

Virtual Learning: Embracing True Education Reform



While touring local schools recently, I discovered that they continue to resemble those attended by the parents and grandparents of today's students. It is as though much of the hoopla about school reform during the past 30 years was nothing more than noise—especially with regard to technology.

Communication, commerce, and social patterns have changed dramatically during the past 25 years, and technology has played a major role in these transformations. In an article in *Atlantic Monthly* entitled “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” author Nicholas Carr (2008) contends that virtual communication changes not only how individuals interact but also how they think and how organizations function.

Yet, one product of technology that schools have not embraced is virtual learning. For technology to play a substantive role in education, an alternative K–12 model must be established that is based on the following:

- An approach to teaching that acknowledges the various types of student learning styles,

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- An individualized curriculum for each student,
- A response to families' demands for market choices, and
- An alternative funding model linked to the student rather than to the school or school district; money would follow the student.

Wanting to change is insufficient to generate an alternative to traditional education. To bring about a new K–12 education model, school reformers must understand how to transform organizations. Only then will an alternative model emerge that leverages virtual learning. This new approach to schooling will change instruction, governance, school leadership, and school funding.

Technology vs. Tradition

The No Child Left Behind Act compelled states to establish education standards against which to judge the success of their schools. Under NCLB, the success of schools is linked to the achievement of each subgroup of students. Thus, schools are designed for standardization, characterized by a common, interdependent curriculum. Staff development, teacher-training programs, and classroom organization assume that the students should share a common experience. Students and staff are expected to conform to the expectations of the district.

The traditional K–12 environment minimizes the effect of technology on the educational process. Rather than being a major platform for delivering education, technology instead sustains teachers' efforts, reinforcing traditional teaching practices. Students use computers, which are located in labs or in the back of classrooms, for research or reinforcement.

With the exception of a few virtual schools, technology is not changing how schools function. Technology is simply the newest “fad,” enhancing the traditional approach to K–12 schooling.

The Changed World

Today's schools function within an education marketplace where the customer—the family—seeks the best fit between the school and the student. Families want choices with regard to the learning opportunities for their children. Parents increasingly expect K–12 schools to customize the education of their children because they are dissatisfied with the notion that one size fits all. Parents and students expect a wide range of curricular offerings that include core subjects, fine arts, advanced placement courses, and unconventional classes.

As Howard Gardner (1993) stressed in his book *Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons in Theory and Practice*, students learn in different ways. One response to this knowledge about how kids learn, combined with the pressure to customize education, is a student-centered model of schooling. In their book *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way*

the World Learns, Clayton Christensen, Curtis Johnson, and Michael Horn (2008) use the term “student-centric” to describe this approach to education.

Two other factors support the move to this alternative model of virtual schooling:

- Students are savvy with computers and with technology in general, and are comfortable learning that way. They will respond to a school model that incorporates virtual learning.
- The high costs of traditional schooling are setting the stage for a new funding model that is consistent with this alternative approach to K–12 education. As school business officials know, the need to provide money to achieve the standards and to cover capital costs is draining school budgets. The demand for funds to keep the status quo alive is stretching already-thin school budgets.

An alternative, streamlined funding model is necessary. Such a funding model would have the money follow students, an arrangement that is aligned with a student-centric approach. In this case, the usual funding mechanism that channels money to centralized bureaucracies will end.

All these factors—the economics, the knowledge of how students learn, the demand for customization of schooling, and the technology adeptness of students—call for a change in how schools operate.

An Alternative View

The characteristics of an alternative K–12 model that responds to these issues should include the following:

- Each student has an individual learning program crafted according to his or her learning style. Decisions regarding the learning process are student-driven, not school-driven.
- Students enroll in courses with the option of completing their online coursework at home or at an alternate setting.
- Students are offered myriad courses. Some come from the local school system, whereas others originate from outside the district, such as universities. Northwestern University, for example, offers online classes for students in grades 3–12.
- Students have individualized courses of study and are expected to master the basic skills but not necessarily within the traditional core areas of study. For example, a student may develop basic skills through the study of fine arts.
- Teachers manage student portfolios, overseeing the work of students in various courses offered by various institutions.
- Teacher training emphasizes knowledge of course matter rather than classroom instruction skills.
- The notion of the school day changes, as the online offerings are not restricted to the workday.

- Teacher contracts hold them accountable for establishing learning environments that respond to the students' needs rather than to the work rules.
- Funding is attached to the student, not to the district or the educational bureaucracy.

Embracing these changes with this alternative model for K–12 education will require embedding technology in the schooling process. The need to build and maintain facilities will decrease, as will the average per-pupil costs.

The Change Process

The lack of true reform in our schools is due in part to a misunderstanding about how organizational reform takes place. Most reform efforts ask for in-house change, calling on organizations to alter their method of doing business, to change fundamentally how they function. This is unrealistic. Organizations sustain themselves, so changes introduced into existing organizations simply reinforce the existing environment. The introduction of computers into schools is an example of such marginal change.

With an understanding of how to reform the K–12 traditional model, school business officials and other education leaders can create an alternative K–12 system that is responsive to a new learning paradigm and to the

new expectations for schooling options. An alternative funding model that has the money follow the students will facilitate this change.

Technology will promote this new understanding of K–12 education, which will bring about 21st-century schools that are responsive to a changed education marketplace, to a virtual learning-savvy population of students, and to the demands for individualized education. It will be an exciting experience.

References

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