

Lowering Costs and Improving Education with Online Learning

New Hampshire's virtual learning school makes learning personal—and cost effective.

By Larry White



School districts are facing rising healthcare and pension expenses. Is it possible to decrease the cost of education to help meet those increasing expenses without negatively affecting the quality of students' education?

An innovative experiment in New Hampshire is radically changing the way secondary school students learn—a change that can have a significant effect on both cost and quality of education in that state.

Virtual Learning Academy Charter School (VLACS) is New Hampshire's first statewide online school that

offers courses free of charge to all middle school and high school students who live in New Hampshire. The school also serves out-of-state students on a tuition basis. Approved as a public charter school in New Hampshire, VLACS is also a nonprofit organization that is governed by an independent board of trustees.

VLACS students have access to college-preparatory, honors, Advanced Placement (AP), recovery, and special-interest courses. They can enroll as full-time students, taking all their classes online, or they can choose to take classes to supplement the work they do in their

brick-and-mortar schools. The school currently has more than 8,000 students and more than 18,000 online course enrollments. Students from every public high school in the state are taking one or more VLACS online courses.

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Learning and Support Anytime at Any Pace

Student-teacher ratios at VLACS are similar to those in traditional schools, and all the school's 120 instructors are deemed highly qualified teachers; most have master's degrees. Students interact with teachers using video and other computer connections, and online content is available 24-7, 365 days a year.

VLACS uses a competency-based approach, and students learn at their own pace. They can complete a one-year math course in only a few months if they achieve competency quickly. They are also able to take well over a year to complete a language course if they are struggling with the subject.

Through online learning, many students can complete enough AP courses to significantly reduce the number of courses they need for college graduation. A high school student completing one year of college online might save a family up to \$40,000 in tuition costs.

In addition to interaction with teachers and required participation of parents, VLACS has a strong guidance department to help motivate students and to assist them with career and college goals. Each enrolled student is assigned an adviser who maintains regular contact with parents regarding the student's progress and answers questions that parents may have about courses, policies, and college placement. A help desk with academic and technical assistance is also available.

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A Unique Funding Model

Most school districts receive money from various governmental funding sources based on some measure of student enrollment or attendance. However, VLACS is funded through the New Hampshire Education Trust Fund, which was established specifically to support the state's charter schools. VLACS requests funding on the basis of students reaching competency in a course. Thus, if a student achieves only half of the required



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competencies in a course during a fiscal year, VLACS will request 50% of the funding for that student.

Partnership with Other Educators

Academic and cost advantages of online learning, however, do not suggest abandoning more traditional methods of learning. Instead, a close partnership among those using all methods of learning seems most beneficial.

Here are a few examples:

- Homeschooled students can supplement their curriculum with online advanced courses, such as calculus and biology. That benefits the students as well as the school district; even a small increase in the number of students being homeschooled reduces a traditional school's costs.
- For students with difficulties attending traditional schools for a wide variety of reasons, full-time enrollment in an online school offers a worthwhile alternative.
- Students who have failed a course at their traditional school have the option of retaking it as an online

course, which may allow them to graduate on time or keep them from repeating a grade—thus saving the school district money.

- For special-education students, having access to online courses that can be taken at a slower or faster pace and can be repeated as necessary will help them achieve competency. If speed of learning is a major factor for a special-education student, online learning may be a helpful and cost-effective way to achieve success.
- For most students, a mix of traditional brick-and-mortar schools and online courses has tremendous advantages. By attending a traditional school, students benefit from socialization, sports programs, food service, and more. However, by adding online courses to the mix, a school can offer many more curriculum choices, even if only a few students wish to enroll in a course, such as a Chinese or AP Biology. That would eliminate the choice a school must make between offering a very expensive course with only eight students enrolled and not offering the course at all.
- Having students taking a significant number of online courses allows schools flexibility and cost reductions in areas such as bus schedules, class size, textbook purchases, and infrastructure requirements. Having some students work from home for a portion of the day rather than having all students arrive at the school simultaneously can help reduce the number of busses that need to be purchased. Switching some course content to digital can reduce the need for textbook purchases and can allow for more frequent updates of course content. VLACS is an all-digital school and does not even have a line item for textbooks.

Many businesses have taken advantage of technology to control costs and enhance quality. VLACS

has been able to use technology and partner with traditional schools to serve as an innovative model for improving student outcomes and controlling costs.

Just the Beginning

VLACS has been funded primarily by the State of New Hampshire Department of Education, and there is no cost for parents of eligible high school students. VLACS, however, is not ending its quest for innovation.

The school has recently received grants from the Next Generation Learning Challenges program and the Nellie Mae Education Foundation to develop new competency-based education programs, including learning through projects, learning through experience, and internships.

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