MEETING THE POTENTIAL OF A VIRTUAL EDUCATION

LESSONS FROM OPERATORS MAKING ONLINE SCHOOLING WORK

BY DANIELA DOYLE AND ISMAEL HERNANDEZ-CRUZ

PUBLIC IMPACT

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Public Impact's mission is to improve education dramatically for all students, especially low-income students, students of color, and other students whose needs historically have not been well met. We are a team of professionals from many backgrounds, including former teachers. We are researchers, thought leaders, tool-builders, and on-the-ground consultants who work with leading education reformers. For more on Public Impact, please visit www.publicimpact.com.

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FOREWORD

Both in Idaho where I currently lead Bluum, and in Ohio where I worked with the Thomas B. Fordham Institute for over a decade, I have met students who have benefited from—if not excelled as a result of—virtual schools. I've heard from families in remote parts of Idaho who have been able to access courses and learning opportunities for their children that would not exist without virtual schools. I've heard from students who told me they would not have graduated from high school had it not been for their virtual school option. I've even served on the board of the Idaho Distance Education Academy that is profiled in this report, and which is perennially one of the state's highest-performing public schools based on a range of metrics. In short, I have seen up close the good that virtual schools can deliver for families and children.

At the same time, I have borne witness to the problems associated with virtual education. I witnessed the unscrupulous behavior of bad actors like the Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow (ECOT), an operator in Ohio, that focused more on profits and finding political and legal solutions to its operational and academic struggles than on improving its academic program and instructional delivery. I've written articles and testified in public hearings calling out the failings and

problems associated with too many virtual schools. And I have been swamped with emails from virtual school parents calling me a sell-out to charter schools and school choice more generally.

The fact is, after 20 years of experience with virtual schools, we know that they are not for all children, and that too many children who have enrolled in virtual schools have not received the education they need or deserve. This is true nationally, and it is true in my home state of Idaho.

The Center for Research on Education Outcomes, or CREDO, released a study of Idaho's public charter schools in January of 2019.[1] Based on its analysis of three years of student performance data (2014–15 to 2016–17), CREDO concluded that, on average, Idaho's virtual charter school students made smaller gains over the course of a year compared to students who attended brick-and-mortar charter schools. The difference was not insignificant: Virtual charter students trailed their peers in brick-and-mortar schools by the equivalent of 47 days of learning in reading and 77 days in math. The difference was so large, in fact, that it wiped out the positive growth posted by brick-and-mortar charter students in math relative to traditional public schools, and lessened the overall positive charter impact on reading progress. In other words, if you took out the online charter results, Idaho's charter schools would look truly stellar.

PHOTO BY MARKUS SPISKE ON UNSPLASH

CREDO was not able to share the performance of any specific virtual school. However, we know that Idaho Distance Education Academy (I-DEA) is an outlier among the state's virtual schools. In fact, when we looked at publicly available state assessment data from 2016–17, we saw that I-DEA outperformed the average virtual school student in Idaho by 19 percentage points in ELA and more than 20 in math, while its graduation rate was more than 40 points higher.

As a longtime charter school supporter and one of Idaho's primary charter school advocates, I have a responsibility to both call out what isn't working well for families and children, and to stand up and fight for what works in the charter school sector. My role is not to simply criticize, but to offer ideas and support for improvements. Bluum also accepts and believes that students in Idaho and across the country should have full-time virtual charter schools as an option so long as students are well served. Hence, as I reflected on various data from Idaho, I could not help but wonder what makes I-DEA different, and

what we might be able to learn from it and other high-flying virtual charters.

This is why Bluum engaged the expert research team at Public Impact to scan the virtual charter school landscape across the country and find successful virtual schools from which they could provide both recommendations for improving virtual school practices and the public policy around them.

The rest of this document is the work Public Impact produced. We are proud to have partnered with them on this important project. Public Impact is a premier education policy research shop co-founded by Bryan C. and Emily Asycue Hassel. Their team has conducted research across multiple states on charter school policy, authorizing practices, and other supports to improve the public charter school sector nationally. They've also worked with leaders of urban school districts to strengthen their principal and teacher pipelines. Veteran and talented researchers Daniela Doyle and Ismael Hernandez-Cruz led the work on this project, and their efforts, grit, and expertise are greatly appreciated.

