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Virtual Schooling in the K-12 Context

by

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ABSTRACT

The primary intent of this study is to identify and assess indications of success and failure in the implementation of virtual schools under the existing Alberta legislation, to determine both its strengths and its shortcomings as it focuses on inception, accountability, structure, program delivery, sustainability, and the direction in which virtual schools are headed.

This study investigated the following key questions: 1. What are the variances in online approaches? 2. How are virtual schools regulated and administrated? 3. Do they enhance and/or improve student learning? 4. What are the characteristics of successful virtual school students? 5. Do the virtual schools differentiate the curriculum to meet the needs of individual students? 6. What are the levels of parental, student and teacher satisfaction within the virtual school context? 7. What criteria are parents using to select the virtual school alternative for their children and what is the targeted public sector from which virtual schools draw? 8. What are the admission requirements of students wishing to enroll in the virtual schools? 9. Are there differential costs in attending virtual schools? 10. What are the trends in student enrollment, retention and attrition in virtual schools? 11. What are the implications of this alternative approach to the delivery of public education? 12. How does socialization, collaboration, interaction and communication occur in the virtual school environment?

This research was envisioned to determine what early lessons could be learned from the Alberta experience in response to these questions and for the future development of virtual schools in Canada.

Key findings reported that teachers, parents and students were satisfied with this alternative. This satisfaction was an outcome of the active participation of students in their learning, of autonomous learning opportunities and of the elimination of perceived negative peer influences and distractions evidenced in conventional school settings. This satisfaction was expressed in spite of the Provincial Achievement Test results for virtual schools that were generally below the provincial standard in both the acceptable standard and standard of excellence in grades 3, 6, 9 and 12.

Also important are the educational approaches offered by virtual schools which include blended programs, dual registration programs as well as total online educational environments.

Other key findings include transformations in the regulatory and administrative context, the 'anytime/anyplace' learning opportunities and the changing role of teachers and students, the interaction, collaboration, communication and socialization that virtual schools permit. Further, parents, teachers and students argued for more face-to-face interaction, a need to improve online math instruction, more tutorials and more academic and non-academic course options.

Virtual school teachers argued for a more manageable working environment. Issues of e-mail correspondence, of course development, of the need to keep up with changing technology and of professional development including both technology and pedagogy were also reported. Other teacher concerns included issues of pupil-teacher ratio and lack of preparation time.

Parents reported that this environment demanded more of their time than parents with students in conventional classroom settings. Issues of funding and equity relating to

the cost of leasing computers and of Internet connections as well as teachers' concerns with the lack of ergonomically efficient office equipment not provided by school districts to home-based virtual school teachers were also reported.

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