

Study of Virtual School Performance and Impact:

Presentation of Findings

State Charter
Schools
Commission
of Georgia



Background

- This research was commissioned by the SCSC in the fall of 2014 in an attempt to address the virtual school performance concerns expressed by commissioners.
- The SCSC contracted with Public Impact (PI) and the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) to complete this research.

Research Questions

- This research examines the following questions and represents Phase I of what will be ongoing work in this area:
 1. *WHAT DO VIRTUAL SCHOOLS LOOK LIKE*
 - *What do virtual school models look like?*
 - *Where are virtual schools operating throughout the country?*
 - *What types of students are enrolled in virtual schools?*
 2. *HOW ARE VIRTUAL SCHOOLS PERFORMING?*
 - *How do virtual schools compare to brick and mortar schools?*
 - *Have certain virtual schools produced exemplary student outcomes?*

Research Question #1:

What do virtual schools look like?

- 1(a).** *What do virtual school models look like?*
- 1(b).** *Where are virtual schools operating throughout the country?*
- 1(c).** *What types of students are enrolled in virtual schools?*

Research Question 1(a): *What do virtual models look like?*

■ Fully online schools

- serve students who take their entire course load online and are not required to attend any classes in physical school buildings.
- may be **state-run, district-run, charter schools, or non-charter schools.**

■ Supplemental online programs

- offer individual online courses to supplement existing curriculum offerings and often operate in partnership with brick and mortar schools and/or traditional school districts.
- may be **state-run or district-run.**

■ Blended learning schools

- offer both online curriculum and in-person direct instruction throughout the school day. Students at blended learning schools may spend very little to most of their time online.
- typically **district-run or charter schools.**

Research Question 1(b):

Where are virtual schools operating throughout the country?

- During the 2013- 2014 School Year:
 - 30 states had **fully online schools** that served students statewide,
 - 26 states ran **supplemental online programs**, and
 - it is unclear how many states supported the operation of **blended learning schools**.
- See Map of Operational Virtual Schools: p. 55, [Keeping Pace with K-12 Digital Learning](#)

Watson, J., et al. (2014). Evergreen Education Group. *Keeping Pace with K-12 Digital Learning: An Annual Review of Policy and Practice*. Available: http://www.kpk12.com/wp-content/uploads/EEG_KP2014-fnl-lr.pdf

Research Question 1(c):

What types of students are enrolled in fully online schools?

- Demographic data for students enrolled in supplemental programs and/or blended learning schools is difficult—if not impossible—to collect because state data systems tie student enrollment data to the brick-and-mortar schools in which they receive the majority of instruction.
- As a result, the following research findings focus on students enrolled in fully online schools and outline how virtual school enrollment compares to that of brick-and-mortar schools in terms of:
 - Race/Ethnicity
 - Free or Reduced Lunch Status (FRL), Special Education (SPED), English Language Learners (ELL)
 - Turnover/Attrition
 - At-Risk Students

Research Question 1(c):

*What types of students are enrolled in fully online schools?
[RACE/ETHNICITY]*

- Overall, fully online schools serve:
 - more white students,
 - fewer black students, and
 - fewer Hispanic students than are served, on average, by the respective states in which they operate.
- GEORGIA:
 - Two of the three statewide fully online schools operating in Georgia in 2013-2014 enrolled more white students than non-white students and exceeded the statewide average for white student enrollment by more than 10 percentage points; however,
 - one school exceeded the statewide average for non-white student enrollment by nearly 20 percentage points.

Research Question 1(c):
What types of students are enrolled in fully online schools?
[FRL/SPED/ELL]

- Overall, fully online schools serve:
 - fewer economically disadvantaged students,
 - fewer special education students, and
 - fewer English Language Learners, on average, than the respective states in which they operate.
- GEORGIA:
 - Two of the three statewide fully online schools operating in Georgia in 2013-2014 served a higher percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch than the state,
 - all served about the same percentage of special education students as the state, and
 - all served a lower percentage of ELL students than the state.

Research Question 1(c):

*What types of students are enrolled in fully online schools?
[STUDENT TURNOVER]*

- Students attending fully online schools do not tend to remain enrolled in a given school for extended periods of time.
- **GEORGIA:**
 - All three statewide fully online schools operating in Georgia in 2013-2014 had higher “churn rates” than the state.
 - One school’s churn rate was very close to the state average,
 - one school’s churn rate was 46 percentage points higher than the state average, and
 - one school’s churn rate was 266 percentage points higher than the state average.

Research Question 1(c):

*What types of students are enrolled in fully online schools?
[AT-RISK STUDENTS]*

- Many fully online schools anecdotally report serving more “at-risk” students (those at risk of not completing their education) and “credit-recovery” students (those working to recover credits for courses they previously failed) than those served by brick and mortar schools.
- To date, however, state-level definitions of “at risk” vary significantly, and no formal studies or national data exist to confirm this assertion or verify the extent to which fully online schools actually serve these students.