Terry Ryan is the CEO of the Boise-based education nonprofit Bluum. Bluum is committed to ensuring Idaho's children reach their fullest potential by cultivating great leaders and growing high-performing public charter schools.

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INTRODUCTION

When the first virtual school began more than 20 years ago, it offered an incredible promise: Suddenly, students could get access to a great education and a diversity of courses regardless of place or time. They could have flexibility to "attend" school around medical appointments, sports practices, or whatever else life threw at them. And outside of schoolhouse walls, students could have a more personalized learning experience, pursuing their interests and speeding up or slowing down as needed.

According to the data, however, virtual schools have largely fallen short of this promise. In 2015, for example, Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) conducted a study of 200 online charter schools. It found that, on average, the students enrolled at those schools *lost* 180 days of learning in math and 72 days of learning in reading compared to similar students in traditional brick-and-mortar schools.[2] In other words, over the course of an academic year, online charter students effectively made no progress in math, and just slightly more than half as much progress in reading as their peers in traditional settings.

At the same time, several online charters have been involved in high-profile scandals. In one of the most recent examples, an online

charter school in Ohio "enrolling" more than 10,000 students closed suddenly when it became clear the state had paid the school $80 million in tuition for students who never logged in.[3]

Not surprisingly, states across the country have been taking action. In May 2019, Indiana's governor signed a bill requiring virtual schools to complete an orientation session with a newly enrolled student's guardian, and to un-enroll students who fail to log into classes for too long.[4] Meanwhile, New Mexico and Georgia charter authorizers have taken steps to close virtual schools as a result of low academic performance.[5]

Given all this, it may seem time to give up on the virtual school experiment. But after more than two decades, we have developed a strong sense of the challenges that virtual operators face, as well as strategies to address those challenges. Moreover, a handful of online schools are demonstrating that success is possible. This report draws on the experience of two virtual charter schools that are making online schooling work for their students—Idaho Distance Education Academy and New Hampshire's Virtual Learning Academy Charter School. Through their examples, this report highlights lessons learned for other online operators and policymakers who are eager to make virtual school success the rule, rather than the exception.

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PHOTO BY STEPHEN LEONARDI ON UNSPLASH

VIRTUAL LEARNING ACADEMY CHARTER SCHOOL (VLACS)

When Steve Kossakoski was assistant superintendent of New Hampshire's Exeter School District, he helped start a successful brick-and-mortar charter school. The school's success led the district's superintendent to consider ways to reach even more students, and he approached Kossakoski to see what he thought about developing an online school. In January 2008, Virtual Learning Academy Charter School—better known as VLACS—went live.

Fast-forward 10 years, and VLACS serves nearly 400 full-time middle and high school students and more than 13,000 part-time students from across the Granite State. The school also enrolls about 100 tuition-paying students from outside of New Hampshire each year.

VLACS students can enroll at any time and have the opportunity to choose from a variety of learning "journeys," including courses, projects, career badges, experiences, teams, and an early-college option.[6] Rather than earning credits, VLACS students focus on mastering competencies. And although students work with advisors to set an appropriate learning pace to master the competencies needed to "fill their backpack," students can accelerate or slow down along the way. The school also requires that students perform 10 hours of community

service and shadow someone on the job three times each year to help prepare them for college and future careers.

In 2018, state data show that VLACS enrolled low-income students and students of color in its full-time program at lower rates than the state overall, so it is not possible to make an apples-to-apples comparison of their performance. School-wide data are encouraging, though: In 2017–18, VLACS's full-time students outperformed the state by 5 percentage points in math (53 percent versus 48 percent) and by more than 15 points in English language arts (74 percent versus 58 percent).[7] In addition, VLACS won the New Hampshire Excellence in Education Special Recognition Award for Pioneering Innovative Educational Pathways in 2016.[8]

