

# A New Kind of School

Here's (virtually) everything you need to know about the brave new world of e-learning

BY KATHLEEN VAIL

**C**reating an online learning program requires tolerance for paradox. You must think outside the bricks-and-mortar classroom box, but you must not forget the traditional elements of education. You must relinquish some control but still maintain oversight. You must treat online learning like a business venture but make it jibe with public school budgeting.

If you can balance these conflicting ideas, you could end up with a program that enhances your curriculum, draws home-schooled students back to your classrooms, decreases your dropout rates, and helps you retain teachers.

Online learning is the rising star of the educational technology movement. As demand for choice and flexibility in public education grows, online classes are increasingly in demand. A survey by West-Ed estimated that 40,000 to 50,000 kindergarten through 12th-grade students were enrolled in an online course in 2001-02.

What's the best way to bring an online learning program to your district? To prepare this special report, *ASBJ* spoke with school people who have started district, regional, and national online learning programs, as well as representatives of e-learning companies that provide online learning packages and services to school districts. What follows is their advice on how to successfully launch an online learning program.

## WHY DO IT?

As education ventures go, online learning is the new kid on the block—the earliest programs date to the mid-1990s—and much remains in the experimental stage. “It’s all brand new, very promising,” said Elliot Masie of the Masie Center, a learning and technology think tank in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. “Some of it works very well. We will get better at it in 10 years.”

You might not want to wait a decade for online learning to work out its kinks, however. For all the potential pitfalls, online learning already offers unprecedented opportunities for schools, teachers, and students. By starting now, as one online learning developer said, you can make the decisions before others make them for you. But it takes time, commitment, money, training, and energy to make online learning programs work.

Letting students take courses over the Internet can be an unsettling proposition, and it raises immediate logistical questions: How will you know if students are actually attending class? Are the courses of good quality? Are the teachers qualified? How will students be graded? What kinds of hardware and software are required?

Online learning brings up philosophical issues, too. Critics worry that computers will replace teachers. They fear that online learning will result in socially isolated students who are taught by machines and lack human contact.

Proponents counter that online learning is simply another choice for students, not a substitute for face-to-face learning. “This is another model,” said Katherine Endacott, CEO of Class.com, an e-learning company in Lincoln, Neb. “It won’t replace a class-

room, and it won’t replace a teacher.”

Control is another issue school leaders face when contemplating online schools. “School boards know their communities’ needs better than anyone else,” said Sue Collins, CEO of Apex Learning, an e-learning company in Bellevue, Wash. “But a view that says you can only provide good education in a building is outmoded.”

Collins said many students are constrained by geography or socioeconomic background from taking certain courses in school. Online learning erases the barriers of distance and brings opportunities to underserved students. “When you are open to the notion that it’s an effective way to learn, it becomes a possibility for the child,” said Collins.

School board members and administrators seem to think online learning is a good idea—at least in theory. According to a National School Boards Foundation survey, 28 percent of school leaders believe at least one in five of their students will receive a substantial portion of their instruction over the Internet in the next three years.

But the reality is that not much online instruction is taking place in schools right now. In the same survey, 80 percent of school leaders said teacher research was the primary instructional use of the Internet at their schools. (The survey report is online at <http://www.nsbef.org/thereyet/index.htm>.)

School leaders who are embarking on an online learning program must “think differently,” said Stephen Shapiro of Jones Knowledge, an e-learning company in Englewood, Colo. “This is not taking a brick-and-mortar class and throwing it online. The design, teaching, and infrastructure

must be thought about differently. Don't be scared of that."

## HOW DO YOU START?

As with other successful ventures, planning is key. "Treat this as a start-up business," said Tim Snyder, executive director of the Colorado Online School Consortium, made up of 70 school districts. "Provide sufficient venture capital. Allow time for full implementation."

Allan Jordan, principal of the Cumberland County Schools' Web Academy in North Carolina, said districts "need a vision of what they want online learning to be." He suggests forming a group of interested people to plan exactly what they want from an online program.

You don't necessarily need to look for staff members with the most technical expertise to lead the way, said Jordan. "The skills needed aren't technical," he added. What's needed is "a person who can motivate, who has realistic expectations but doesn't let tradition get in the way."

First item on the agenda: Which students do you want to serve and why? Here, the possibilities seem endless. Do you want to offer Advanced Placement or language classes for students who otherwise wouldn't have access to them? Give students who work or have other responsibilities a chance to earn credits to graduate? Offer courses for students who have been suspended, or remedial classes for students who need extra help? Provide classes for homebound or hospitalized students? What about students in alternative schools? Students in prison? Home-schooled students?

