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Innovative Public Education or Glorified Homeschooling: Funding Full-Time K-12 Online Learning

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Abstract – While there has been some improvement in what is known about supplemental K-12 online learning, there continues to be a lack of evidence to guide the practice of full-time K-12 online learning. This paper examines the literature and research into the funding of full-time K-12 online learning programs. As one of the few areas where a reasonable body of literature exists, and where both progressives and neo-liberal groups have reached relative agreement. It concludes that full-time K-12 online learning costs less than traditional brick-and-mortar, and that policymakers should consider the nature of instruction when determining funding for full-time K-12 online learning programs.

“A paucity of research exists when examining high school students enrolled in virtual schools, and the research base is smaller still when the population of students is further narrowed to the elementary grades.” (Rice, 2006) A number of scholars have documented the absence of rigorous reviews of virtual schools (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). Cavanaugh, Barbour, and Clark (2009) defended this state of affairs, writing that “in many ways, this [was] indicative of the foundational descriptive work that often precedes experimentation in any scientific field.” We can ask, however, how long must we wait? K-12 online learning began around 1991 (Barbour, 2011). The first cyber charter school began around 1994 (Darrow, 2010).

Yet eight years after Rice’s initial assessment, the state of research into K-12 online learning has not changed. While there has been some improvement in what is known about supplemental K-12 online learning, there continues to be a lack of reliable and valid evidence to guide the practice of full-time K-12 online learning (Barbour, 2013). Yet it is the full-time K-12 online learning that has seen the greatest growth in recent years (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2011). It's past time to insist that K-12 online learning policy, particularly when it comes to full-time programs, be driven by what is actually known based on the available research.

What We Know About The Cost of Full-Time K-12 Online Learning

One area where existing, if limited, research can provide some guidance to policymakers is how to approach funding for online learning—an area where there is more attention to full-time online alternatives. To date, proponents of K-12 online learning have often argued that it should be funded at equal levels to brick-and-mortar education. In one case, proponents even argued that costs not only equal those of traditional schools, but actually exceed them at some points. In a 2004 presentation to the Colorado State Legislature, the Colorado Cyberschool Association argued that the “cost per student [of cyber schooling] is not enormously higher than for in-class students. Over time, cyber education will become substantially more cost-efficient” (Hausner, 2004). The iNACOL position that “online schools should be funded within the range of brick-and-mortar school operating costs” is typical of arguments for comparable funding (Watson & Gemin, 2009). The organization’s stance is based, in large part, on a BellSouth Foundation funded report that concluded “the operating costs of online programs are about the same as the operating costs of a regular brick-and-mortar program” (Anderson, Augenblick, DeCescre, & Conrad, 2006). This conclusion, however, rests on the opinions of individuals largely representing both supplemental and full-time K-12 online learning programs. In addition, the report authors excluded from their estimates traditional schools’ capital expenses and transportation costs; had those costs been included, the authors noted, “the costs of operating virtual schools would have been less per pupil than brick-and-mortar schools” (Anderson et al., 2006).

Almost all other sources have found that K-12 online learning, particularly full-time K-12 online learning, costs less than traditional brick-and-mortar instruction. For example, Barbour (2012) recently detailed costs in one full-time, district-based K-12 online learning program in Michigan, the Virtual

Learning Academy managed by the St. Clair County Regional Education Service. After analyzing budgets posted on the academy's website, Barbour concluded that it cost 16% less in 2009-10 and was projected to cost 7% less in 2010-11 to provide full-time online learning than to provide traditional schooling. Similarly, Dodd reported that the Georgia Cyber Academy, a full-time online charter school, was able to meet Annual Yearly Progress in 2009-10 with 65% of the funding provided to traditional schools, or \$3500/student (Dodd, 2010). During an online presentation to the Classroom 2.0/Future of Education organization, Lisa Gillis, Director of Government Affairs and School Development for the full-time online charter provider Insight Schools, stated that during the 2008-09 school year the average per student funding in the states where Insight Schools operated was \$9,760 (Gillis, 2010). However, Insight Schools was able to operate its full-time online charter schools at 65% of traditional funding, or \$6,480/student. Similar findings emerged in a study of costs in Ohio's full-time online charter schools. The Ohio Legislative Committee on Education Oversight reported that the actual cost of the five existing full-time online charter schools was \$5382/student, compared to \$8437/student for traditional public brick-and-mortar schools (Ohio Legislative Committee on Education Oversight, 2005). Overall, findings suggest that full-time online learning costs approximately 65% of funding for traditional schools.