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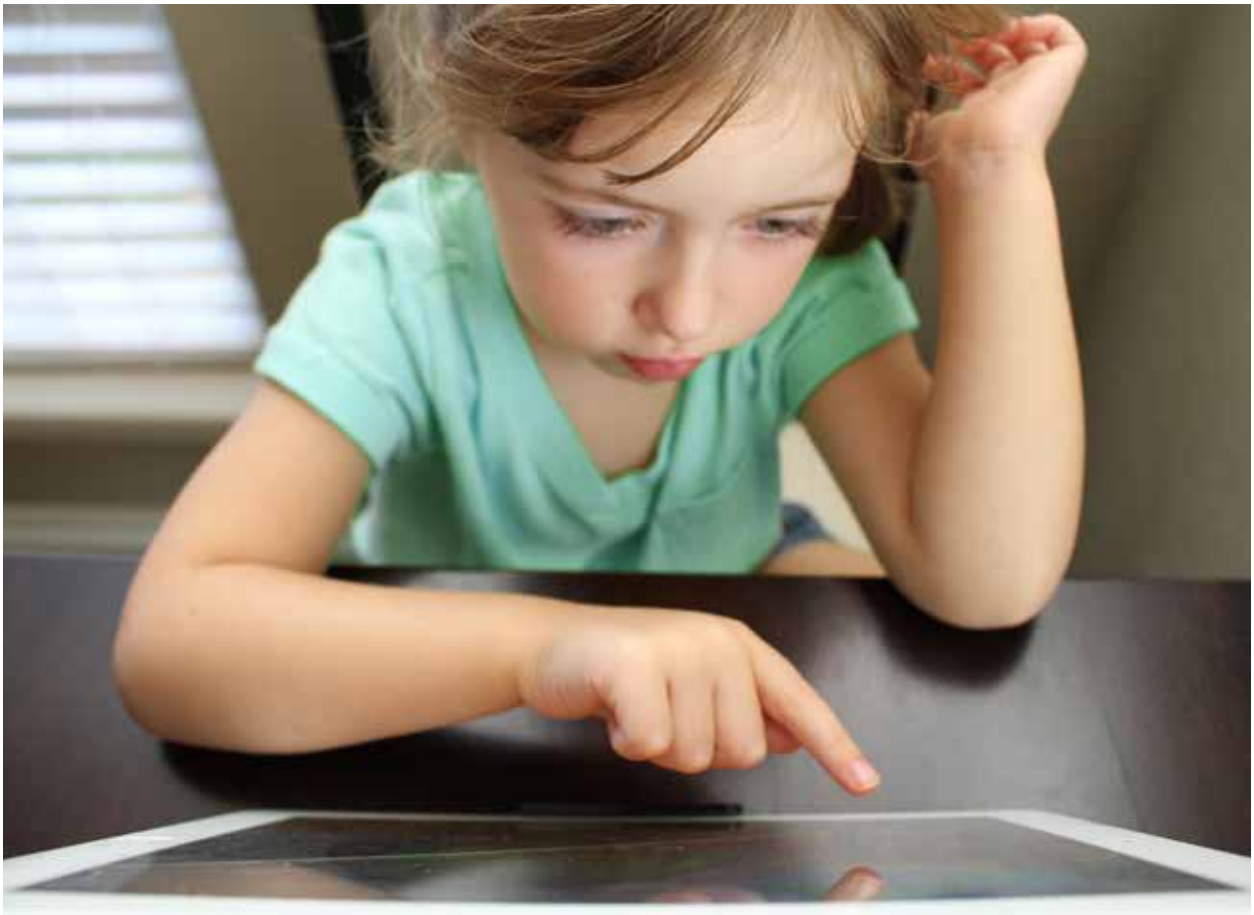

PHOTO BY HAL GATEWOOD ON UNSPLASH

IDAHO DISTANCE EDUCATION ACADEMY

Idaho Distance Education Academy (I-DEA) opened in 2004 in response to homeschooling families searching for educational resources. For years, the rural Whitepine School District had been providing materials to homeschoolers for free, without the benefit of state funding. Authorizing a new online charter school offered a way to deliver high-quality materials to homeschooling families with public funding.

