INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, K-12 schools are delivering instruction via Internet courses that allow students to access course content and complete assignments from home. According to a recent survey conducted by Education Week, 27 states in the United States have spent public monies to establish virtual public or charter schools. For example, over the past 5 years, the Florida Virtual School has spent $23 million and offered 62 online courses to over 8,000 students. Kentucky Virtual High School, which offers approximately 40 courses and enrolls approximately 750 students annually, has a budget of about $400,000 per. The Michigan Virtual High School is funded for $15 million for start-up costs with $1.5 million allocated annually for operational costs. And the Virtual High School International, a nonprofit collaborative of 200 national and international schools with a budget of $10 million, offers 160 courses to students in 16 countries. In spite of declining budgets, the growth of K-12 virtual schools continues at a rapid pace (Park & Staresina, 2004).

Although the United States dominates the market in virtual K-12 schools, Canada has also developed several online schools that are approved by the Canadian Ministry of Education. The Open School, based in British Columbia, offers courses and content to K-12 students in 14 subject areas ranging from agriculture to mathematics. The Toronto District School Board launched its virtual high school in 2004 with 20 course offerings. The Kitchener-Waterloo Private School, based in Ontario, is a parochial school that offers teacher-designed, interactive high school courses online in dozens of content areas. Several other provinces in Canada such as Quebec and Alberta are planning to launch online schools in the near future.

Although virtual K-12 schools are not the norm, the trend is expected to grow worldwide (Bonk, 2001; Clark, 2000; Park & Staresina, 2004). The convenience and accessibility of online courses offer many benefits to students, parents, and school districts. Several challenges face districts and educators; however, online courses may be designed to provide a wealth of educational opportunities for youngsters and maximize opportunities for districts to offer a more extensive curriculum.

BENEFITS OF ONLINE COURSES

Internet courses offer many advantages to parents, students, and educators. Advocates contend that online courses offer variety, flexibility, and convenience that the traditional classroom cannot match. Many believe that online courses have the potential to equalize educational opportunities for all students. For example, Tom Layton, a teacher in Eugene, Oregon’s virtual school maintains that,

Distance education finally brings democracy to education. It gives the student in East L.A., or Brentwood, or Martha’s Vineyard, or Harlem, or Pakistan an equal opportunity to content curriculum and to people with many perspectives... Until now, the single biggest factor influencing the quality of education was where you live. If you don’t believe me, ask any real estate agent. For the 21st century it is not going to be where you live, but how you are connected. (Chaika, 1999)

Although Layton’s position conveys the magnificent potential of distance learning, students and parents cite more practical advantages. Online courses allow students in small, rural school districts to take a wide variety of courses that small schools usually do not have the resources to offer. Students may work at an individualized pace and advance or repeat a lesson without affecting the rest of the class. They receive more individualized attention from their teacher and may discuss concepts, problems, and ideas privately with teachers via e-mail.
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