Similar results have emerged in research on supplemental programs. When considering the costs of supplemental K-12 online learning, the Florida TaxWatch Center for Educational Performance and Accountability examined student performance in and costs of the Florida Virtual School (FLVS). After examining the funding provided to the FLVS from 2002-07, authors of the Center's report concluded that the FLVS was "a credible alternative to traditional schooling as regards both student achievement outcomes and cost-effectiveness" (Florida Tax Watch Center for Educational Performance and Accountability, 2007). Specifically, the report found FLVS to be \$284 more cost effective than brick-and-mortar education in 2003-04, and \$1048 more cost effective by 2006-07. The authors' overall conclusion was that "FLVS gets solid student achievement results at a reduced cost to the State" (Florida Tax Watch Center for Educational Performance and Accountability, 2007).

Moreover, evidence of lower costs comes not only from disinterested researchers and watchdog groups, but even from strong proponents of full-time, online K-12 programs. For example, a study from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute—a strong proponent of full-time online K-12 learning—has reported that online learning is less expensive to provide than traditional brick-and-mortar schooling. In *The Costs of Online Learning*, Butler Battaglini, Haldeman, and Laurans (2012) found that traditional brick-and-mortar education costs on average \$10,000/student; they found that, in contrast, full-time K-12 online learning costs between \$5,100/student and \$7,700/student—or between 51% and 77% of the cost of traditional brick-and-mortar schooling.

Some states have begun re-thinking funding for online providers. And yet, even in the face of the growing body of consistent findings, full-time online charter school providers (and the trade organizations that represent them) continue to argue in favor of equal funding. Recent legislative action in Pennsylvania is an excellent example (Carr-Chellman, & Marsh, 2009). After reports about the student achievement limitations of full-time online charter schools, *Senate Bill 1085* proposes to cut the funding to the state's full-time online charter schools to approximately 60% of the funding provided to traditional brick-and-mortar schools (Pennington, 2013). Yet proponents of full-time K-12 online learning in Pennsylvania continue to argue against this proposed legislation, insisting that funding for their programs should be kept level with traditional brick-and-mortar schooling (Bouder, 2013).

One of the reasons why some have begun to question the funding provided to full-time online learning is because of the level of instruction provided by teacher, and the level of local instructional support required of the parent or learning coach. In fact, it was the role of the learning coach that was found to be critical when full-time online programs faced legal challenges in Wisconsin (Johnson v. Burmaster, 2007) – which initially resulted in a court ordered closure of cyber charter schools at the end of the existing school year due to the fact that parents were primarily responsible for the instructional support of students. The importance of the learning coach is also evident in the fact that programs such as Connections Academy and Insight Schools have created substantial guides aimed at assisting parents/guardians on performing the learning coach role to support their children (Connections Academy, 2004; Kanna, Gillis, & Culver, 2009). In fact, the reliance of these online charter schools on the parent as a primary provider of instruction and instructional support have led some to question whether these programs are publicly-funded instances of homeschooling (Ohanian, 2004). It is this kind of inquiry that have led some researchers, policymakers, and legislators to question the level of funding provided to full-time K-12 online learning programs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Additional research is required to determine whether the business model of for-profit, corporate online charter schooling affects the factors that lead to a high quality online learning experience. It is unclear, but essential to know, whether alternative management arrangements for online charter schools affects the quality of education provided. Further, state and federal policymakers examine the role of the parent/guardian in the instructional model of full-time online learning to determine the level of teaching support that is necessary for students to be successful. If the instructional model used by full-time online learning resembles traditional homeschooling more than traditional brick-and-mortar instruction, consideration should be given to adjustments in the funding provided to full-time online learning to reflect their decreased teaching responsibilities.

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