In I-DEA's early years, however, it struggled to balance its origin as a resource provider with its responsibility as an academic institution, and student progress lagged. In 2007, the school began to reset. Its leaders adopted a standardized curriculum, implemented a learning management system, and worked with teachers to raise expectations for student learning.

Today, I-DEA enrolls about 700 full-time students in grades K–12.[9] It offers considerable flexibility as an online school, but does require that students participate in live online classes at set times twice a week. They also follow a calendar, with classes starting and ending at set times during the year. In addition, I-DEA offers students access to college-level courses, and on average, 20 percent of students graduate from high school with a two-year college degree.[10]

Though I-DEA tends to enroll lower rates of students of color than the state overall, it enrolls a similar rate of low-income students.[11] Nonetheless, I-DEA's students consistently outperform their peers statewide in reading and math proficiency, and rank among Idaho's top 10 school districts for SAT performance.[12] I-DEA's graduation rate was 89.2 percent in 2018, nearly 10 points above the state average, and more than 22 points above any other virtual school in Idaho.[13] In addition, I-DEA students outperformed the state average on the 2018 SAT,[14] and the school sent more of its graduating seniors to college than the state overall (56 percent versus 45 percent).[15]

I-DEA's students consistently outperform their peers statewide in reading and math proficiency, and rank among Idaho's top 10 school districts for SAT performance.

LESSON 1

STRONG TEACHING (STILL) DRIVES STUDENT SUCCESS

The schools we studied made clear that a cutting-edge computer program does not replace an excellent teacher. "My belief is that skilled and caring teachers are equally important in virtual or face-to-face settings. It is not about the technology," said VLACS founder Steve Kossakoski. In fact, both I-DEA and VLACS take painstaking measures to select teachers with a track record of success, train them for an online platform, and set high expectations for student learning.

To illustrate how important great teachers are in an online setting, consider how seriously I-DEA takes its teacher selection process. It includes four phases aimed at both filtering out teachers looking for an easier job they can perform at home, and ensuring that applicants understand what great teaching looks like. As part of the hiring process, applicants must provide evidence of measurable success in the classroom; I-DEA does not hire new teachers because its leaders believe teachers must know what effective teaching looks like in a traditional setting before they can transfer those skills to a virtual one. Applicants must also review student data and propose a plan to support students based on those data. In addition, they're asked to model a lesson, and provide video and written responses to sample problems to demonstrate how they communicate in different mediums.

VLACS does much the same to select new teachers, though because students can begin a new course whenever they want, the school has been able to take additional steps to ensure that new teachers are ready to support high student achievement from day one. Teacher onboarding lasts nearly four months at VLACS. First, teachers participate in various trainings, both online and in person. When those are complete, the school assigns four or five students to the teacher. As teachers demonstrate their ability to meet standards and support student success, they slowly receive more students, with the goal of reaching a full caseload at the end of 16 weeks. All the while, a mentor teacher provides ongoing support, including weekly online meetings for the first half of their onboarding, and every other week for the second half. During these meetings, mentors provide information, examples, suggestions, and resources, in addition to fostering a supportive environment where teachers feel comfortable asking for help to solve challenges.

WHAT IS VIRTUAL SCHOOL "SUCCESS"?

This report aims to identify the practices of successful virtual schools. Admittedly, school success can be difficult to define. Policymakers have often focused on student achievement, including proficiency, SAT scores, and graduation rates.

Some schools, however, enroll higher percentages of students who arrive already performing below grade level (sometimes several years below) or lacking credits. At those schools, student growth can be just as indicative of success. Relatively few states, however, calculate growth scores that capture where students are starting from, especially high schoolers.

At online schools untethered from a traditional school calendar, time-based calculations like the four-year graduation rate also become less meaningful. And arguably, current approaches to calculating educational impact fail to adequately account for the unique attributes of online students, including higher-than-average mobility rates.

To expand our definition of success, and to identify additional virtual schools we might profile, we contacted a handful of online operators, but those conversations mostly yielded additional considerations, rather than concrete examples. We posed the same questions to several virtual school experts and researchers, but they, too, struggled to define virtual school success or were not at liberty to share their data.

