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ABSTRACT

Courses delivered over the World Wide Web can help states meet the academic needs of all students. Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) states are creating state virtual schools to support and manage the efficient, effect use of Web-based courses. Florida and Kentucky have invested significant funds, personnel, and time, and Maryland, Texas, and West Virginia are moving slowly but systematically to understand how best to use this new technology. These state virtual schools vary greatly in goals, staffing, and funding. A key issue for each state is to determine whether it will lease or purchase courses instead of creating them. Leasing or purchasing courses is less expensive than developing and maintaining courses. Steps for states that consider creating a state virtual school include: establish the state's vision; identify which courses are needed; organize actions to meet state needs; determine costs and funding methods; determine course quality; and evaluate the program. (SM)

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Considerations for Planning a State Virtual School:

Providing Web-based courses for K-12 students

Courses delivered over the Web can help a state meet the academic needs of all students. SREB states are creating state virtual schools to support and manage the efficient, effective use of Web-based courses. These state virtual schools vary greatly in goals, staffing and funding. The Florida Virtual School, the nation's largest state virtual school, offers more than 60 high school academic courses and expects to serve nearly 8,000 students this year. The Kentucky Virtual High School coordinates the services and courses that schools offer to students. Other state departments of education — including those in Maryland and West Virginia — have staff who work closely with schools and school districts to identify needs, evaluate courses and coordinate student access. Before determining whether to build a state virtual school, the Texas Legislature in 2001 directed the commissioner of education to establish a program to examine state policies and requirements or restrictions affecting districts that offer electronic courses to local students. The Texas Education Agency is scheduled to submit a report in December 2002.

A key issue for each state is to determine whether it will lease or purchase courses, instead of creating them. The answer likely will depend on what courses the state needs. A state may need to develop courses unique to the state, such as a state history or foreign language course. For example, West Virginia has mandated that middle grades students be offered foreign languages. The state is working with the Florida Virtual School to develop several such courses. Because technology is changing so rapidly, there is much to learn about developing and using Web-based courses successfully. Leasing or purchasing courses should be considered whenever possible because these options are less expensive than developing and maintaining courses.

“Building a school” — key policy choices

- Which courses are needed?
- How can the state work to eliminate policy barriers to online learning?
- Should the state coordinate or manage efforts of school districts?
- Should the state lease or create courses?
- How will the state's program for online courses be funded?

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assess the program and recommend improvements. As a result of these efforts, the Florida Virtual School is accountable for 100 percent of the courses it offers. These courses are reviewed by users to ensure that course goals are met, that the course content is aligned with state standards and that the course content and final assessment are linked clearly. The Florida Virtual School's goals are that at least 80 percent of the students will earn A's or B's; every course will have a completion rate of at least 70 percent; at least 80 percent of the parents of students will indicate on surveys that they are satisfied with the courses; and all teachers will be certified in the subjects they teach. The Florida Virtual School's efforts to assess its program illustrate the complexity and range of issues that states must address to ensure that Web-based instruction succeeds.

Summary

In the last few years several states have shown interest in creating state virtual schools. Florida and Kentucky are among a few states nationwide that have invested significant funds, personnel and time. Other states — including Maryland, Texas and West Virginia in the SREB region — are moving slowly but systematically to understand how best to use this new technology and what changes are needed to offer the maximum opportunities for students.

A state should consider whether to “build” a state virtual school and, if so, what academic results to expect. This decision requires attention to the funding amount and sources, to assessment procedures and to policies that will guide the state virtual school. What state goals will a state virtual school help to achieve? What academic needs will it help to meet? How will its role be defined in relation to traditional schools and school districts? To what extent will schools and school districts participate in the state virtual school? The issues associated with a state virtual school go beyond technology; the most important issues are related to the state's role in ensuring that each student in the state has access to a quality education.



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