Education Week

Breaking Away From Tradition

E-learning Opens New Doors to Raise Achievement
By **Michelle R. Davis**

As the world of online education continues to evolve, brick-and-mortar schools are incorporating digital curricula and virtual teachers into their classrooms in ways that have surprised even the advocates of the online education movement.

Once mostly catering to advanced students who educators believed had the motivation to pursue education online, virtual courses are growing in popularity for struggling students, too. And school districts and teachers that once felt threatened by the surge of online education are embracing the technology, often in a hybrid model that blends face-to-face learning with digital teaching and curricula.

A **2009 report from the Sloan Consortium**, a Needham, Mass.-based advocacy group for online education, found that the number of K-12 students using online courses rose to more than a million public school students during the 2007-08 school year. That was a 47 percent increase from 2005-06.

The growth is fueling a new creativity in such education and an increasing acceptance of online learning in schools, filling voids in ways that educators hope will allow them to deliver more high-quality courses to a wider variety of students.

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"Online education is absolutely moving beyond the distance-learning model into a whole other category unto itself," says Michael B. Horn, a co-author of *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns*, a book published in 2008 that has stirred debate about the growing role of e-learning in K-12 schools. "This technology allows for a lot of creative arrangements."

Still, some educators and researchers caution that the success of online-only education depends largely on the quality of the curriculum and the teachers. Poor-quality online curricula exist in the marketplace, and figuring out how to train and evaluate virtual teachers is still a work in progress. Those factors, as well as concerns that face-to-face interactions between teachers and students remain important, could slow the growth of e-learning.

"A major responsibility of today's and tomorrow's principals is to assess the quality of those courses and how they line up with the courses being offered," says Gerald N. Tirozzi, the executive director of the Reston, Va.-based National Association of Secondary School Principals. "As we move toward this online world, … we need to be sensitive to social interaction, emotional development, and how to deal with adults in many situations."

Though Tirozzi says there are "some negatives" to the wave of online education offerings, he has high hopes for their future and educators' ability to address the potential downsides. "We're a bright country," he says. "We'll figure it out."

This school year, distance-learning officials for the 408,000-student Chicago school system decided to try something different. They established an entire school pairing online courses with in-class teachers.

"A cultural change had to take place to realize that online learning is real—it's just as good—but you have to provide support," says Sandra L. Atols, the manager of distance learning for the district. "You can't just say, go take it and sit in the corner alone."

Chicago's **VOISE Academy High School**, which opened in September 2008 with 9th graders, provides each student with an in-school laptop computer and an at-home desktop model. A significant hurdle, however, has been that the mostly low-income families of students must still pay for their home Internet connections.

Each class at VOISE, which stands for Virtual Opportunities Inside a School Environment, uses digital curriculum from Apex Learning Inc., says Principal Todd R. Yarch. While some virtual schools require students to have an in-house coach or mentor to help them in addition to the virtual instructor, VOISE opted to use only face-to-face teachers, certified in their subject matter. Many of the school's students are several grade levels behind in their achievement, and the digital curriculum allows teachers to "meet them where they are and build the skills so they can advance," Yarch says.

In one class, a teacher often works with a span of achievement levels, something difficult to do in a traditional classroom, he says. Preliminary results show promise. The Chicago district typically has an 80 percent on-track-to-graduate rate for high school freshmen, gauged by academic assessments, and so far the VOISE students are at 84 percent, Yarch says.

Experts in online learning are seeing variations on that theme across the country.

"We're seeing a shift from using purely virtual, or at-a-distance, options to using mainstream digital curriculum in blended learning environments in the classroom," says Susan D. Patrick, the president and chief executive officer of the Vienna, Va.-based International Association for K-12 Online Learning.

The ability to differentiate teaching and learning for students is a key bonus when using online courses, says Deirdra A. Washington, the lead science teacher for the 45,000-student Omaha, Neb., schools. Washington uses digital curriculum to teach her courses. Online courses also allowed her to effectively juggle biology, physics, and chemistry classes in an after-school science club she sponsored before taking her current job. She'd gather with biology students for 10 minutes and start them with an online lesson, then do the same with the other science subjects. That approach would be difficult without the virtual teachers and digital curriculum, Washington says.