In the end, we recognize that virtual school success—just like success in brick-and-mortar schools—may take different forms. We also recognize that VLACS and I-DEA perform well on perhaps the most traditional metric of success—student achievement in ELA and math.

More and better data are clearly necessary, and we welcome other evidence-based examples of outstanding online charter schools to add to this research. At the same time, we must acknowledge that the data that *are* available on virtual schools in general are disheartening. Every charter school has an obligation to provide not just a safe learning environment or to offer families greater choice, but also offer excellent instruction that supports student learning no matter who a child is, from where or why they come, or for how long they stay. And if the school does not, it is important to question its approach and capacity to serve *all* the students who enroll.

PHOTO BY VLADIMIR MALYUTIN ON UNSPLASH

Virtual school success—just like success in brick-and-mortar schools—may take different forms.

PHOTO BY FRANK MCKENNA ON UNSPLASH

LESSON 2

PERSONAL CONNECTIONS ARE KEY

It may seem that virtual schooling inevitably compromises personal connections since students and teachers do not share a physical space. To the contrary, the virtual schools we studied recognize how important those connections are and build in frequent and intentional opportunities for students to interact with caring and supportive adults.

Relationships are central to the way VLACS was designed. Each full-time student has an advisor who works with students on non-cognitive skills and serves as the student's and family's primary contact throughout their time at VLACS. Advisors connect with students about once a week and speak with both the student and a parent at least once a month via video. Advisors also provide families with monthly progress reports and work with students to develop a future plan, whether focused on classes for the following year, college, or a career.

As a testament to the personal connections VLACS students form with their advisors, Kossakoski shared a now-common occurrence at the school's graduation ceremony, which takes place in person each year. "Students will often come up to me and ask if the woman

standing on the other side of the room is their advisor. When I say 'yes,' I have often watched them approach one another and embrace, even though it's the first time they've met in person."

At I-DEA, teachers also play an advisory role, and are expected to form a relationship with the entire family. "We can't do anything else that we're doing without that foundational connection," school leader Jason Bransford said. I-DEA also offers families several different ways to connect with staff. They can call, email, text, or participate in a virtual meeting.

In addition, I-DEA staff all work from one of the school's three brick-and-mortar resource centers, which improves staff accountability and fosters connections that facilitate collaboration and support. Students and families may meet with staff in person at one of the resource centers if they want in-person interactions.

PHOTO BY MARKUS SPISKE ON UNSPLASH

PHOTO BY MARKUS SPISKE ON UNSPLASH

LESSON 3

STUDENT LEARNING MUST BE THE CENTER OF SCHOOL DESIGN

Online education is often considered a tool to unleash personalized learning—schooling tailored to student's strengths, needs, and interests, and providing flexibility and choice in learning.[16] Both VLACS and I-DEA have incorporated elements of personalized learning by designing their programs around what students need to succeed.

In many ways, VLACS epitomizes personalized learning. Students can start a new class whenever they want. They can speed up their pace in a course, or slow it down if they're struggling. Students can also pursue different "learning journeys," which include scripted courses as well as projects and experiences they design with teachers. Similarly, students can demonstrate mastery through a variety of methods, including a test or paper, completing a project, or participating in a 30-minute discussion-based assessment with a teacher. "Students are in charge of when, where, and what they learn based on needs, resources, and talent," Kossakoski said.

Though I-DEA's model offers less flexibility, students are still very much at the center. In addition to nurturing personal connections, I-DEA has pushed its teachers to make sure students are actively engaged in lessons. I-DEA leaders expect that teachers will do just 20 percent of the talking during live classes, leaving students to do the remaining 80 percent. Similarly, leaders have set a standard that every fourth slide in an instructional slide deck will include an engaging student activity. In addition, I-DEA expects students who enter the school lacking credits or particular skills to take additional courses to catch up and reach graduation on time; students who want a more challenging curriculum can take college-level courses.

