

EDUCATION WEEK

TECHNOLOGY COUNTS 2012

VIRTUAL SHIFT E-learning turns toward district-level approaches and a focus on accountability

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Spotlight Turns Toward Virtual Ed. Accountability

As e-learning moves further into the K-12 mainstream, it is attracting greater scrutiny of its effectiveness

By **Kevin Bushweller**

Virtual education is at a critical juncture.

The popularity of online education continues to rise as students, parents, and educators embrace its flexibility and emphasis on using multimedia tools and curricula to personalize learning. In response, school districts are building their own virtual programs, making district-based efforts the fastest-growing model for this form of education.

But as e-learning moves further into the K-12 mainstream, it is also attracting closer scrutiny from educators, policymakers, researchers, and the news media. Questions about its effectiveness are being asked more often by a growing cadre of critics, and even advocates concede that the e-learning movement needs to take a harder look at putting better accountability measures in place.

Essentially, virtual education is moving into that intersection where rising popularity meets calls for greater accountability. How the virtual education movement responds to those calls will have a significant impact on how it evolves in K-12 over the next five to 10 years.

Technology Counts 2012 tackles this shift in the virtual education landscape. The report examines the growth of district-based programs designed with more local control in mind, and it tracks state legislative efforts to expand online education while also evaluating its effectiveness. It also covers the critical accountability questions facing virtual education providers, particularly for-profit companies, and issues related to the financial sustainability of state-sponsored e-schools.

To get a better handle on the perspectives of district administrators on virtual education, *Education Week* conducted an online poll of such administrators who are *Education Week* readers. Although not a scientific sampling of district opinion, the poll offers some findings worth thinking about.

Of the 367 respondents, 93 percent said they think virtual education providers need to

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integrate more accountability measures into their programs to make sure they are working effectively. That nearly unanimous call for greater accountability dovetails with a key recommendation in the 2011 edition of **"Keeping Pace With K-12 Online Learning,"** an annual review of policy and practice conducted by the Evergreen Education Group. The report says that "it is critical that states create the systems by which online and blended learning providers can demonstrate results and be held accountable."

Many of the district-level administrators who responded to the survey of *Education Week* readers agreed.

"[Virtual schools] need to be measured in the same fashion as their brick-and-mortar counterparts," one administrator said in a survey comment. "Our district-led online school is highly accountable compared to the for-profit charters who self-report."

There is likely a gap, however, between the accountability measures schools would like to see happening and what is actually happening. In the *Education Week* readership survey, only 16 percent of respondents said their districts had done comparisons to see how well students taking online courses perform compared with students taking face-to-face courses covering similar material. Of those that did conduct comparisons, the results appeared to be mixed.

"It depends on the profile of the student," wrote one administrator. "Self-motivated students do very well or at least comparatively. Low-performing students flounder."

Many of the readers who responded also expressed concerns about making sure virtual students are actually the ones doing the work. One administrator said there needs to be more "assurance that student work is authentic and being performed by students with limited assistance from others around them."

Another said: "Students should not be able to advance in an online course if mastery is not demonstrated. This feature would add value to the online delivery method."

Ultimately, that appears to be the challenge ahead for online education providers, whether they are for-profit companies, state-sponsored e-schools, virtual charters, or district-based online learning initiatives. They must add value, it seems clear, to teaching and learning by putting accountability measures in place that help them determine what is not working and take action



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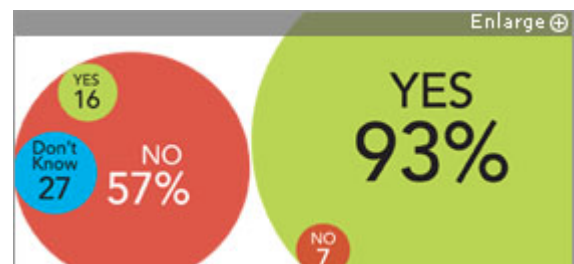
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Education Week Readers Respond

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SOURCE: Education Week

to address those problems.

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