Some states are emphasizing the importance of having students learn how to take an online-only course. In 2006, the Michigan legislature passed a requirement that students have an "online learning experience" to graduate from high school. In 2008, Alabama followed suit with a similar requirement that has a variety of added features.

The 1,358-student Tarrant, Ala., city school system has had success with online courses provided by the **ACCESS program** (for Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators, and Students Statewide), a state-sponsored distance-learning initiative, says district Superintendent Martha P. Rizzuto. The courses, which often have a videoconferencing component and use teachers across the state, have worked particularly well for situations in which a handful of students want or need to take a course, but the number isn't large enough to justify hiring a full-time teacher, Rizzuto says.

"I champion it," she says of the new graduation requirement. "Our students are not going to be competitive if they're not tech-savvy, and colleges expect you to know what to do with a laptop when you walk in the door."

The virtual classes have had an unexpected plus, she says, often pairing students from her school—nearly all minority and low-income—with a teacher and students in another part of the state.

"In one class, our high school was paired with a rural, white high school with students who probably haven't had a lot of interaction with minority children," she says. Tarrant's students visited the other school, and "it was probably the best thing for race relations I've ever seen," Rizzuto says.

Virtual courses have been particularly helpful for rural school districts, says William R. Thomas, the director of educational technology for the Atlanta-based Southern Regional Education Board. "They're filling the gaps," he says.

The concept of hybrid classes "makes a huge amount of sense" for rural districts, which may only have a few students who want to take a particular class—not enough to justify hiring a teacher—or lack certified teachers, Thomas says. Another advantage, he says, is that in blended classes with a certified virtual teacher as well as a teacher on site who is not certified in the course material, "the virtual schools are like a tutorial" for the in-class instructor.

As the economy continues to falter, school leaders are increasingly considering online learning as a way to do more with fewer resources, says Elizabeth R. Pape, the president and chief executive officer of the Virtual High School Global Consortium, based in Maynard, Mass. In February, the consortium hosted a conference for Massachusetts superintendents to show them the value of online courses. The presentation included a panel of students who answered questions about their own online course experiences. "They're all coming with the same concerns," Pape says of district leaders.

"How can we maintain our programs?"

In addition to blended courses, one of the biggest growth areas in online education has been in credit recovery, which is for students who have failed or not completed a core course needed for graduation. The report, **"Keeping Pace With K-12 Online Learning,"** released in November 2008 by Evergreen Consulting Associates, an Evergreen, Colo.-based firm, found that more U.S. students are using online courses for credit recovery than for Advanced Placement classes.

And much like regular online classes, credit-recovery courses are becoming available through for-profit online schools, state-run virtual schools, nonprofit groups, and homegrown district efforts.

"Before, online classes were the province of the upper-level students," says Timothy J. Magner, a former director of the U.S. Department of Education's office of educational technology. "Now there's a trend toward credit recovery as a way for students at the other end of the spectrum to get those experiences."

This school year, the long-established **Florida Virtual School** launched its Learning Recovery Center program, which is available both to students in Florida and outside the state's borders. The courses are designed to assess each student's existing strengths and weaknesses and "give students credit for what they know," while focusing on aspects of a course they haven't mastered, says Julie E. Young, the president and chief executive officer of the Orlando-based school.

The school piloted the program with 50 students over the summer of 2008. All passed the English course. The school now offers more than 10 classes for credit recovery, according to Young.

The courses have a heavy emphasis on providing a customized education and building a relationship between the virtual teacher and each student, Young says. The teachers for those courses have additional training in credit recovery.

"These students—their self-esteem has bottomed out, and they don't believe they can learn," says Young. "By being able to work with [teachers] one-on-one, the students can experience success, sometimes for the first time in their lives."

But even as schools link up with virtual teachers, access online curricula for credit recovery and advanced courses, and start to incorporate hybrid learning models into their

classrooms, online delivery of education remains far from mainstream, says Horn, the *Disrupting Class* co-author. But a hard-pressed economy in need of new ideas may create circumstances in the traditional system that will push virtual education closer to the mainstream, he says.

"The economic situation and tight budgets are an opportunity to increase online and virtual learning," Horn says. "The faltering economy may accelerate this process and force schools to change their assumptions about how classrooms typically work."