

November-December 2000 - Articles

Taking Charge - Larry and Susan Kaseman

How Will Virtual Schools Effect Homeschooling?

Virtual courses and degree programs are becoming increasingly available through the Internet. This column will consider how they will affect American education in general and homeschooling in particular and how we can respond.

What are virtual courses and virtual schools?

Technically anything a person learns from or by means of a computer could be called "virtual learning." However, this column will focus on organized courses offered on the Internet, usually for credit. (The amount of information one can gather by surfing the Net and visiting web sites will not be discussed.) The term "virtual schools" as used in this column refers to programs that offer a range of virtual courses, sometimes organized into curriculums and sometimes offering credit and even high school and college diplomas. Some virtual schools are sponsored or subsidized by states, some are a part of existing private schools or colleges, and some are run by for-profit companies.

Public schools may try to minimize the number of students they lose to virtual schools by offering virtual courses themselves. Students would enroll in their local public school, select from approved virtual courses and complete the course work either on computers at school or at home (perhaps with the school even supplying the computer and a voucher for course tuition). Students would prove that they had completed the course by taking a test or in some other way. The school would grant course credit and eventually a high school diploma. Public schools could also allow students to combine conventional courses with virtual courses. (For examples of state-sponsored virtual courses that are already available, see www.cosc.k12.co.us and www.dcs.k12.ak.us:8001.)

Virtual courses vary widely.

- * Some are quite conventional; others are innovative.
- * Some are limited primarily to reading and written responses, much like conventional correspondence courses. Others offer interaction among the teacher and students through chat rooms, email, or a dedicated listserv. A few have limited real time voice conversations, sometimes accompanied by a picture of the speaker (assuming everyone involved has a sufficiently sophisticated hardware and software).
- * Some courses are unscheduled; students may work on them


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whenever they choose. Some are scheduled, including those with real time interaction among students and teacher.


* Some are free to people for whom they are intended (such as residents of the state which is sponsoring them); others are fairly expensive.


How will virtual courses and schools affect American education in general?

Here are some of the ways in which virtual courses and schools are likely to affect education in America. 

* **Opportunity:** Virtual courses will give many students (including homeschoolers) increased opportunities to study with teachers anywhere in the world on any topic being taught on the Internet. Public schools will undoubtedly use virtual courses to supplement what they can offer in real classrooms. In addition, unscheduled courses will allow students to work at their own pace and according to their own schedule, so conventional schools could use them to offer more individualized programs for students.

* **Limitations imposed by the medium:** Material is presented to students via a computer monitor. Therefore, it will have to be formatted linearly, flat, and primarily visually. Students and on-sight supervisors will have to be responsible for any hands-on activities. Immediate interaction among teacher and students will be very limited or non-existent. Obviously, some subject matter is much more easily conveyed through computers than others. Also, subtle but very important elements like the teacher's warmth and enthusiasm will decrease dramatically. 

* **Dehumanization:** Virtual courses give students much less opportunity for human interaction than do real classes. Also, a growing body of literature documents the detrimental mental and social effects of use of television and monitors. Ideas presented by Jerry Mander in Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television are being furthered by articles such as "Strangers in Our Homes: TV and Our Children's Minds," by Susan R. Johnson (available at <http://sooth.com/a/johnson.html>). 

* **Undermining public schools:** If a significant number of students choose virtual schools over public schools, the power, authority, and prestige of public schools will decrease. Public school officials who become concerned about the growth of virtual schools will probably try to control them in conventional ways, such as limiting the credits students may earn through virtual schools and controlling the process by which virtual schools are accredited. 

* **Increased government control of education:** In a real classroom, the teacher can know fairly well what is going on, who is paying attention, who seems to be grasping the material presented, and who needs extra help or motivation. Grades can be based on class participation as well as written work and

tests. However, in virtual courses, grades will be based primarily on test scores, with written assignments sometimes included. Since many schools already administer state-mandated tests to their students, it is reasonable to assume that virtual schools will use them as well, at least part of the time. The more any educational program relies on state-mandated testing, the greater opportunity the state has to control that program. And since courses need to cover material that is on the tests so students will be prepared for them, a state that controls tests also controls curriculum.

*** Increased standardization of education:** Virtual courses are likely to focus on national educational standards developed as part of Goals 2000, especially since the Internet has no state (or national) boundaries. Therefore, most virtual courses would adhere to the standards, values, and beliefs chosen by the federal government. Our society would be moving closer to uniform education which would undermine the diversity in education that is necessary to maintain freedom of thought and a free society.

*** Increased surveillance of students:** The state will want to develop ways to ensure that students actually do required course work and spend enough time on task to meet the requirements of compulsory school attendance laws. (Some programs require that students check in at intervals; other use web cameras to take attendance and ensure that students do their own work.) Also, security measures will be needed to ensure that work that students submit is their own and not copied from another student or written by someone else. How will studying in an atmosphere of distrust affect students and their learning?


