Virtual School Consultant Project

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Introduction

Montgomery County, Maryland is home to approximately 1 million citizens. It is home to several government agencies and multinational corporations including the National Institutes of Health and Marriott Corporate Headquarters. Despite being in a suburb of DC, K-12 students do not have access to public online education. This paper provides an overview and recommendations for a successful virtual school for this district, including factors that must be considered and addressed.

Summary of Virtual School Status in the United States

Waters (2011) explains that K-12 school districts face the same disruptive technological changes that have rocked newspapers, and districts face increasing competition for online learners and know that they must offer an online program in order to stay relevant. Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, and Rapp (2012) explain that more students are taking online and blended courses than ever before and blended programs in districts continue to grow at the fastest pace. They estimate that approximately two-thirds of districts are offering some online or blended program, and the large majority have relatively few students and rely on external courses providers. They go on to point out additional current trends in K-12 online education:

- New laws and policies are being created and implemented at a rapid pace.
- Provisions to allow students to choose online courses from multiple providers are being implemented in about a half-dozen states, significantly expanding choices for each student beyond local physical schools.
- Established blended school providers are moving into new states and experienced providers of fully online schools are opening new blended schools.
- The spread of the Common Core State Standards is helping private online course

providers have greater involvement.

- 25% of all school districts are currently not offering significant online or blended courses. These districts have neither significant state virtual school nor online state charter school that draws students from districts—Maryland is one such state.

Current Status of Online Education in Montgomery County

Montgomery County's online course offering are currently minimal. The county allows a health course, a technology course, and AP courses for high school students—all courses require payment from students and their families with costs ranging from $600 to $900 for full credit course. Students in Montgomery County do not have access to public virtual school that can meet all of their course needs (Montgomery County Public Schools, 2013). Prince George's County in Maryland is ahead of Montgomery in online course offerings and vision. They have partnered with Connections Learning to provide a hybrid learning program called ACCESS to provide credit recovery to county students. Students take their course online with an online teacher. They perform their studies from home, while also coming into the school and working in a learning lab supported by a face-to-face teacher (Connections Learning, 2013).

Self-Blend Model

Online students in Maryland must be physically present on school premises (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2012). A fully online virtual school would be unlawful in a Maryland district while a self-blend model is feasible as the students would be present on school premises, at least some of the time. Many school districts in the US use the self-blend model successfully to provide supplemental online courses to all district students for credit recovery, dual enrollment, core, and electives. The self-blend model describes a scenario in which students take one or more courses entirely online to supplement their traditional courses, and the teacher-

of-record is the online teacher (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2012). Students may

perform online instruction and learning at home, and in-school time with a learning coach is used

for live personal discussion to fine-tune projects and seek out additional assistance and support

(Staker & Horn, 2012; Campbell, 2012).

Student Population

Watson and Gemin (2008) explain that one-third of all public high school students and

half of minority high school students fail to graduate from public high school with their class

(2008). Dropouts are more than twice as likely to slip into poverty, and more than eight times as

likely as high school graduates to be in jail or prison. Online learning is proving to be a

transformational tool in reaching at-risk students to prevent dropping out, or to bring dropouts

back to complete high school (2008). A main goal of the Montgomery County district virtual

school is to address the needs of this population but also increase learning opportunities and

options for all students including gifted students; students looking for schedule flexibility due to

family or time commitments; students with physical constraints; and students with safety and

social issues that make online participation and learning more advantageous, such as being

bullied for being different or being overlooked by overworked teachers in a traditional school

(Brown, 2009; Lynott, 2011).

Curriculum

Districts should focus on what they do best and not be afraid to turn to private, for-profit

providers to provide courses that snap into existing public schools in the district to provide the

best of both worlds (Waters, 2011). Watson and Gemin (2009a) explain that outside private

vendors have development teams including writers, instructional designers, multimedia

developers, etc. that often exceed expertise within a virtual school program; the wide variety of

courses is difficult to produce in-house; the district may lack staffing, funding, and expertise to effectively develop and update high production value content; private providers have the ability to realize economies of scale while incorporating user testing and other feedback to regularly update and provide the best courses and trained teachers for reasonable cost. Some providers, Connections Learning for example, partner with universities and tap into higher education expertise in elearning for the best teacher training and curriculum development and evaluation (2009a).

Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, and Rapp (2012) explain that new providers of online courses are constantly entering the field, and existing companies are merging or moving into new areas. They advise surveying the field at least twice a year to know whether new or better options are available. It is ideal to publish a request for proposals and then require real-world demonstrations from providers, going as far as thoroughly using and testing the courses and the learning management system for a number of days as both a teacher and student in order to assess which provider best meets the district's needs. It should be understood that "many private companies have demonstrated success with district clients" (2012, p. 32).

Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, and Rapp (2011) explain that while it is good that many districts are interested in creating virtual schools, many do not recognize the level of investment that is necessary and tend to underestimate the amount of time it takes. This results in inadequate exploration of the critical dimensions of a virtual school including teaching, technology, content, student support, and other elements. For a district that does not yet know whether in-house development will be cost-effective based on economies of scale, utilizing professional course providers is the better option due to lower cost and broader range of higher quality courses (Cavalluzzo, 2005).

