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Online Educators Gaining Both Classes and Critics

By MORGAN SMITH

HOUSTON — The school day was difficult, said Will Clarkston, a soft-spoken 20-year-old who, in his own words, can't sit still.

His dyslexia sometimes leaves him grasping to text the right acronym to his friends. He often loses his train of thought because of his attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Though he graduated from a public high school here two years ago, he was not prepared to go to college.

"The maturity level, his frustration threshold — he just was not ready," said his mother, Carol Clarkston.

Six weeks ago Mr. Clarkston began taking online courses in financial management. Now, he can have his course materials read to him. Or, when his mind wanders, he can hit pause and take a walk. If he does not understand something, he can contact a teacher. He has done so well that he now plans to attend [community college](#) in the spring and, eventually, to open his own process-serving business. Ms. Clarkston said she has seen a transformation in his self-esteem.

Virtual education offers opportunities for primary and secondary students at both ends of the learning spectrum. It allows more advanced students to take courses beyond their grade level or to study subjects their school districts might not offer. For students who are struggling, it can provide crucial supplemental or remedial help outside of the school walls. And for students like Mr. Clarkston who require different styles of teaching that a traditional classroom cannot provide, its flexibility can be a godsend.

Public schools are grappling with how to most effectively integrate virtual education into their classrooms. It threatens many concepts that are fundamental to the identity of public education: districts defined by geographic boundaries and brick-and-mortar buildings. Among the challenges, however, is dealing with what it means to be publicly financed in a digital education world, where much of the curriculum and even employees can come from profit-making companies.

It is a policy maze being navigated by state lawmakers, school leaders and educators across the country. Meanwhile, the number of students enrolled in virtual courses is growing. Thirty percent of high school students have taken a course online, according to a 2011 report from [Project](#)

Tomorrow, a nonprofit education group, and Blackboard, an education technology company. In the 2009-10 school year, 150,000 students attended school online full time, according to **Keeping Pace 2010**, a report on virtual education produced by the Evergreen Education consulting group.

Some educators want more evidence that online instruction works, and they are skeptical of such enthusiastic private-sector involvement. **Gene V. Glass**, a senior researcher at the **University of Colorado's National Education Policy Center**, who will release a study on virtual education this fall, questions the findings of a **2009 United States Department of Education analysis** that found online learning could lead to superior results. In the five studies that were collected at the kindergarten-through-12th-grade level, he said, the students who took courses online had more time to study — or they also had face-to-face instruction.

Mr. Glass also said the same “five or six” companies produce most of the curriculum that students use in virtual courses. That is a problem, he said, because “they are responsible to their shareholders, not to the kids or anyone else. They are in it for the money.”

Texas has had a state-operated virtual school network since 2007. Schools have long been able to offer online courses, either with curriculum developed in-house or through private providers. In 2007, the Legislature passed a series of laws that created a framework for sharing courses across districts and put a financing mechanism in place.

Through the **Texas Virtual School Network**, two dozen school districts, community colleges and universities offer online courses in which students across the state can enroll. To develop the curriculum, the districts can subcontract with private companies, universities or even other districts. (The New York Times Company is a majority owner in Epsilen, an online education company that provides services to the Texas Virtual School Network.)

Starting in third grade, Texas students can also go to virtual school full time what is now three campuses operated out of both traditional and **charter school** districts. The Texas Education Agency has the ultimate authority to approve the courses for both the online schools and the virtual school network, though the network's operations take place in a service center in Houston.

Even so, despite having the second-largest school-age population of any state, Texas lags in virtual-school enrollment. According to numbers from the virtual school network, about 3,600 students enrolled in online courses last fall. In the early months of the current school year, as schools adjust to new financing rules passed by the Legislature, online enrollment is around 1,200. Compare that with Florida, where almost 260,000 students took online courses during the 2010-11 school year.

“Online education is still creating its own image right now,” said Chuck Fattore, who taught both traditional and virtual courses with the Houston Independent School District. “It's not an institution yet in any sense. Educators aren't sure how to use it.”

Mr. Fattore now teaches at the Bridge School, a private company that offers online courses in Houston and provides courses to Mr. Clarkston. In one of the public-private partnerships frequently found in virtual education, the Bridge School also offers courses to students through Southwest Schools, a charter operation in Houston that operates two “sober” high schools for students who are often in and out of residential treatment centers for substance abuse problems.

Though students at Southwest Schools have the option to enroll in the state’s Virtual School Network, Superintendent Janelle James of Southwest Schools said it was often easier to work with the Bridge School because it was based in Houston. It also has an on-site special education teacher, she said, who provides related services like counseling. And it can be flexible.

“There are times when students are in that phase of nonsobriety and they aren’t enrolled with us, they can buy the courses, then enroll with us and finish taking the courses” once they are back on track, she said.

Ms. James said she understood the concern about the growing control of private companies in education, but that the onus is on the districts to stay vigilant.

“It comes back to the school district being actively involved,” she said. “There’s no such thing as a turnkey.”

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