Virtual School Consultant Project

At Risk Students and Dropouts

Gloria L. Robbins

UMUC

Virtual School Consultant Project

Introduction

Maryland district schools have experienced declining dropout rates, according to an Annie Casey Foundation Study (2014), the past four years and as a result began to explore the implementation of virtual schools to supplement face-to-face learning and improve graduation rates. This paper was developed to provide suggestions of the most feasible way to create an alternative learning environment utilizing a virtual learning structure that offers supplemental programs for at risk students. The areas explored included models for virtual schools, mission, policy, structure, course infrastructure, curriculum, costs, funding options, administration, course development, and possible barriers.

Summary of Virtual Schools in the United States

In the United States virtual schooling has been the trend for adult learners over 100 years; however, today the next wave for virtual schooling is for students in K-12. The trend for the past decade was state-level, state-sanctioned virtual schools; however, since the 20th century the focus has shifted to virtual schools operated through partnerships or consortia-based entities. These include schools operated by universities, traditional schools and districts; virtual charter schools operated by state-chartered entities; and virtual schools operated by private school entities with the focus being supplemental programs in a blended learning environment that happens in conjunction with face-to-face learning. According to the September 2011 Issue Brief on Virtual Charter Schools' blended learning is the focal point of innovation and has experienced the most significant growth in the United States.

Possible Models

Maryland identifies several possible models of virtual schools and each will provide students with flexibility in time, space, and place for learning. At present, Maryland does not offer fully online learning, because program proposals available in Maryland Virtual School offer supplemental courses to high school students as an alternative to face-to-face learning. In addition, this is based on Maryland's virtual learning experience, which is a district, statewide learning environment; consequently, supplemental or full time programs are the most common schools in Maryland and provide the basis for this recommendation (Babour, n.d.).

Mission

Maryland Department of Education's statewide mission and policy standards for implementing virtual K-12 schools are to provide educational access to all students and graduate every student to be career and/or college-ready.

Policy

Starting a virtual program within a school district should follow the structure and guidelines in place unless mandated differently by the State implementing the school. This format is essential for regulating and ensuring that students are successful in the K-12 virtual classroom, in college, and in his/her career choice; to that end and based on the consortium model utilized in Maryland, partner entities will draw upon the policies and models of leading virtual schools (Russell, 2001). Policies are adopted from the existing schools because it ensures best practices are carried through as well as sound curriculum development and course design are implemented.

Model

Also as a newly formed district, state school, the suggestion is to operate as a consortium, regionally-based school. This is based on the popularity of virtual school consortia school models in the United States and because consortium schools are more versatile and can operate on a national, multi-state, state-level or regional levels acting as a broker for external provider opportunities or share courses among members (Clark, 2001). An example is the Massachusetts Virtual High School, a nonprofit school collaborative model virtual school functioning sustainability through its broad network of participating schools.

Implementation

The option for Maryland is to partner with nonprofit providers or for-profit curriculum providers most of which allow administrators either to buy a license that allows their own staff to teach or to barter with a consortium school for resources, such as course materials and specialty instructors. To that end, the implementation plan which is based on the mission of the Maryland Virtual School system is to provide interactive, media-rich, college preparatory, and educational opportunities for grades 6-12.

Course Structure

Maryland will implement a course/ learning management platform scaffold on technology offering a student-centered learning environment that is flexible. Students will also participate in synchronous and asynchronous classroom activities via, charts, discussion boards using interactive technology. It will also lease its course content, which is the funding model utilized by the Florida Virtual School, a successful virtual school operating over a decade; whereas, FLV create course content and lease to other virtual schools in exchange for specialty subject-matter instructors at a minimum cost. This concept brings in additional funding that is

used to offer students extra-curriculum programs or to acquire needed supports to assist struggling students. In addition, Connections Academy, which is based in Baltimore, is a provider of curriculum and course materials, but not explored because it only service K10 virtual public schools.

Course/curriculum development

In Maryland, statewide district school students must complete three required courses to graduate— government, modern world history, and United States history as well as the final high school assessment—each will be offered online as independent study with access to mentors, teaching assistants, and the support of parents in addition to the instructor as the facilitator.

To also assist at risk and dropouts is to provide credit recovery courses to allow full-time students to take courses to obtain credits they require to meet graduation requirements or to return to school in the virtual environment to complete requirements to obtain a high school diploma bearing the high school's name. This type program is utilized at Obridge Academy and has been an effective and proven way to help students earn middle or high school credits in courses they did not pass the first time around (Obridge, 2014). The courses are self-contained, independent study units, and are designed to supplement current learning.

Cost of online learning

The costs for virtual schools is said to be lower than traditional brick and mortar schools because virtual schools do not require overhead as walled facilities. However, to maintain costs the consortia model is best. Maryland will mimic the program operated at FLVS because the school is better prepared to write curriculum and will prove more advantageous to the first few years of operation as well as ensure academic success. Another example is Obridge Academy, a virtual school in Massachusetts that has a similar student base and also operate a successful

virtual school that partner its resources and share best practices, i.e., specialty teachers, course

shells, design and development options.

Administration

In addition to online counselors, online advisors, the virtual management team, course

designers, and admissions and registration staff, the following positions can be tapped from

current teachers and staff or utilized through the resources of the partner schools.

- Specialty Teachers with subject-matter expertise, or partner with third party/consortia vendors to provide content, which certainly solves start-up issues.

