



# Evaluating Virtual Schools: Lessons for Evaluators and Policymakers

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# Virtual Charter Schools Nationally

- Approximately 500,000 children take some K–12 classes online
- Approximately 90,000 children take entire curriculum online (185 schools)
  - Florida (< 50,000 part-time)
  - Wisconsin (800 full-time)
  - Idaho (< 3,600 full & part-time)

Source: New York Times, 2-1-08, with exception of Idaho data

# Issues for Policymakers and Evaluators

Virtual schools often differ from “brick and mortar”) schools (traditional and charter)

- Operation and oversight
- Curriculum development
- Instruction methods

# Operation and Oversight

- Definition
  - Virtual school vs. virtual program
  - Virtual school vs. charter school
- Requirements
  - Approval process
  - Laws and rules specific to charter schools
  - General education laws and rules
  - Reporting and accountability

# Curriculum Development

- Parents choosing curriculum
- Pre-packaged materials
- Teachers developing courses

# Method of Instruction

- Computers may not be the primary method of instruction
- Role of parents
  - Provide instruction and answer questions
  - Correct and grade assignments
  - Supervise work
- Meaning of student-teacher and parent-teacher contact in virtual environment

# OPE Report Highlights

- Virtual schools are recent to education in Idaho
- Approval process and oversight are not tailored to virtual school operations
- Current statutory definition is vague; no clear framework for virtual schools to operate within
- Wide variations exist in school operations
  - Curriculum development
  - Delivery of instruction
  - Required student-teacher contact

# OPE Recommendations

1. Clarify definition of virtual school to address areas of school operations and make a distinction between virtual schools and programs

Status: **Implemented**

2. Seek clarification about what rules apply to charter schools

Status: **In process**

# OPE Recommendations

3. Update the petition review checklists to reflect requirements specified in rule

Status: **Implemented**

4. Require petitioners to address the findings in the State Department of Education sufficiency review

Status: **Implemented**

5. Analyze the relationship between variations in operations and student outcomes

Status: **Not implemented**

# OPE Recommendations

6. Require all existing virtual schools to be approved by commission
7. Consider adding annual reporting requirements for virtual schools
8. Address whether any public school operating a virtual program be subject to oversight similar to virtual schools

Status: **Open for legislative action**

# Final Thoughts

- Virtual schools are emerging as an innovative flexible approach, providing opportunities for students who may not fit in a traditional classroom setting
- Variations in school operations may include differences in attendance requirements, required levels of student-teacher interaction, activities that count as course work, and student-to-teacher ratios

# Final Thoughts

## Statutes should

- Define virtual schools in clear, comprehensive language
- Outline operating requirements
- Provide mechanism for school approval and ongoing oversight
- Provide framework for virtual schools to maximize flexibility in operations