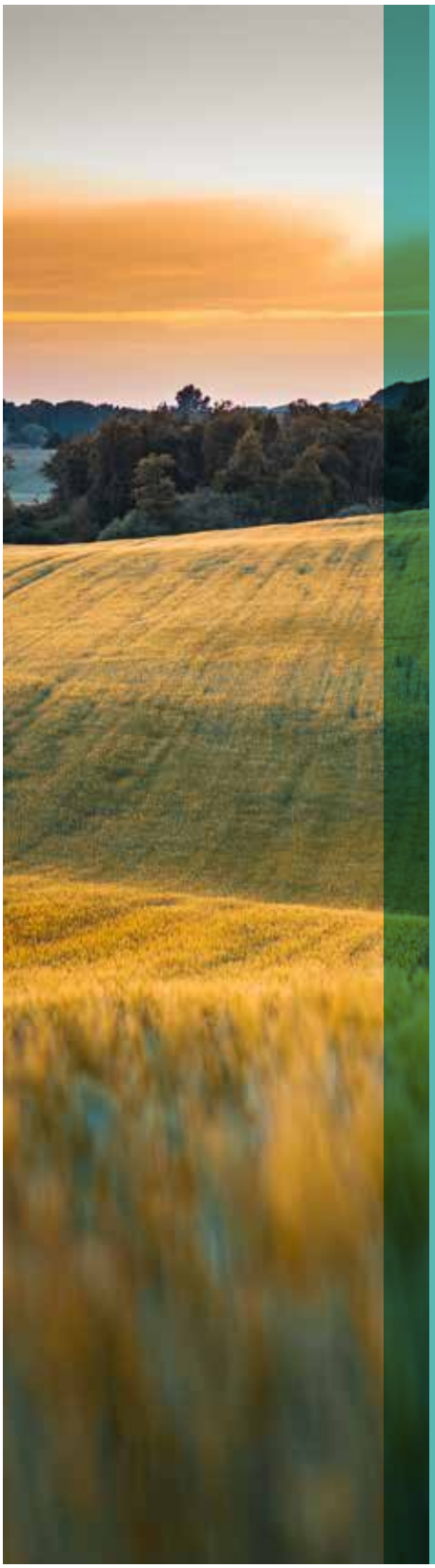

PHOTO BY ANDREAS DRESS ON UNSPLASH

STATE POLICIES THAT ALLOW VLACS TO PERSONALIZE LEARNING

Personalized learning is embedded throughout the VLACS model. But being an online school is not enough to create the flexibilities and variety of experiences VLACS offers. Two state policies are key:

Competency-based education. New Hampshire began piloting competency-based education in 1997, an approach to learning that focuses on student mastery of a particular skill or concept. In contrast to traditional methods, which tend to emphasize educational inputs like seat time and course completion, competency-based education focuses squarely on the output (what students learn) and provides greater flexibility around how students can learn and demonstrate understanding. Rather than completing an Algebra 1 course, for example, students might be held accountable for mastering exponential functions, inequalities, linear functions, and other key competencies.[17]

In 2005, the New Hampshire State Department of Education adopted rule changes requiring all high schools—online and brick-and-mortar—to provide competency-based education.[18] In effect, this shift untethered VLACS from rules limiting when and how students could learn, allowing school leaders to personalize the academic experience for each student.[19] Rather than simply completing courses, VLACS students fill their "competency backpack" each year.

Completion-based pay. Historically, New Hampshire—like most states—funded schools based on attendance. Once the state untied academic achievement from seat-time requirements, however, it also needed a new way to fund online schools. Kossakoski's solution was to work with the state to develop a system for converting competencies mastered into credits, with the school receiving funding based on the number of credits (or partial credits) that students earned.

In New Hampshire, charter schools receive about $933 per student credit earned, with an expectation that the average student will earn six credits per academic year.[20] If a student masters only half of the competencies for a particular credit, the school receives half that amount (about $467).

Some have expressed concern that completion-based pay could lead school operators to discourage struggling students from enrolling since it may take them longer to demonstrate mastery and earn credits. Kossakoski insists, however, that that has not happened at VLACS. And in fact, Kossakoski has found that many students fall into both camps, needing more time to master some competencies and flying through others. "There's no part of what we do that ends up saying to the kid, 'you must do this because our funding is on the line,' and instead of just worrying about learning, they're worried about their school or worried about their teacher losing their job," he said. "I don't think that is the type of pressure I'd ever want to put on a student. It just wouldn't be right."[21]

PHOTO BY ANDREAS DRESS ON UNSPLASH

Competency-based education provides greater flexibility around how students can learn and demonstrate understanding.

