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VIRTUAL SCHOOLS IN THE U.S. 2015: POLITICS, PERFORMANCE, POLICY, AND RESEARCH EVIDENCE

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Introduction

Virtual education continues to be a focal point for policymakers interested in expanding education choices and improving the efficiency of public education. In particular, full-time virtual schools, also known as online schools or cyber schools, have attracted a great deal of attention. Proponents argue that online curriculum can be tailored to individual students and that it has the potential to promote greater student achievement than can be realized in traditional brick-and-mortar schools. Further, lower costs—primarily for instructional personnel and facilities—make virtual schools financially appealing. Assumptions about the cost-effectiveness of virtual schools coupled with policies that expand school choice and provide market incentives attractive to for-profit companies have fueled a fast-growing virtual school expansion in the U.S.

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This report is the third of a series of annual reports by the National Education Policy Center (NEPC) on virtual education in the U.S. The NEPC reports contribute to the existing evidence and discourse on virtual education by providing an objective analysis of the evolution and performance of full-time, publicly funded K-12 virtual schools. Specifically, the NEPC reports: analyze the universe of proposed state bills related to virtual education; assess the research evidence that bears on K-12 virtual teaching and learning; describe the policy issues raised by available evidence; analyze the growth and performance of full-time virtual schools; and, offer recommendations for future research. The 2015 report presents several important findings:

- Policymakers continue to face difficult challenges in the areas of funding and governance; instructional program quality; and recruitment and retention of high quality teachers.
 - Significant policy issues associated with funding and governance include linking funding to actual costs, identifying accountability structures, delineating enrollment boundaries and funding responsibilities, and limiting profiteering by EMOs.
 - Significant policy issues associated with instructional program quality include ensuring the quality and quantity of curricula and instruction, as well as monitoring student achievement.
 - Significant policy issues associated with the recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers include identification of appropriate skills for online teaching, designing and providing appropriate professional development, and designing appropriate teacher evaluation.
- Claims made in support of expanding virtual education are largely unsupported by high quality research evidence.
- A total of 400 full-time virtual schools enrolling an estimated 263,705 students were identified, an enrollment increase of some 2,000 students since last year's report; 73% of the identified students were enrolled in charters operated by Education Management Organizations (EMOs). In 2013-14, the largest for-profit operator of virtual schools, K12 Inc., alone enrolled over 95,535 students (37% of the total full-time virtual school student enrollment).
- Compared with conventional public schools, full-time virtual schools continue to serve relatively few Black and Hispanic students, impoverished students, and special education students.
- On the common metrics of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), state performance rankings, and graduation rates, full-time virtual schools lagged significantly behind traditional brick-and-mortar schools.

Our first report in 2013 report provided an initial set of research-based recommendations to guide policymaking on virtual education; subsequent reports, including this one, revisit

those recommendations to document the degree to which progress is being made toward more sound policies for virtual education in the U.S. When appropriate, earlier recommendations may be revised.

This 2015 report is organized in three major sections. Section I examines the policy and political landscape associated with virtual schooling and describes the current state of affairs related to finance and governance, instructional program quality, and teacher quality. The authors analyze to what extent, if any, policy in the past year has moved toward or away from the 2014 recommendations. Based on an analysis of legislative development across all states, the authors find that troubling issues continue to outpace informed policy.

Section II reviews the research relevant to virtual schools. It finds that despite considerable enthusiasm for virtual education in some quarters, there is little credible research to support virtual schools' practices or to justify ongoing calls for ever greater expansion. The authors find that even as research on virtual schooling has increased, there is still little high-quality evidence that justifies ongoing calls for the expansion of virtual schools.

Section III provides a descriptive census of full time virtual schools and their expansion based on data gathered from state, corporate and organizational sources. Details on enrollment include the student characteristics of: race/ethnicity; sex; free and reduced lunch eligibility; special education designation; ELL status; and grade level. Other information includes student-teacher ratios. In addition, details on student achievement include: Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) ratings; state ratings, and graduation rates.

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