Answering these questions will shape your online learning program—and then other questions arise:

- Who will develop the courses?
- Who will teach them?
- What software will you use to deliver the classes?
- How will people find out about the program?
- How will students receive credit?
- And, finally, how will you pay for it all?

"You need to begin with time lines," said Jordan, "but you need flexibility and pa-

tience." It's important to have realistic expectations, he said, "but everyone needs to understand there's no way to anticipate problems because you have no frame of reference."

It's also important to put people in place who are passionate about seeing the venture succeed. "This is a labor-intensive venture not suited to the halfhearted," said Snyder, who founded Colorado's first online school, the Monte Vista Online Academy. "The most able, enthusiastic supporters will be needed. Twelve-hour days are the norm."

Getting involved with online learning doesn't mean you must develop a full-blown online school, of course. Online learning and virtual schools come in various packages. First, you might want to see what your state is offering. Currently, 32 states have some kind of e-learning program; 12 states have virtual high schools, and five more are developing them.

The oldest state-established school, the

Florida Virtual School, offers its courses to schools and students around the country, in partnership with Jones Knowledge. Consortia of public schools, such as the Virtual High School in Hudson, Mass., allow schools to participate without reinventing the wheel. E-learning companies offer courses as well.

## HOW ARE ONLINE SCHOOLS FUNDED?

You might not be able to tap easily into venture capital, but federal, state, and private grants are available for online learning initiatives. And if you start out small, as many people recommend, the program could become self-sustaining. Remember, though, teacher training and online course development aren't cheap, and it's not inexpensive to purchase online courses.

Appleton e-School began as a charter school—in part, said program leader Connie Radtke, because the state of Wisconsin

## Varieties of online schools

Not all bricks-and-mortar schools are alike, and that goes for virtual schools, too. Here are the most common types:

■ **State-established schools and programs.** Twelve states have virtual high schools for their students, with five more states currently developing them. Thirty-two states have some kind of e-learning program. Florida Virtual High School is the longest running and best known of the state-established online schools. Most of the time, administrative costs, teacher salaries, and course development are paid for by the state.

■ **Consortia.** These are public schools that have come together regionally or nationally to offer online classes. The best known is the Virtual High School in Hudson, Mass. Funded with a grant from the federal government, the Virtual High School aims to become a sort of national virtual school. It offered 183 courses in 2001-02 and had 2,003 students en-

rolled in the spring of 2002. The school sustains itself by having member schools offer teachers and courses in exchange for class slots for their students.

■ **Local school districts.** Many school districts have established their own online learning programs. These programs often start for local students and expand to include students from other districts. An example is the Web Academy in Fayetteville, N.C.

■ **Charters.** Cyber charter schools are online schools established as charter schools and subject to the charter laws of their states. Appleton e-School in Appleton, Wis., is a cyber school chartered by the Appleton School District.

■ **For-profit online schools.** Companies such as Jones Knowledge, Sylvan, K12, and others offer many components of online education, including courses, teacher training, platform design, and other tools.—K. V.

offered grants for charters. Radtke, who has used the grant funds to train teachers and develop courses, said the start-up might have been harder without the state money.

Relying on grants might require schedule adjustments, though, to mesh with funding cycles. And starting slowly might not be an option, said Radtke, noting that she and her staff had to do the bulk of their teacher training and course development while grant funds were available.

State remediation funds fueled the start-up of Jordan's Web Academy, which began by serving students who struggled with core subjects. Some online schools actually generate their own revenue by drawing back home-schooled students and dropouts who then are counted as students in the district's state-aid formula. Also, other districts might pay for their students to take courses that aren't available locally; in other cases, parents might pay the online tuition fees.

But no money will come before the program is online, and you'll need to find a way to get financial support up front.

Some companies, like Jones Knowledge, allow you to make money on courses your teachers develop. Jones offers the classes, and your district receives money for them.

"Districts can build different courses and sell them to each other," said Jones' Stephen Shapiro.

Companies like eClassroom.com, in Denver, provide sample business and financial plans and get you in touch with some of their other clients to see how they structured their money matters.

#### WHAT ABOUT TEACHERS AND COURSES?

Online courses offer new opportunities for teachers, allowing them to try something different and creative. But training is essential, because teaching online is very different from teaching in the classroom.

"You cannot assume a face-to-face teacher can be an online teacher without training," said Liz Pape, CEO of Virtual High School, a national consortium of public schools based in Hudson, Mass. "Train your teachers first."

