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PLATTE CHAT

VIRTUAL EDUCATION BENEFITS ALL OF NEBRASKA

By Anne Duda
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Technology has transformed everything in our daily lives. We carry cell phones in our pockets and GPS mapping equipment in our tractors, but yet, we in Nebraska have not fully allowed technology into our school systems. Despite computers being a staple in almost every classroom, they are not being used to their full potential. If technology were properly integrated then students in Cozad and Louisville would be able to take Arabic and Cantonese along with all thirty-seven Advanced Placement (AP) classes. There should be no reason students in Lexington and McCook do not have the same opportunities as students in Millard or Lincoln.

Virtual education can provide many of these services at a lower cost, with higher test scores, grades and AP scores than ordinary classroom education. States such as Kansas and Florida have

heard by thousands of people. To make the process easier, the Platte Institute has assembled a list of links which allow you to submit a letter to the editor to nearly all Nebraska newspapers. Simply [CLICK HERE](#) for a listing of the newspapers and follow the appropriate link to submit your letter.

documented over 10 years of success; therefore, many of the complications associated with starting a new system have been remedied. Virtual charter education systems allow the state to save money while concentrating on what students need.

Ideally, all Nebraska students should be eligible to attend virtual charter schools free of cost. “Charter schools are public schools founded by teachers, parents, or community organizations that operate under a written contract with a state, school district, or other entity. Because they are public schools, charter schools are open to all students, they cannot charge tuition, they have no religious affiliation, and they abide by the same state and federal testing, financial, anti-discrimination, health, and safety regulations. Unlike traditional public schools, however, charter schools are managed locally on-site and operate with more autonomy and flexibility than traditional public schools.”[\[1\]](#)

Virtual charter schools are a little different in that all class interaction is over the internet, students will not necessarily be in a school building. The implementation of virtual charter schools is not only cost effective, but has several other advantages as well. First, transportation to and from school would no longer be a concern to families, especially in rural areas. Inner-city parents would have additional alternatives to a failing school. In addition, adult learners returning for their GEDs would have greater flexibility in their options by being able to take classes online, at home and on their schedules.

Not only will virtual schools benefit parents and students, but teachers will benefit as well. Virtual schools systems provide curriculum to teachers, which reduces valuable time currently required for lesson planning. This would also allow teachers

more time for instruction and feedback. Having curriculum provided would give every class the same basic format. Through trial and error, other states have found that a standard format helps students learn because, while the course content will vary by subject, the layout of each lesson is relatively similar. In addition, computer menus, options, and help are all located in the same location, enabling the student to jump in and start learning class material.

Virtual school systems allow for two types of classes to be offered. One option includes interactive teacher-led lessons; the other is self-taught with daily feedback on homework and progress from accredited teachers. Teachers typically instruct between twenty and fifty students, depending on grade levels. The teacher regularly monitors students' homework and attendance in addition to making phone contact with parents twice a month, which is more than most traditional schools. The benefit of the dual class options is that students who are proficient in one subject may need less hands-on help from a teacher. At the same time, if they are in a class where they struggle, they will need and receive guidance that is more intensive.

Classes can be taken either full-time as a replacement for traditional schooling, or as a supplement to add a particular class that the home school district might not offer. Students taking classes as supplements to their regular schooling could use a study block during their regular school day to take a class, or they can take it at home, the library, or the community center like the full-time virtual students. Classes are electronically customized to each student, providing instruction at the exact level they require. With virtual education,

students are no longer frustrated because the pace of class is too slow or too fast. These programs can be especially relevant for students with learning disabilities. In fact, the most successful, documented virtual schooling program, What Works Clearinghouse, is designed specifically for helping special needs and low-achieving students improve their reading skills. All of this can be done for a fraction of the cost of traditional education.

Currently, school financing is based on a rarely seen, archaic formula that provides funding to the schools as a whole. Virtual schools operate differently. Each student is provided with funding equal to the average cost per student of the regular public schools. If the child attends a virtual school or a traditional public school full-time, then that school receives all of the student's money. If the student attends both schools part-time, then the money is divided based on how many classes the student is taking at each facility. This money could not transfer to religious schools, since that would take additional legislation. Another added bonus of virtual charter schools is a lack of taxing authority; they cannot raise your taxes because they have a short fall, which is not likely. In Oregon, for example, ordinary public schools spend \$10,000 per year, per child. The state's charter schools operate on less than \$6,000 per child.

Despite costs and education benefits, virtual schools do have one potential downside; lack of social interaction. Students are able to interact with their teachers and classmates online through chats, message boards, instant messaging and e-mail, but they lose a face-to-face connection and the skills associated with it. Communities can make up these short falls by providing activities, including prom and homecoming for their students. YMCAs,

YWCA's, and churches can provide sports while community and cultural centers provide activities for students to socialize. Another option is mixed classrooms, particularly with the younger students, in which the students spend part of their day on guided virtual learning and the other part of their day in traditional classroom learning. Social interaction is not a large enough issue to table the idea of virtual schools, especially not when it will give communities an excuse to gather.

The primary obstacle in Nebraska for virtual education is legislation. First, we have no charter school legislation. The two most important aspects of a potential bill are that the charter schools will report directly to the State Board of Education and that no limit exists on the number of children that may attend. Without these, future virtual education bills would be hindered before they were even written. The second piece of legislation that is needed, is a virtual education bill, which mostly needs to allow a school to exist without students physically being in the building. In addition, it would need to address funding formulas, primarily allowing money to follow students.

Virtual education will benefit everyone in the state. It will reduce overall education costs to the taxpayers of the state, while increasing class options and opportunities. The lack of social interaction can easily be solved by communities coming together for their children.

[1\[1\]](#) Race to the Top

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