PHOTO BY ALEXIS BROWN ON UNSPLASH

PHOTO BY BLAKE BARLOW ON UNSPLASH

LESSON 4

SCHOOLS SET HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

Both I-DEA and VLACS are open-enrollment charter schools, meaning that students come to them at all different academic levels. Both schools make clear, however, that they are not places to hide out, or earn an easy A. They are also not credit-recovery programs. Even before students complete the enrollment process, school staff make clear to students and families what it takes to succeed at their schools. Ultimately, both schools believe in setting and communicating high expectations, even if doing so leads some families to go elsewhere.

From families' first interactions with I-DEA, it emphasizes its commitment to high student performance and the need for family support. Staff members aim to talk to every family before they finish the enrollment process. During those conversations, they share what the typical school day looks like and set expectations for student and parent involvement. They also emphasize the expectation that students graduate on time. If students enter behind, then I-DEA will work with them to develop a plan to catch up, including taking summer and other additional classes if need be. Moreover, I-DEA is comfortable enrolling fewer students if doing so means those enrolled are positioned to succeed in a demanding virtual school environment.

Meanwhile, at VLACS, many families have found the academic standards to be higher than in neighborhood schools. Originally, a C was a passing grade at VLACS, but school leaders found that did not correlate with college readiness. The school now requires students to earn an 85 percent or higher to move on to a new competency. Teachers were initially concerned that the school would lose students by raising the bar, which would in turn reduce school funding. Since classes are not time-bound at VLACS, however, students who need more time to meet the higher standard can have it. So, although some students have taken longer to master some competencies, very few students have left the school.

Families may not always realize what they are getting themselves into when enrolling in an online school. That's one reason why VLACS students participate in a 28-day trial period. If after 28 days, students do not respond to repeated communication or submit work on a regular basis, the teacher may drop the student in accordance with the school's truancy policy.[22] VLACS does not allow teachers to drop students simply because they are struggling, however, and students may later re-enroll.

NOT JUST A CHARTER THING: VIRTUAL SUCCESS IN STATE-RUN PROGRAM FOLLOWS SAME FORMULA

PHOTO BY NICOLE HONEYWILL ON UNSPLASH

Florida Virtual School (FLVS) is a public statewide virtual district that operates six online schools in Florida.[23] Since it opened in 1997, FLVS has grown to serve nearly 6,500 full-time students and more than 200,000 part-time students each year.[24] Like I-DEA and VLACS, FLVS students often perform as well as, or better, than their peers statewide in terms of proficiency on the state exam and scores on college courses.[25]

FLVS's design also demonstrates many of the same core elements supporting student success as I-DEA and VLACS.

Emphasis on teaching

When FLVS began, its leaders set incredibly high expectations for teachers. Reviewers went into courses and reviewed gradebooks and parent communications. Student data were analyzed, and teachers had to account for students who were ahead and those who were behind. Teachers were also expected to respond promptly to students, and this practice still holds true today. While its hiring and oversight have evolved over time, high-quality teaching with certified instructors remains one of the district's highest priorities.

Personal connections

FLVS pairs digital learning with individualized attention. FLVS leadership believed from the beginning that technology, though critical to online learning, takes a backseat to positive human interactions. Teachers have been trained to get to know their students as people first, including their habits, passions, and hobbies. Teachers are available to students Monday through Friday, between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. and are reachable via phone, email, and text. During interactive live video lessons, students receive direct instruction, collaborate with classmates, and participate in activities. In addition, FLVS offers field trips and meet ups where students have the opportunity to meet their teachers face to face.

Student-centered approach

Like VLACS, the state pays FLVS based on course completion rather than seat time. Hence, the school gives its students the time they need to master a particular piece of content, working one to one with instructors, prior to moving on to the next lesson.[26] In addition, FLVS invites students to provide feedback on courses to better understand how they learn, and to give feedback on the school's platform.[27]

FLVS leadership believed from the beginning that technology, though critical to online learning, takes a backseat to positive human interactions.

