The New
ATLANTIS
A Journal of Technology & Society

The Rise of Cyber-Schools

Online Education and Its Enemies

Holly Bates, an eight-year-old Florida girl, has such bad allergies that being near nuts or nut-based products—or even being near someone who has recently eaten nuts—can trigger anaphylactic shock. With peanut peril ubiquitous, young Holly is not enrolled in a traditional public school; instead, she attends Florida Connections Academy, a full-time "virtual" school that she accesses from her home computer. Her mother, a former public school teacher, loves the program. "The curriculum is unbelievable," she told the *Tampa Tribune* in 2007. "It would astound you, the progress these children make."

The Sunshine State is something of a virtual education pioneer. Since the 2003-04 school year, Florida has partnered with two for-profit companies—Connections Academy and K12 Inc.—to provide pupils with the option of attending school online, full-time, for free. But years before that, Florida was promoting other types of virtual education. Florida Virtual School is a statewide program that allows students to take individual courses online, often in subjects not offered at their local school, like Latin or Macroeconomics. It began in 1997 as a small grant-based project with just 77 course enrollments. Today, Florida Virtual School is its own school district and has an annual budget near $100 million. In the 2008-09 school year, according to *Education Next*, some "84,000 students will complete 168,000 half-credit courses, a ten-fold increase since 2002-03." A newly-minted Florida Virtual School Connections Academy, announced in August 2008, will further expand online learning options and access.

Other states have been experimenting with virtual education, too. A report released in early 2009 by the Sloan Consortium, a pro-online-education organization, finds that in 2007-08 some 1,030,000 American children took online classes in more

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than two dozen states. That figure, which represents a 47 percent increase in enrollment since 2005-06, comprises students who mostly attend brick-and-mortar schools but take some cyber-courses administered through their local districts, and also pupils who predominantly do their work at home through virtual charter schools, such as the one in Florida. The courses are paid for—and at some level overseen—by the public education system. The number of students taking online courses through private schools or more traditional homeschooling is unknown, but may be fairly high.

Online courses offered on-site at public schools—an approach known as "blended education"—are an increasingly popular option. Students can take classes in specialized subjects, earn college credit, resolve scheduling conflicts, or make up credit in courses they previously failed. At a more basic level, small schools in rural areas report that online education is a godsend in providing quality instruction in subjects—such as foreign languages and advanced math and science—they would otherwise be unable to offer. Despite some anxiety expressed by teachers in the Sloan report, there is little evidence that in-school online instruction has so far resulted in the replacement of classroom teachers in significant numbers; administrators simply find it an attractive option for special situations.

More radically, many students across the United States have followed Holly Bates in leaving the classroom altogether to be educated in cyber-schools full-time. These students mostly work from home, but unlike in traditional homeschooling, their parents are not their primary instructors. The curriculum is provided by an agency such as Connections Academy; a teacher with state certification oversees instruction, communicating with students and parents via e-mail, Web chat, telephone, and video-conference. Parents are responsible for making sure their children stay on task. Students review material at their own pace, allowing gifted children to accelerate and stay engaged, and permitting those children who need extra time to get it, with plenty of help and individual attention along the way. Cyber-school pupils take the same state-mandated standardized tests as their peers in public school.

For this approach to succeed, cyber-students need discipline, motivation, and self-direction—just the qualities that they may have been missing in the real classroom in the first place. Also, parents of younger pupils must be deeply committed to their children's schooling and able to devote several hours a day to facilitating lessons. These not-trivial factors mean that cyber-education is not a possibility for many students in the nation's most profoundly troubled schools.

That's a big problem for virtual schooling, since assisting kids in troubled classrooms is America's grand educational project (see, for example, the No Child Left Behind Act). And the millions of youngsters who languish

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academically, the data show, do not need *self-guided* learning but intense, hands-on, in-your-face *teacher-guided* learning. Struggling pupils require the opposite of what virtual education provides. Politicians, therefore, may be unwilling to allot to cyber-schooling the funding it requires to meet demand and grow. On this point, a recent kerfuffle involving Florida Virtual School—legislators had proposed to cut its budget by as much as 15 percent—is instructive and ominous.

Another powerful political force acts as a restraint on virtual education's expansion: teachers' unions. These influential interest groups, sensing that more virtual schools means fewer dues-paying members, have not been reluctant to vigorously oppose online learning.

For example, in 2004, the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC), the state's largest teachers' union, filed a lawsuit to shutter Wisconsin Virtual Academy (WIVA), which at the time enrolled 420 students. Union lawyers argued, in part, that publicly-funded WIVA depended on parental instruction, and thus was in violation of state laws, which required public school teachers to have a valid teaching license. They also argued that virtual schools didn't satisfy state requirements related to geographic districts. After prolonged legal proceedings, a state appeals court ruled in late 2007 that virtual schools in Wisconsin (total enrollment then at 3,500) were not eligible for state aid. The court explained that it took no position on the *merits* of virtual education—but it did rule that the laws as they stood did not permit taxpayer funding of virtual schools in Wisconsin; if citizens wished to continue online academies with public funding, they would have to petition their representatives to change the law.

They did, and lawmakers quickly drafted legislation to keep the virtual schools up and running. State legislators, however, did throw WEAC a bone by instituting an arbitrary cap on the number of pupils who could enroll in Wisconsin's virtual charter schools, thereby artificially limiting supply in the face of great demand.

The union's motives in filing suit were transparently self-interested. WIVA cost less and got better results than the unionized public schools: WIVA employed one teacher for every forty-two students, producing above-average student achievement for half the cost of normal per-pupil expenditures ($5,500 as opposed to $9,000-$13,000). Expanding this model would result in fewer on-site teachers—bad news for the union, though surely welcome to taxpayers. Add that to the unions' philosophical hostility toward anything extra-establishment—especially giving uncredentialed parents greater input in their children's education—and it appears likely that their opposition to online education has only just begun. As an employee of the National Education Association, the country's largest teachers' union, said of Florida's virtual-school programs, "There are concerns about deputizing

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whoever happens to be at the kitchen table as a teacher."

This bizarre description of parents who devote themselves personally to their children's education does nothing to inspire confidence that unions have students' best interests at heart. To be sure, virtual education is not for everyone; but then neither are homeschooling, blended education, private or parochial schooling, or the many other academic alternatives. It is dangerously foolish to insist that the brick-and-mortar public school offers the best educational course for everybody and to throw up obstacles in front of parents pursuing other options that may allow their children to flourish.

In their 2008 book *Disrupting Class: How Disrupting Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns*, Harvard business theorists Clayton Christensen, Michael Horn, and Curtis Johnson envision a future in which education is highly customized to each student's learning style, relying heavily on special software and virtual courses. They predict that one-quarter of all high school courses will be online by 2016 and one-half by 2019—an unlikely (and undesirable) forecast. But while the authors seem a touch techno-starstruck in the details, their fundamental insight is quite sound: By empowering students and parents, by loosening the oppressive grip of the teachers' unions, individualized virtual learning is one promising path to incrementally improving modern American education.

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