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Virtual Schools: Planning for Success, by Zane L. Berge and Tom Clark, eds. (Book Review)

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Virtual Schools: Planning for Success, by Zane L. Berge and Tom Clark (Eds.). New York: Teachers College Press, 2005, 246 pages, paperback: $28.95; cloth: $64.

Virtual schooling in the United States began in 1996 in two corners of the country with the creation of the Florida Virtual School and the Virtual High School. Five years later, Clark (2001) speculated that there were 40,000 to 50,000 students enrolled in virtual courses. Almost a decade from the first virtual schools, Setzer and Lewis (2005) estimated that there were 328,000 public school enrollments in online or video-based learning. This growth does not include charter school and home-school students who are also enrolled in cyber- and virtual schools.

Berge and Clark bring together many of the leading individuals in the virtual school movement in the United States to discuss some of the factors involved in the success of their initiatives by using their own personal examples

Au: Add Clark 2001 to a reference list.

Au: Add Setzer and Lewis to reference list.

as a series of best practices in matters of policy and planning. The book is divided in exactly this manner, with the first six chapters discussing issues such as equity and access or the technology involved in and marketing of virtual schools. These chapters are all written by individuals well-versed in virtual school initiatives such as the University of California College Preparatory Initiative or the Michigan Virtual High School. The second section of the book provides a series of case studies written by teachers and administrators from a variety of virtual schools, such as the district-based Cumberland County Schools Web Academy, the state-wide Florida Virtual School, the consortium model of the Virtual High School, and the cyber charter K12 Inc.

Clark and Berge introduce this series by describing many of the current issues surrounding virtual schools. This description is focused upon three distinct areas: challenges, benefits, and limitations. Under the challenges, the authors see the new demands for school

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improvement and educational equity brought about by the No Child Left Behind legislation, funding constraints and limited resources available to virtual schools, and the continued issue that technology has not affected teaching or learning in the same way that it has radically changed other aspects of society. Clark and Berge then describe the various benefits that virtual schools can bring, such as expanding access to educational opportunities to "minority, low-income, rural, inner-city, and small-school students as well as for remedial and alternative learners and other targeted populations," and the ability to provide high-quality learning opportunities in resource-rich learning environments that allow for individualized instruction, along with the ability to improve student outcomes and skills through the use of technology to access advanced-level courses, such as the Advanced Placement curriculum. The authors conclude by discussing the opportunity to provide choice to both the home-schooling population and through the use of cyber charter schools.

The limitations, as described by the authors, include the high cost to start virtual school programs and the need for stakeholder buy-in to maintain the cost of running the virtual school. Issues of access to the technology because of the digital divide that continues to exist in North America, along with whether or not a student is suitable for a virtual school program based upon their technology skills, level of motivation, and ability to work independently, are also of concern. The low retention rates, problems with accreditation, and low levels of public understanding and support can also plague virtual schools, according to Clark and Berge.

As an example of one of the issues chapters, Francisco Hernandez, the founder and executive director of the University of California College Preparatory Initiative (UCCP), describes the background of the UCCP. In California, "in schools across all levels of AP program size, Hispanics and African Americans general participated in AP classes at rates substantially below their share of the total school enrollment" (p. 25). The discussion outlines the need for the UCCP and provides a rationale for its focus upon issues of access and equity. In the remainder of the chapter, Hernandez details the development of the UCCP, from the planning stages to the necessity to partner with other existing programs and organizations to increase the opportunity to funding to the problems still unresolved with the program. Hernandez ends with a series of lessons that were learned through the experience. These lessons includ a realization of many of the barriers that minority and low-income students face within the virtual school setting, along with the need for more research into issues related to virtual schooling, the need for additional support to overcome barriers to student success, the need for better training of school personnel to assist these students, the need for more online assistance, and the need for formal communication channels between the virtual school and the brick-and-mortar school.

As an example of one of the case study chapters, Jason Baker, Cathy Bouras, Susan Hartwig, and Earlene McNair describe the K12 Inc.-affiliated Colorado Virtual Academy (COVA). This virtual charter school, designed for students from kindergarten to grade eight, provides students with a guided curriculum that is both online and offline. Parents or other responsible adults are tasked with guiding their students through this material. Students must complete 90% of the online curriculum beyond completed COVA online assessments using equipment provided by the virtual school. In addition to the COVA assessments, students also complete all of the state-mandated evaluations. The authors hold COVA as a successful example of a virtual charter school that can be modeled in other jurisdictions.

For practitioners in the virtual school movement, both administrators and teachers, this text is a must read. It provides a comprehensive overview of many of the issues that can arise in the management of new and established virtual schools. For researchers of virtual schooling, this book is good starting point to become familiar with a number of very dif-

ferent models of virtual schooling and many of
the policy issues that still require scholarly
inquiry.

REFERENCES

Add missing reference information.