichment options allow students time to interact in social groups with students much like themselves. Most of the schools/programs seem to use an asynchronous approach, but elements of independent and synchronous approaches can also be seen. It is important that students consider their personality before attending a virtual school due to the individual and self-paced nature of the curriculum.
Conclusion

In conclusion, virtual schools provide families and students choices within their educational environments. They have the opportunity to tailor a program to fit their personal goals and needs. Through various instructional techniques and a guided and structured curriculum, students can accept greater ownership of their educational experiences than they might in a curriculum narrowed by geography. Encouraging alternative educational models allows families and students to match their education to their wants, needs, styles, and capabilities. Virtual schools grant families choices related to the education of their children, allowing their child to be homeschooled with the presence of a licensed teacher and support staff. Overall, virtual schools provide parents and students with the option to make informed choices about their own educational experience, all while creating an individual plan for learning and success.

References