*** Increased emphasis on accreditation:** Parents, students, employers, and others will want virtual schools to be accredited to be assured that courses are thorough and accurate. At present accreditation is being done by several general accrediting organizations and three that specialize in virtual schools.

Accreditation of real schools is based primarily on (1) credentials of teachers and administrators, (2) budget, facilities available, size of library, etc.; and (3) performance of students on standardized tests. Obviously, for virtual schools, the emphasis will be on testing.

*** Increased opportunities for large corporations to control education:** Corporations are likely to support virtual schools as an easy, inexpensive, accessible means by which many people can be trained to do the kind of jobs corporations want them to do. Since large corporations have a strong influence on government, virtual schools provide an easy means by which corporations could increase their control over education, in part through the accreditation process. Also, the Internet is subject to regulation by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), both of which are also strongly influenced by large corporations. (Just think about

corporations like Disney gaining greater control over American education!)

Why should we homeschoolers pay attention to developments in virtual courses and virtual schools?

* **Homeschooling families find virtual courses a helpful learning resource**, especially for advanced or esoteric areas of study. Also, virtual schools offer a way to earn official high school and college credit and sometimes even diplomas at home. 

* **Public school officials who are concerned about virtual schools often link virtual schools with homeschooling.** Concerned officials will probably work to regulate not just virtual schools themselves but anyone who might be free to use them as a substitute for conventional schools, which would lead to increased regulation of all homeschoolers.

* The general public's expectations of homeschoolers are influenced by what is the norm in conventional schools. If conventional schools begin relying more on virtual courses, the public will assume that homeschoolers are or should be using them. **If schools rely even more on testing to measure students' learning, there will be more pressure to require increased testing of homeschoolers.**

* For obvious reasons, many people will assume that people who spend most or all of their "school time" at home taking virtual courses should be called "homeschoolers." **This means there would be yet another group of people referred to as homeschoolers.** In addition, states that require homeschoolers to register with the state or report their enrollment to the state will need to require that "virtual schoolers" do the same, so that the compulsory school attendance law can be enforced. Otherwise, anyone charged with truancy could simply say, "Oh, I'm a virtual schooler."

This raises two concerns. First, students who enroll in a public school for virtual schooling should not be considered homeschoolers, for reasons explained in the previous "Taking Charge" column (HEM, Sept-Oct, 2000, pp. 16-19. home-ed-magazine.com/HEM/175.tch.html).

Second, school officials and the general public may feel that these "virtual homeschoolers" need to be monitored, regulated, and evaluated by school officials, especially if schools begin to feel threatened by virtual schools. Homeschoolers who are not relying primarily on virtual courses would get caught in the web of regulation intended to control virtual schools. It would not make sense and we would not want to try to maintain our homeschooling freedoms by suggesting that the state regulate homeschools that use virtual courses but not those who do not use such courses, because virtual courses are viewed as a valuable resource for homeschoolers.

What We Can Do

We can plan now for ways we can respond when public school officials, legislators, or others suggest that regulation of homeschooling should be increased so that people don't claim to be virtual schoolers but do nothing to get an adequate education. If we are prepared and respond quickly when this idea first surfaces, perhaps we may be able to convince school officials that increasing state regulation of homeschooling is NOT the way to deal with the threat they see coming from virtual schools.

Among the points we can make:

* Homeschooling is working well. Although some homeschoolers are using virtual courses, evidence has not been presented that increased regulation of homeschooling is needed. "If it's not broken, don't fix it."

* Increased regulation of homeschooling would inevitably force homeschools to become more like conventional schools, so their children could pass state required tests or meet whatever other requirements the state devised. This would undermine the many homeschools that are working well because they provide an alternative to conventional schools. "Don't mess with success."

* The government has used two main justifications for its involvement in schools. The first is its need to be accountable to the taxpayers for the way tax money is spent. However, as long as homeschools are not receiving tax money (as vouchers, tax credits, etc.), this does not apply to homeschoolers. The second justification is that the state has the right to ensure that citizens do not become a burden on the state. Since evidence is lacking that homeschoolers are growing up to be wards of the state, this justification does not apply to the increased regulation of homeschoolers either.

* Instead of trying to control virtual schools by increasing state regulation of homeschools, public schools could reduce their emphasis on standardized testing and learn from homeschoolers how important positive human interaction and experience in the real world are to children's learning.

Conclusion

It is worth our while as homeschoolers to pay attention to the virtual school movement as it unfolds. If it takes off, it will change American education in ways that will influence everyone, including homeschoolers. It could lead to increased state and federal regulation of homeschoolers. © 2000 Larry and Susan Kaseman Larry and Susan Kaseman have been learning through homeschooling with their four children since 1979. They are the authors of Taking Charge Through Homeschooling: Personal and Political Empowerment. © 2000,