PHOTO BY JORDAN WHITT ON UNSPLASH

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR VIRTUAL OPERATORS

The lessons above, as well as conversations with leaders from VLACS and I-DEA, point to four recommendations for virtual school operators:

1. Be sure to incorporate the same elements that drive student success in brick-and-mortar schools. One of the most striking aspects of the lessons highlighted above is how universal they are. Ultimately, great schools share many of the same characteristics regardless of platform. Kossakoski relied on elements from his original, successful school to create VLACS, and Bransford opened three brick-and-mortar charter schools drawing on lessons learned from I-DEA. (All four Idaho charters are now part of a single charter school network).

Virtual operators would be well served to focus on similarities with successful brick-and-mortar schools rather than emphasizing how they are different. For example, if a student caseload of 600 students is too large in a physical school, it probably is too large for one that's online. The learning goes both ways: Virtual schools can show others how to push the limits of when, what, and how students can learn.

2. Identify and adjust to what is truly different about online schooling. Of course, operators must address the indisputable differences between the two types of schools. The most obvious examples are teaching and communicating virtually. How can educators translate successful in-person lessons to an online setting? How can they keep students engaged when they are not in the same room? And what is the best way to communicate if not face-to-face? By identifying questions like these, both VLACS and I-DEA have been able to hone in on the additional content and development their teachers need and tailor excellent teaching for an online platform.

3. Use the unique opportunities online schooling offers. Perhaps the greatest benefit of online schooling is that it does not have to battle decades-long expectations about what education should look like. So, while brick-and-mortar schools can adapt and evolve, the path is clearer for online schools. "We've lost sight that kids learn in different ways and at different paces," Kossakoski said. "We've tried to shape students by saying, 'you have to start on this day and master the content by this date or you're a failure,' but life before and after school doesn't work that way." Online operators should strive to take advantage of the opening their platform offers by truly serving students differently and in ways that meet them where they are.

4. Innovate, don't just automate. Technology provides incredible opportunities to innovate, but it can also lead to inappropriate automation. While operators of all kinds ought to consider ways to deliver high-quality instruction most efficiently, automation of some aspects of schooling can fly in the face of the strong relationships and tailored instruction students need to succeed. Online operators should maintain a healthy skepticism of new opportunities to automate, focusing instead on using technology in new ways that better meet the needs of all students.

Ultimately, great schools share many of the same characteristics regardless of platform.

PHOTO BY MARKUS SPISKE ON UNSPLASH

A LESSON FOR POLICYMAKERS: PROVIDE SPACE FOR ONLINE OPERATORS TO TEACH DIFFERENTLY

To take full advantage of the opportunities online schools offer, those schools must have flexibility to operate differently—not just through a different platform. Often, that flexibility comes through law and policy. Policymakers who want to support online schools should consider legislation that:

- Unlinks credits from seat time;
- Allows schools to award credit based on demonstrated mastery (such as a competency-based credit system);
- Frees schools to use different kinds of assessments;
- Separates funding from seat time;
- Allows schools to require minimum levels of student and parent engagement, especially at enrollment and at set periods in the year.

Of course, policymakers must also be sure to maintain high expectations for student learning and respond in cases of chronic low-performance.

PHOTO BY SANTI VEDRÍ ON UNSPLASH

CONCLUSION

Much of the discussion of virtual charter schools tends to focus on their scandals or poor academic outcomes. And there is clearly ample evidence of both. Accordingly, policymakers have largely focused their energy on how best to regulate the sector as a way to protect students and taxpayers.

That work is certainly justified, and it is important. But so too is learning from the online operators who are getting it right. This report demonstrates that virtual success is absolutely possible. It also shows that much of what makes a brick-and-mortar school great also holds true in a virtual setting, while what sets them apart provides opportunities for online schools to not only reach more students, but also provide them and their families with a more flexible and personalized academic experience.

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27. At the time of this writing, FLVS was undergoing a notable leadership challenge. However, we chose to include the school in this report because the underlying structures upon which it was built are consistent with the lessons learned from VLACS and I-DEA and because indicators of student performance have been strong.

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