E-learning companies offer training in the form of online classes, and some public online schools will work with your teachers. Don't limit your search to the most tech-savvy teachers. Jordan of the Web Academy said he sought teachers who were good educators, not necessarily those who were the

most proficient in technology. "I knew we could teach them," he said.

You'll need to take a look at your employment policies and contracts, though—chances are, they'll need some revision for online educators. Some online teachers are paid on a contract, as an additional job. Some are given a class period as their online class time. Some are paid from tuition receipts.

One benefit for teachers is the chance to develop their own courses or to help mold existing online courses to fit state and district standards. Some programs begin with a purchased product and have teachers develop their own curriculum as they get more comfortable with the online format.

But districts don't have to develop their own courses to make their program successful. "There is a fear that unless they do a homegrown product, they will lose control," Pape said. "But they can become savvy consumers."

Pape recommends asking course providers such questions as: Is the course self-paced with minimal contact with teachers, or will there be daily teacher presence? What activities can students do for coursework? How often do students receive feed-

## Questions for policy makers

The National Education Association, in partnership with several education organizations, put together a guide for educators considering online learning programs. The following questions are excerpted from the publication:

- Are a process and criteria in place for determining when to use online courses?
- Is online instruction aligned with the overall vision for student learning and achievement?
- Are there procedures for ensuring that online courses are aligned with state/district academic standards, curriculum frameworks, and assessments?
- Is there a process to decide when to develop courses and when to purchase them? Is there a funding system in place for development and distribution of courses?
- If districts offer courses, will the state establish policies and procedures for overseeing implementation?
- Will home-schoolers and private school students be permitted to enroll in online courses? Will they enroll directly or through a school district? Who will assume the cost?

- Who is responsible for ensuring that students have convenient access to the necessary equipment, software, connections, and other resources needed to make best use of instructional technologies?
- Do current seat time mandates support the use of online courses, or do they need to be revised?
- Are there procedures for reviewing, evaluating, and updating policies related to online education?
- Will online courses be led by local or within-state certified teachers, or by teachers certified outside the state?
- Are a plan and budget in place to ensure consistent support and professional development for online educators?
- Who monitors and evaluates the online teacher? Do contractual or other personnel safeguards apply?
- Do employment policies provide sufficient flexibility to allow such practices as flextime and working from home?

Source: Guide to Online High School Courses, published by the National Education Association; online at <http://www.nea.org/technology/distanced/highschool>.

back? What type of infrastructure must be in place? What happens when students forget their passwords or don't understand what the teacher is saying? Is the course taken as part of the school day, or do students take it on their own time? What should students be expected to get out of the course? How is the course tied to curriculum standards?

"The whole area is new and fraught with potholes for people to stumble into," said Pape. "Anyone can slap curriculum on the screen and call it an online course. But they should also have classroom experience with collaboration."

### WHAT TECHNOLOGY IS REQUIRED?

Choose the software, or platform, that will deliver the courses carefully. This is what your students and teachers will see when they log in to the course. Many companies offer platforms, and some will customize their product to fit your needs.

Customization is important. "You can't let the software platform push how you deliver it," said Pape. "Find the software to support what you want to do."

Technology support is crucial, too. Students and teachers are likely to be online after school hours. "It's no longer a 7:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. model of education," said Pape, who recommends outsourcing your server and data storage to make sure teachers and students can log on to the Internet at any time. "Districts don't have enough tech support to maintain a 24-7 operation."

And once coursework is online, security becomes an issue, said Pape, who recommends having firewalls to protect against hackers. Until now, schools have been concerned with filtering Internet content to protect students from accessing harmful information. With online learning, schools also need to worry about who is coming in.

"We need to safeguard and prevent unworthy people from entering into vital classroom space," said Pape. "We don't allow strangers into our classrooms."

Equitable access to technology is another consideration. Some schools provide laptop computers to online students through community partnerships and offer discounted Internet connection to their families.

Others have students complete their coursework at school computer labs, public libraries, and community centers. When that's the case, school computer labs might need to be open after school and on weekends.

### SYNCHRONOUS OR ASYNCHRONOUS CLASSES ?

Should you offer classes students can take at any time, anywhere (asynchronous)? Or will you require students and teachers to log in at the same time each day (synchronous)?

It doesn't have to be an either/or decision. Some schools have students meet together occasionally online—perhaps after school—but not as often as students would see each other in a face-to-face class.

If you don't like the idea of kids logging into classes at midnight or teachers typing lectures at their kitchen tables, you can have everyone meet online at the same time or require students to do their coursework at a set time in a school computer lab. What you gain in control, however, you will lose in flexibility. If your goal is to offer classes to students with scheduling problems or outside jobs, having the class meet at the same time won't be helpful.