Research Question #2

HOW ARE VIRTUAL SCHOOLS PERFORMING?

- 2(a). How do virtual schools compare to brick and mortar schools?*
- 2(b). Have certain virtual schools produced exemplary student outcomes?*

Research Question 2(a):

How do virtual schools compare to brick and mortar schools?

- To compare the performance of virtual and brick-and-mortar schools, the following metrics were examined:
 1. Student proficiency on state assessments in reading and math;
 2. School performance or ratings on state accountability measures/systems;
 3. Student growth and/or progress;
 4. Student graduation rates (4 year rates); and
 5. Student drop out rates (at the high school level).

Research Question 2(a):

*How do virtual schools compare to brick and mortar schools?
[STUDENT PROFICIENCY on STATE ASSESSMENTS]*

- Overall, students enrolled in fully online virtual schools demonstrate lower levels of proficiency than students enrolled in brick-and-mortar schools.
- GEORGIA: None of the three statewide fully online schools operating in 2013-2014
 - A. met all of the standardized assessment goals included in their respective charter contracts or
 - B. outperformed the state on the CCRPI “achievement” component.

Research Question 2(a):

*How do virtual schools compare to brick and mortar schools?
[SCHOOL PERFORMANCE on STATE ACCOUNTABILITY METRICS]*

- Overall, fully online schools fare worse than public schools on state accountability metrics.
- Each state accountability system is unique, and criteria for acceptable academic performance differs among states.
- **GEORGIA**: None of the three statewide fully online schools operating in 2012–13 outperformed the overall state average score on the state accountability metric, the College and Career Readiness Performance Index.

Research Question 2(a):

*How do virtual schools compare to brick and mortar schools?
[STUDENT GROWTH/PROGRESS]*

- Fully online students make less progress than public school students overall; however, results vary by state.
- **GEORGIA**: None of the three statewide fully online schools operating in 2012–13 outperformed the state on
 - A. the CCRPI’s “progress” component or
 - B. the SCSC’s value-added performance analysis (which evaluates a school’s impact while controlling for student characteristics).

Research Question 2(a):

*How do virtual schools compare to brick and mortar schools?
[GRADUATION RATES]*

- Overall, fully online students are far less likely to graduate from high school in four years compared to public school students.
 - In 2012–13, 44% of fully online students graduated in four years, compared to 79% of all public school students nationwide.
- **GEORGIA**: In 2012–13, only two of three fully online schools operating in Georgia had a graduating cohort. Neither school's graduation rate exceeded 27% percent that year. (The statewide graduation rate was 72% in 2012–13).

Research Question 2(a):

*How do virtual schools compare to brick and mortar schools?
[DROP-OUT RATES]*

- Overall, fully online students are more likely to drop out of school compared to traditional public school students.
 - In 2012–13, 44% of fully online students graduated in four years, compared to 79% of all public school students nationwide.
- **GEORGIA**: In 2012–13, two of three fully online schools operating in Georgia had drop out rates that exceeded 18%, and one school had a much lower dropout rate of 7%. The state average dropout rate that year was 3.6%.

Research Question 2(b):

Have certain virtual schools produced exemplary student outcomes?

- Overall, no fully online virtual schools are consistently producing strong results. However, there is evidence that some individual fully online schools that are achieving better results than others—especially in certain subject areas.
 - Fully online schools' proficiency rates in reading were the same or better than statewide rates in Georgia, Michigan, and Wisconsin.

Questions for Further Research

- This research identified studies that held answers to the SCSC's initial questions and also found three additional areas that could lead to a better understanding of student performance at fully online schools:
 1. What else can we learn about students who attend fully online schools?
 - (At-risk student designations, factors driving high turnover rates, factors driving racial/ethnic student composition)
 2. What characteristics are common to virtual schools that are performing better than others?
 - (Student outcomes associated with blended or supplemental virtual models, the impact of charter authorizer standards on fully online school performance, factors influencing the efficacy of fully online schools in specific subject areas and/or grade levels, the impact of student screening on virtual school performance)
 3. How do existing policies impact and respond to virtual school performance?
 - (Consequences for fully online schools not meeting state or authorizer standards, promising accountability strategies for improving low virtual school performance, the relationship between the funding and virtual school performance)

Next Steps

- Student performance at fully online schools has considerable room for improvement.
- Further research could move the field closer to identifying practices and policies that would support improved student outcomes in these schools.
- Next steps for the SCSC include:
 - selecting the SCSC's Phase II virtual school research questions,
 - engaging researchers, and
 - continuing to communicate with commissioners, virtual schools, and policymakers.

Questions

