Despite Serious Problems and a Lack of Research Support, Virtual Schools Continue to Spread as Policymakers Remain AWOL

Key NEPC Research Brief Takeaway: Research reveals overwhelming evidence of poor performance by full-time virtual and blended learning schools.

BOULDER, Colo. (PRWEB) May 28, 2019 -- Virtual Schools in the U.S. 2019, a three-part research brief released today by the National Education Policy Center, examines the claim that online curriculum can be tailored to individual students more effectively than curriculum in traditional classrooms.

Proponents contend that this potential for individualization allows virtual schools to promote greater student achievement than can be realized in traditional brick-and-mortar schools. NEPC researchers found, however, that the research evidence does not support this claim. Yet the lack of research support has done little to dampen policymakers’ enthusiasm, perhaps because virtual schools are marketed as promising lower operating costs—primarily via cutbacks in instructional personnel and facilities.

Section I of the brief, Full-Time Virtual and Blended Schools: Enrollment, Student Characteristics, and Performance, provides straightforward analyses of the characteristics and performance of full-time, publicly funded K-12 virtual schools. The data reveal that full-time virtual and blended learning schools continue to perform poorly.

Section II, What Virtual and Blended Education Research Reveals, points to a serious shortfall in the scholarly research. It reviews the relevant available studies related to virtual school practices and finds that much of this is atheoretical, methodologically questionable, contextually limited, and overgeneralized. As a result, the available research is of little value in guiding policy.

Section III, Key Policy Issues in Virtual Schools: Finance and Governance, Instructional Quality, and Teacher Quality, provides an overview of recent state legislative efforts to craft policy regarding virtual schools. As in past years, bills to increase oversight of virtual schools continue to be introduced. Some legislative actions have been prompted by state audits and legal challenges, as exemplified by recent virtual school controversies in California and Ohio. As such, the bills have been aimed at addressing accountability and governance structures, as well as curbing the operation of for-profit virtual schools. However, there is little evidence that legislative actions are being informed by available research on the performance of virtual schools.

The authors recommend that policymakers hit the pause button on further virtual school expansion until we understand how to address the poor performance of these schools.


Find Documents:
Publication Announcement: https://nepc.info/node/9813
NEPC Publication: https://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/virtual-schools-annual-2019

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