Assessment and Continuous Improvement

Traditional metrics of attendance and grades are coarse compared with the information online learning provides from clickstreams, time spent watching videos, and records of student progress through various topics (Campbell, 2012). It is important that the district virtual school is able to access and utilize course metrics and data, even though the courses are provided by an outside provider—such utilization should be clarified with the private provider in advance (Black, Ferdig, & DiPietro, 2008). Content/curriculum, and technological assessments as well as measures of teacher support, student interaction, and student satisfaction are essential (2008). Ongoing evaluation of the district virtual school is important for its success, and continuous improvement is good preparation for enhanced future interaction with local and state government to publicize effective virtual learning (2008). Parents, mentors, site coordinators, and the virtual school administrator are good sources of survey data and should not be overlooked (2008). Upfront planning is critical, but it is also necessary to learn along the way, allow sufficient flexibility to make changes as needed, and remain adaptive in order for virtual schooling to be successful (Vineyard, 2013)

Student Support

Student support services are integral for student achievement in virtual school. Academic support including support for those with academic gaps or writing comprehension or reading issues, social support, parent support, and general health and well-being support are all necessary (Scurry, 2011). Technical support needs to be readily available so that students are not stuck with their work due to computer issues (Podoll & Randle, 2005). Although less likely in the year 2013, low-income students may nonetheless be at a disadvantage with reliable internet and computer access at home. The district virtual school should make evening and weekend hour labs available

in select school or community centers that are staffed with at least a tutor—no student should be

unable to study when they want or need to do so (2005).

Students may not get the most from their education, or become discouraged, or fall

behind due to procrastination, embarrassment, and lack of direct contact with their online teacher

or other students (Podoll & Randle, 2005). Although much of this may be mitigated by way of

the face-to-face teacher/coach in the blended district model, online teachers should nonetheless

enable each student to interact with other students and the teacher in order to get the most from

their education, and to contact each student by phone and email as needed to ensure the student is

on track and does not fall behind (2005). Communication is the key element of support: students

should never feel helpless and it should be made obvious to them where they can turn for help

whether it be with online teacher, school facilitator/learning coach, or other appropriate resource

(Watson & Gemin, 2009a).

Self-motivation, self-discipline, and time management are critical components of student

success in virtual school, and these qualities may take some time to build and should be

supported by online and face-to-face teachers (Podoll & Randle, 2005). Lines of communication

should also be open between the online and face-to-face teacher as needed to ensure optimal

student progress (Connections Learning, 2013). Student computer skills and technological know-

how, English language proficiency, and psychological factors important for online learning must

be measured and known so that additional help can be provided as necessary (Black, Ferdig, &

DiPietro, 2008).

Professional Development

Those that support students need support and professional development themselves. Site

facilitators are coaches and advocates for online students and can reduce dropout, therefore their

training is essential to virtual school success. School counselors should receive training about the role of online education and the role they can play in supporting students that are interested in online courses (Davis & Rose, 2007). These persons in the district may receive a tiered training program that begins with learning online themselves to see what it's like, participation in professional development, facilitating online courses and working with online students, and finally mentoring other facilitators and counselors (2007). While the private provider is responsible for the professional development of online teachers, the district should aggressively train its internal staff and face-to-face teachers so that they understand the challenges, benefits, and best practices of online learning. Teachers can't understand how students learn online unless they themselves have been trained online, therefore professional development should be online as much as possible (Podoll & Randle, 2005).

Funding

Watson et al. (2012) explain that in Maryland, school districts are authorized to establish a virtual public school subject to approval of the state's department of education. No funding was appropriated for this purpose, and a virtual school can't provide funds to students and their parents to purchase instructional programs. Per student cost is never higher in virtual school than in brick-and-mortar school (Bakia, Shear, Toyoma, & Lasseter, 2012). Efforts must be made to demonstrate to county government that the district virtual school makes economic sense and should be supported by county government in its budget. Grants from the federal government and from foundations like the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation should also be pursued to fund the school. Watson et al. (2012) explain that course-level and performance-based metrics may be used to fund courses based on demonstrated student success.

Policy

Online learning is growing rapidly: it has annual growth rates of up to 50% and by 2019 50% of high school classes will be online (Watson & Gemin, 2009b; Wicks, 2010). Maryland possesses the technological infrastructure and relevant state policies and practices to incorporate elearning into its K-12 schools: it has put into place all of the policies in the use of technology, and has earned an A from Education Week's Technology Counts assessment (Hightower, 2009). Unfortunately Maryland policies do not support public virtual schools (Watson et al., 2012). Fair and sensible funding is needed to allow online learning to expand with demand while maintaining quality. Existing policies that do not fit or that hinder the progress and accessibility of online learning must be updated. Legislators, at the county level and above, should create and amend education policy, focus on adequate funding, and otherwise allow for the option of a public virtual school for students (Watson & Gemin, 2009b)

Conclusion

It is clear that the modern workforce demands modern education, and many of the fixes to America's challenges begin with effective education for its young students. Montgomery County, Maryland can better serve its K-12 students by implementing a public district virtual school. This paper has provided a model for the public virtual school, as well as a series of recommendations that are necessary for its success.

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