EDUCATION WEEK

Test Scores Raise Questions About Colo. Virtual Schools

Virtual school students falling behind their peers, analysis finds

By Nancy Mitchell, Education News Colorado & Burt Hubbard, I-News Network

Colorado taxpayers will spend $100 million this year on online schools that are failing many of their students, state education records and interviews with school officials show.

The money includes millions of tax dollars that are going to K-12 online schools for students who are no longer there.

The result: While online students fall behind academically, their counterparts in the state's traditional public schools are suffering, too, because those schools must absorb former online students when they leave virtual schooling, while the virtual schools keep the students' state funding.

Consider the experience of high school senior Laura Johnson.

In the tiny Florence School District outside Pueblo, Ms. Johnson was one of 39 students who left Florence High School last year to join **GOAL Academy**, one of the largest online charter schools in Colorado.

By January, she was back at Florence High School, disillusioned by the online experience and trying to make up for her lost class time. She was joined by a dozen of her former online classmates.

The 39 students who left Florence High School for GOAL represented one of every 10 students in the school. When they left, so did nearly a quarter-million dollars in state funding—the equivalent of four to five teachers' salaries. When a dozen of the students returned to Florence High School midyear, the funding to educate them did not come with them.

Analyzing the Numbers

Education News Colorado, a nonprofit news organization, and the **I-News Network**, a Colorado-based news consortium, spent 10 months investigating the experiences of Colorado K-12 students who move to online schools.

The investigation used previously unreleased state education data to document the path of 10,500 students who were enrolled in the 10 largest online schools beginning in 2008. Those students accounted for more than 90 percent of all online students for the 2008-09 school year.

The data analysis found that, in Colorado:

• Half of the online students wind up leaving within a year. When they do, they're often further behind academically than when they started.

• Online schools produce three times as many dropouts as they do graduates. One of every eight online students drops out of school permanently—a rate four times the state average.

• Millions of dollars are going to virtual schools for students who no longer attend online classes.

• The churn of students in and out of online schools is putting pressure on brick-and-mortar schools, which then must find money in their budgets to educate students who come from online schools midyear.

"We're bleeding money to a program that doesn't work," said state Senate President Brandon Shaffer, a Democrat from Longmont. Last week, he asked the state audit committee for an emergency review of online schools before the legislature meets in January.

Officials with the online programs say a variety of factors contribute to the high rate of attrition, including working with an at-risk student population that sees online learning as a last resort, brief experimentation with a new learning process, and parents not being able to stay home to oversee their children's studies.

"We are all so different, we are serving different audiences, and students are enrolling for very different reasons," said Heather O'Mara, the executive director of Hope Online, one of the state's largest online programs.

Flow of Funding

Colorado's first online school opened in 1995, with 13 students, most of them on academic probation. The schools are thriving today, with students taking classes, usually on computers provided by the online schools, and typically using email or virtual chats to get teacher support. Some schools require a set amount of teacher contact, live or virtual; others do not.

Online schools in Colorado may be created as district-run programs, or they can operate through charters or contracts with a school district or the state **Charter School Institute**.

They also get state funding.

Currently, the schools receive $6,228 per student, slightly less than the average per-pupil funding statewide. Colorado expects to spend $100 million in state funds for some 18,000 students to attend online schools this year.

That amount is based on student counts taken at the beginning of October each year. In each of the past three years, however, half the online students have left their schools within a year.

State documents make it difficult to pinpoint exactly when students leave a school. However, a comparison of the October student-count data and districts' end-of-year data shows at least 1,000 students transfer midyear. That means at least $6 million annually went to online schools for students who weren't there the entire academic year.

The Education News Colorado/I-News Network analysis of state data found that most online school students are not struggling academically when they leave their traditional schools.

Among the 2,400 online students who had taken a state standardized reading test in a brick-and-mortar school the year before, more than half had scored proficient or better.

However, the scores of online students on statewide achievement tests have been consistently 14 to 26 percentage points below state averages for reading, writing, and math over the past four years.

Some 2,414 students took the reading exams in traditional schools in 2009 and then in online programs the next year. Their proficiency rate fell from 58 percent to 51 percent, the analysis found.

The state's annual online school report, released in June, reflected concern about those numbers, noting that "results indicate achievement of online students consistently lags behind those of non-online students, even after controlling for grade levels and various student characteristics," such as poverty, language, and special education status.

High Turnover Rates

The analysis also looked at the high turnover rate of students in virtual schools.

Of 10,500 students in the largest online programs in fall 2008, more than half—5,600—had left their virtual schools by the fall of 2009. By October 2010, only about a quarter of the students remained in their same online program after two years.

The high turnover rate concerns state educators and lawmakers, like Sen. Shaffer, who fear profit and student recruitment are taking precedence over educating students and keeping them in school. Diana Sirko, deputy commissioner of education in Colorado, said she would put together a task force to look at the challenges created by skyrocketing online enrollment, especially the high turnover.

"We know that mobility contributes to a lack of success for students," Ms. Sirko said. "What we hear from some of the school districts who receive children halfway through the year who have started in online is there may have been a two- or three-month gap as they left one and began the next."

Top officials at some school districts said the turnover has hurt their students and their finances.

The St. Vrain school district in Longmont lost 70 students to GOAL Academy last year after heavy recruiting by the online program. St. Vrain Superintendent Don Haddad said virtual school recruiters made pitches to high school students during their lunch hours. He said the district lost more than $400,000 in state funding because of the loss of students.

Randy DeHoff, who spent 12 years on the state board of education before becoming GOAL Academy's director of strategic planning last fall, said online schools are trying to reach students not being served by traditional schools. "We're not trying to steal kids from districts; we're there serving the kids that districts either can't or don't want to serve," he said.

At Florence High School, Laura Johnson said she left the online school after six months with no credits earned. The social isolation convinced her it wasn't a good fit.

"I think the most difficult part about it was trying to keep yourself on it," she said.

For other students, the online programs are a benefit.

Janette Lopez, 19, dropped out of Pueblo schools to care for her son. She enrolled in the GOAL online program, and the model has worked for her. "I really wanted my education," she said.

Slowing Down

Branson Online School, one of the state's oldest online programs, is also its highest-performing. But to get there, the school had to cut back its student numbers, from more than 1,000 students in 2005 to 427 in 2010.

Assistant Superintendent Judith Stokes said fast growth and lagging scores—combined with a critical 2006 state audit of online schools—prompted the slowdown. She said the school focused on ensuring families understood the online program before enrolling because, "if you're looking for easy, it's not us."

Last spring, Branson online students beat the statewide average in reading proficiency and were 6 percentage points short in math.

Mr. DeHoff, the former state board of education member now with GOAL Academy, said online schools need to do more to show academic progress. He believes they're trying.

"We're figuring out that most kids need more than just a course over the computer," he said. "So online programs are doing much more in the way of field trips and social gatherings.

"You really do need both."

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