- Student and teacher online support provided by partnering with a third party or course content provider will certainly solve start-up issues; however, both students, teachers and administrators must be trained on infrastructure to ensure the highest level of excellence when it comes to interaction between the enrollee at a Web site-and

- Mentors/teaching assistants are crucial in K-12 virtual schools even more so than adult learners and especially critical for struggling and at risk students, and because they are the first line of contact for students it will free up instructors to facilitate and keep students on task. Mentors can advise students in time management or arrange additional interactive sessions with the online teacher.

- School Site Coordinator Provide site-based coordination, assist with some technology issues and provide course mentors, advising, and counseling services.

Course Infrastructure

The course infrastructure and development, 12%, is through private vendors or open

educational resource entities (Clark, 2001). Moodle, Chalkup, and Blackboard are the most

used course development platforms. It is also important to note that some LMS vendors may

require a yearly licensure, such as Blackboard. The most advantageous may be an open source

product such as Moodle or Sakai, which is free to use and easy to manage or services can be

acquired from a commercial vendor who will also maintain technology updates and

infrastructure maintenance.

Features needed in the LMS include,

❖ organize course content into units or chapters and lessons or
     individual content items

❖ discussion boards or forums for asynchronous discussions

❖ Assessment system to allow for online quizzes

❖ Online grade book

❖ email system

Possible Hurdles

Online learning, especially K-12, is still emerging and exploring various delivery

platforms and technology to ensure transparency, ease of use, and interactivity with content that

focus on learning (Russell, 2001); therefore, challenges are eminent.   Even though virtual

schools have been around for over a decade, K-12 Virtual Schools are not unlike the early

distance teaching programs of higher education. Both have and will encounter issues such as

students not being experienced or familiar with the teaching technology. To overcome and

eliminate possible student frustration and loss of interest, training must be provided continually

for both students, and online instructors, as well as counselors, mentors, and teaching assistants,

Another problem for new virtual schools is funding for start-up costs, hiring staff, course

development and design, and maintaining the course infrastructure. In addition, is the lack of

connectivity to the internet or no access to a computer or needed course hardware. Connectivity

has been dealt with at some schools, like the Pennsylvania Leadership Charter School by

providing all students with not only computers but also free internet access.

Funding Options

Funding is based on multiple types and models —fully-online or cyber, supplemental,

state, district— and although funding depends on the type of program offered, the school funding

laws in Maryland can be supplemented by forming partnerships or operating as a consortium

with established virtual schools or obtaining funding from outside agencies, or in the form of

grants and donations from state, federal, local, and private contributions.   It is also possible to

obtain state funds, which are available regardless of the type of online learning program, and

supplement other funding sources with grants, donations, and private contributions.   It is crucial

to have sufficient start-up funds for the long-term sustainability of the school/ program.

Technology

Current technology applications used to support the different models of online learning

include asynchronous communication tools such as, e-mail, and threaded discussion boards.

Synchronous technologies include, video conferencing, audio, webcasting, chat rooms, and

desktop audio/video technology which are used to approximate face-to-face teaching strategies

such as delivering lectures and holding meetings with groups of students (Means, Toyama,

Murphy, Bakia, M. & Jones, 2009).

In conclusion; "virtual schools have become the landscape of education in America"

(Patrick, 2010), and serve various special learner groups, such as credit recovery, at risk

students—physically or emotionally, and mostly, to expand access to high quality courses or

teachers using the Internet or other web-based technologies (Watson & Gemin, 2008).

Nonetheless, the purpose of virtual K-12 schools is not to compete with traditional face-to-face

schools, but to complement or supplement current academic programs. Consequently, there are a variety of models, and are still emerging as technology continues to evolve; however, the literature states that there is no single right way to design an online learning program. What is crucial is that all stakeholders are consulted and aligned to the institution's goals, state policies and standards. Although all programs try to provide educational opportunities that were previously unavailable, the specific reasons for creating virtual programs is to provide a means of access to all students that prepare students for college or the work force.

References

Barbour, M. (n.d.). Are virtual schools more cost-effective compared to traditional, brick-and-

mortar schools? Point.

Clark, T. (2001). Virtual schools: Trends and issues A study of virtual schools in the United

States. *Distance Learning Resource Network (DLRN)* at WestEd.

Data by Location, Kids count data center. (n.d.). Retrieved April 16, 2015, from

http://datacenter.kidscount.org/locations.

Maryland Virtual Learning Opportunities.   (n.d.). Retrieved from

http://mdk12online.org/courseproviders.html

Online diplomas for the College-Bound student. (n.d.). Obridge Academy Retrieved from

http://obridgeacademy.com/our-school-6-12th-grade/curriculum/

Means, B., Toyama, Y., Murphy, R., Bakia, M. & Jones, K. (2010). Evaluation of Evidence-

Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning

Studies. (*May 2009*). U.S. Department of Education

Russell, G. (2001). Is virtual schooling a virtual reality? *The Educational Technology Journal,*

10(6). Retrieved from http://www.fno.org/mar01/virtualschool.html

Watson, J. & Gemin, B. (2008) Using Online Learning for At-Risk Students and Credit

Recovery. *NACOL Promising Practices in Online Learning*. Retrieved

from http://www.inacol.org/cms/wp-

content/uploads/2012/09/NACOL_CreditRecovery_PromisingPractices.pdf