The Web Academy has opted for synchronous classes. "These are children," Jordan said. "If you don't meet them and get to know them, you will lose a lot of them."

But just because a class is asynchronous, it doesn't mean that students and teachers won't build a sense of community or that students will never interact with teachers. The Virtual High School consortium, for instance, has students in classes from all over the country. The teachers encourage collaboration through e-mails, threaded discussions, group projects, and other means.

"Every way works," said Endacott of Class.com. "It depends on the goals of the program."

### WHAT ABOUT CONTROL AND OVERSIGHT?

With e-schools, as with traditional schools, final authority is vested in the district school board. But day-to-day oversight might take a somewhat different form. Usually, one person is hired as the online school's ad-

ministrator, but occasionally, e-schools will have their own committees or boards.

Jordan's advice is to allow on-site management of online learning, delegating responsibility to a principal or other administrator. "You have to have enough trust in people to make the decisions they need to make without having to consult every minute with the superintendent or school board," he said.

The Web Academy's board is made up of counselors from each of the district's high schools who serve as advisers and meet to discuss enrollment procedures. "We let people who are dealing with the prob-

## Want to know more?

Information on virtual schools and online learning is as near as your Web browser. See the online resources on page 54 and the list of selected providers on page 56. Or get in touch with some of the pioneers in the field:

■ Liz Glowa, coordinator of the Maryland State Department of Education's Web-Based Learning Project, Web site: <http://mdk12online.org/index.htm>; e-mail: [lglowa@msde.state.md.us](mailto:lglowa@msde.state.md.us).

■ Allan Jordan, principal, Cumberland County Schools' Web Academy, Fayetteville, N.C. Web site: [http://www.ccswebacademy.net/Home\\_Page.htm](http://www.ccswebacademy.net/Home_Page.htm); e-mail: [ajordan@ccswebacademy.net](mailto:ajordan@ccswebacademy.net).

■ Liz Pape, CEO of the Virtual High School, Hudson, Mass. Web site: <http://www.goVHS.org>; e-mail: [LPape@govhs.org](mailto:LPape@govhs.org).

■ Connie Radtke, program leader at the Appleton e-School, Appleton, Wis. Web site: <http://www.aasd.k12.wi.us/eSchool>; e-mail: [radtkeconstanc@asd.k12.wi.us](mailto:radtkeconstanc@asd.k12.wi.us).

■ Tim Snyder, executive director of the Colorado Online School Consortium, Web site: <http://www.cosc.k12.co.us>; e-mail: [tsnyder@sargentk12.org](mailto:tsnyder@sargentk12.org).

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lems control it,” he said. “We do want to get their advice and opinions.”

It’s especially important that adults track each student’s progress. Successful programs include a mentor or contact person at each school where an online course is being used. Liz Glowa, coordinator of the Maryland State Department of Education’s Web-based Learning Project, said that success rates for online courses often depend on a student being able to talk to someone if problems arise. The contact person can be a liaison for the online teacher, as well.

“You need someone the teacher can e-mail or call to say the student hasn’t logged on in five days,” Glowa said.

Management and control issues become more complex when students from outside your school system take your courses. Who grants course credits and grades? Some online teachers provide a percentage grade, with the student’s home school granting the

credit and assigning a letter grade according to the home district’s grading scale.

### IS THAT IT?

Well, no. For one thing, you’ll need to monitor how well your program is working. As Justin McMorrow of eClassroom.com puts it, an evaluation plan “is crucial to making [the program] a long-term success.”

At the Appleton e-School, student progress is monitored closely by teachers and the student’s mentor. Students must contact teachers at least twice a week through online discussions, completed assignments, e-mails, or phone calls. Teachers are required to contact students at least once a week and monitor student progress using agreed-on benchmarks. If, after the third week of the class, students aren’t keeping up, they are dropped from the course.

Your evaluation plan should track test scores and grades and pay special attention

to completion rates. You might also want to have students complete surveys about individual classes.

Finally, be prepared for evolution and change. Still in its infancy, online learning is growing rapidly. Fortunately, online educators and administrators are more than willing to share their experiences and the lessons they’ve learned.

Even the most avid online learning proponents acknowledge that virtual schools aren’t for everyone. But with the right support and planning, they can be a power tool, one of the many that you have at your disposal.

“E-learning is not a panacea for all that is perceived to ail public education,” said Tim Snyder of the Colorado Online School Consortium, “but it can be an effective tool in meeting individual needs.”

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