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## Virtual Schools: An Ethical Option

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## Introduction

An odyssey of civil rights in education has been taking place in America over the last 16 years. The school choice issue has heated up in the last decade and a half, traversing the years from 1990, with the first urban school choice program in Wisconsin, to 2006, with a suit filed against Los Angeles Unified Schools for lack of cooperation in informing parents of educational options available. The core argument is that parents, not government, should have the primary responsibility and economic power to determine where and how their children should be educated. This is a basic ethical, philosophical, and human rights concern, and is an essential American freedom.

## The Questions Everyone Asks

Proponents and opponents ask two crucial questions: Should parents receive vouchers to choose the schools their children attend or take advantage of charter schools offered in many states? Moreover, should parents remove their children from brick and mortar schools and choose virtual online schools instead? Parents want what is best for their children. A growing number of parents say they have the moral, ethical, and civil right to choose where their children attend school. The public schools express serious concerns over the loss of revenue that could result from mass withdrawals from physical schools. Religious communities have opened schools that address parents' ethical and moral concern. In addition, charter schools have opened to address specific learning needs. This paper addresses the position of virtual schools, and suggests that the educational community consider the ethical implications of this mode of instruction.

## Why Today's Schools Can No Longer Be All Things to All People

Unanticipated growth has seriously damaged the capacity of neighborhood schools to carry out their original intent. These schools were built to accommodate students living in the environs immediately surrounding the buildings. Neighborhood schools were originally intended to decrease "student/teacher ratios" and "transportation costs" (Salyer 2004). However, continuous population growth has increased in the number of student numbers who attend neighborhood schools. This influx of students has stretched budgets to the point where the schools' ability to provide adequate materials and instructional attention has been compromised. Many schools are unable to meet either a moral expectation of individual attention to students' needs or the federal mandate of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002). The costs of "traditional" education continue to rise.

## Virtual Schools Solve Many Problems

Virtual schools can reduce the costs that required for attending traditional schools. Textbooks, notebook paper, and other traditional school supplies are used in minimal quantities. Buildings do not have to be renovated and expanded. Classroom overcrowding could be positively impacted with fewer students. Virtual schools were slow to develop. Because of the growing demands, this concept accelerated quickly. In 1995, Washington State began the first online K-12 schools. By 2001, more schools were created on the Internet. The United States Department of Education recently indicated that there are more than one million students attend virtual schools in 37 states. Physical location is no longer obstacle to achieving for child in underperforming schools. Some virtual schools provide students with materials that range from a laptop computer and microscope to crayons and

paintbrushes. Virtual schools receive public funds for teacher salaries and other educational expenses. In Wisconsin, for example, the open-enrollment policy means that a parent may select any district. Appleton's Wisconsin Virtual Academy enrolls students from across the state. Teacher conferences and field trips are a part of the Wisconsin program <http://www.the-atec.org/virtual-schools.asp>

Who benefits from virtual schools? "For homebound students or rural children with few school choices, online schools provide a much-needed service," said Mary Gifford, director of Arizona Virtual Academy, the largest virtual charter school in the state (Ryman, 2005).

Virtual schools can offer a greater variety of information to those students who live in remote areas. Students are able to visit historical places around the world via Internet access. They have instant access to libraries, zoos, museums, and encyclopedias in every country. Students are also given a vast variety of curricula from which to choose. A full complement of subjects can provide a rich and complete educational foundation.

The Appalachian Technology in Education Consortium (2006) indicated that virtual schools benefit students who have medical issues that prevent them from attending traditional classes. That is, disabled and other sickly children may succeed where they have failed in the past. Students with major illnesses can maintain their studies and remain in the same grade as their counterparts from a traditional school setting, allowing them to graduate with their peers.

#### Many Parents Are Dissatisfied with Today's Traditional Schools

Parent dissatisfaction with the public schools could lead educators to offer the virtual school as a viable option in the rapid growth of alternative schools. With the expansion of alternative schools, an attempt is being made to give parents and children a choice based on the needs of the students. With the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002), the focus has been on the at-risk student who is having difficulty keeping up with the curriculum and testing standards. With this at-risk emphasis, NCLB is ignoring our most talented and gifted students. At Stanford University, an online program has been launched to address the diverse needs of gifted students (Bartindale, 2006). According to Program Director and Professor Emeritus Patrick Suppes (2006), this program has significance because "The gifted are among those left behind," (Pg.1).

#### Some Virtual School Solutions

Virtual schools are a part of the future of education. These schools can provide partial answers to many issues found in the public schools.

- One teacher can facilitate many more students without the interference of behaviors and interruptions that occur daily in the traditional school, alleviating the teacher shortage problem.
- Computer programs could be designed to grade student submissions, relieving the teacher of many hours of work.
- Learning takes place in more than one location, serving the needs of rural students, hospital bound students, and others with special needs.
- Learning would take place 24 hours a day, seven days a week, allowing students to do their studying at hours that are best suited to their individual peak learning times.
- The learning process will be less influenced by tardiness, detention, absenteeism, and classroom disruption, and other non instructional factors.
- Learning would become customized and individualized.
- Central office administration costs could be diminished. A great deal of school funding is consumed in the governance procedures of the central office. A smaller staff would be needed to manage a team of teachers and handle payroll, attendance, report cards, and accreditation issues cutting central office costs to a pittance.

Virtual schools and school vouchers would seem to be an ideal pairing. Some virtual schools charge a tuition fee. Although there is a wide range of tuition costs, the average cost for one subject is about \$300. The average cost for a full standard curriculum is about \$12,000 a school year (Bartindale 2006). These costs are comparable to the tuition fees for attending most private schools. With school vouchers, parents choosing to enroll their children in private virtual schools would have the economic opportunity to do so. Vouchers would also allow more students the freedom of school choice.

Virtual Education is Continuing to Grow and so is the Freedom to Choose

The future for virtual schools is positive. Expectations are that programs will continue to develop and attract even more parents and children. The range and variation of online schools are comparable to traditional schools. The selection of a particular program may depend on a parent's preference for a particular teaching or learning style. Most importantly, the essential quality of online learning is that it is in ethical agreement with the basic right and freedom of parents to choose which schools their children attend. Distance education finally brings democracy to education. Rod Paige, 2004 U. S. Secretary of Education, stated, "Education is the only business still debating the usefulness of technology. Schools remain unchanged for the most part, despite numerous reforms and increased investments in computers and networks"

Virtual education is integrating itself as an essential part of the new Information Age. We will continue to see major changes in education, the workplace, and in everyday life (Draves & Coates, 2004). New infrastructures are evolving, infusing additional values, work ethic, and behavior into the learning environment. In addition, many traditional schooling methods are being replaced with online learning. Virtual schools are the foundation of this paradigm shift. Educators have an ethical responsibility to inform citizens of their rights in selecting the best education for themselves and their children in 21st century American society. Virtual schools are timely and appropriate additional choices that educators are ethically required to present to parents and schools. When the community is fully informed of this choice, true freedom to choose a particular form of education will become a recognized right and reality for all human beings.

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