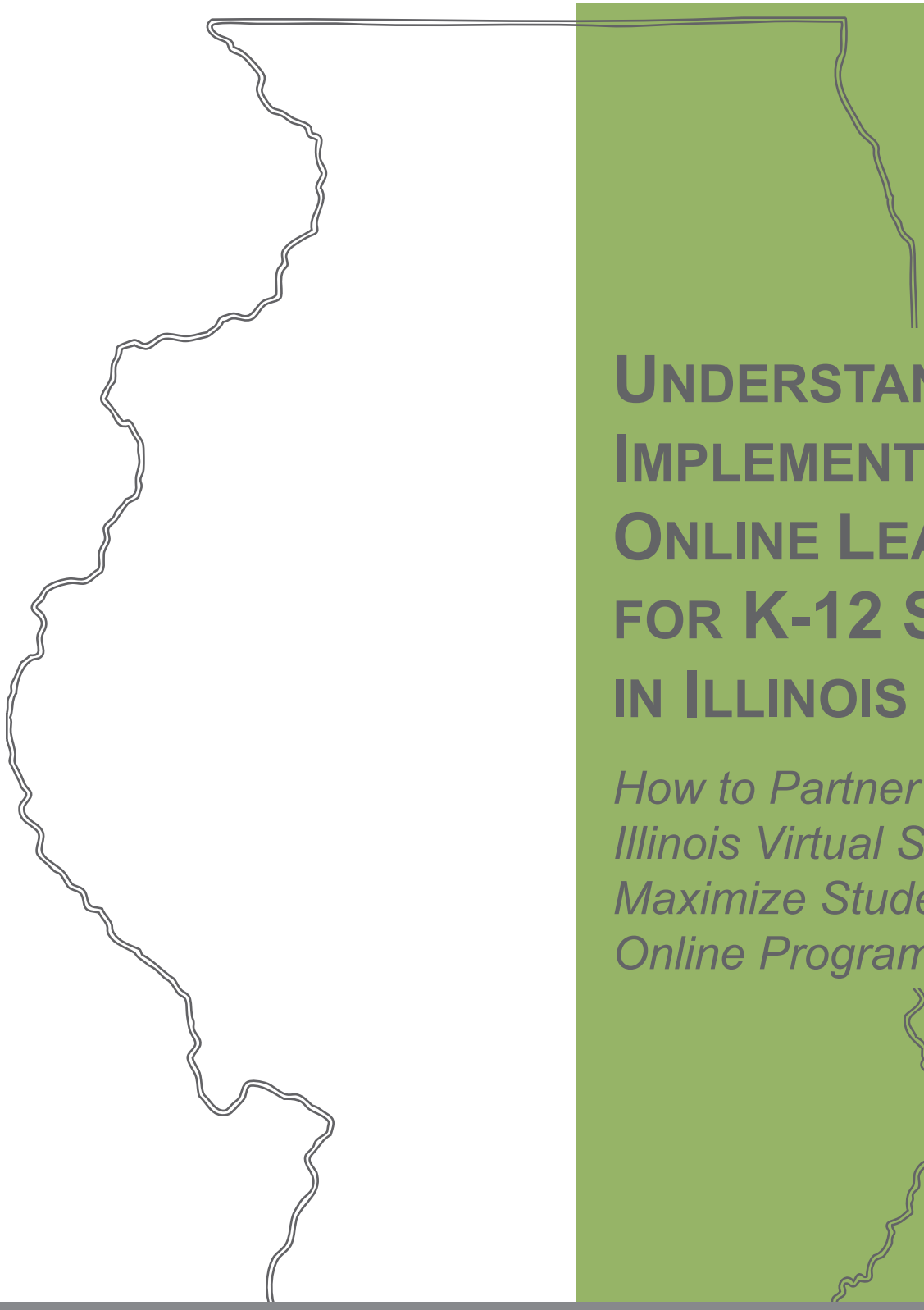

Understanding and Implementing Online Learning for K-12 Students in Illinois

How to Partner with the Illinois Virtual School to Maximize Student Success in Online Programs.

Prepared by:
The Illinois Virtual School
and
The Evergreen Education Group

Illinois State Board of Education

ISBE GOAL 1:
Every student will demonstrate academic achievement and be prepared for success after high school.

REALITY: Students may require alternative educational experiences and opportunities to assure their learning success and reach their learning potential.

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Background and Purpose

The Illinois Virtual School (IVS) works in partnership with over 300 public and private schools across Illinois to offer individual online classes to students, and professional development programs to educators. IVS partners—does not compete—with local schools and districts. The local school retains its students and is able to offer expanded learning opportunities.

IVS is administered through the Peoria County Regional Office of Education (ROE), a member of the Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools (IARSS). The Peoria County ROE was awarded the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) contract to manage and operate the Illinois Virtual School (IVS) on April 1, 2009.

With the moratorium on virtual charter schools in Illinois set to expire in early 2014, it is likely that online schools will be operating in Illinois in the relatively near future, and districts across the state will need to be ready to respond. Some have already done so; a consortium of suburban Chicago districts has banded together to create a blended learning program that will serve students across all of the member districts.

This white paper provides an overview of online learning including current trends both nationally and in Illinois, and explores how Illinois school districts may partner with IVS in order to offer a partial or fully online education to their students.

An IVS partnership with a local public or private school provides:

- An opportunity for students to take a fully online curriculum, giving schools, students, and families greater options;
- Courses not offered by a student's face-to-face school, such as Advanced Placement®, world languages, and other enrichment opportunities;
- Flexibility in scheduling;
- Credit recovery options for students to help them graduate on time; and
- Options to retain resident students looking for a fully online option, or who may have previously dropped out of school.

The Evergreen Education Group, which contributed to this report, is a leading national K-12 online and blended learning advisory organization.

- Cindy Hamblin, Director
Illinois Virtual School

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Introduction

Illinois does not yet have fully online schools operating across districts, but fully online schools are being considered in some areas and may be offered across the state in the near future. This report is intended to help educators better understand online schools and to prepare them for the changing digital landscape in Illinois.

Online and blended learning, in many forms, are becoming increasingly common across all levels of K-12 education. During school year 2012-13, state virtual schools served 740,000 course enrollments (one student taking one semester-long course) across 27 states, including Illinois.[1] Blended schools, which combine elements of online and face-to-face instruction operated in at least 24 states.[2] Four states (Alabama, Florida, Michigan, and Virginia) require students to complete an online course in order to graduate, and two other states (North Carolina and Arkansas) are in the process of implementing such a requirement. An unknown number of students, likely totaling several million, are accessing online or blended courses that are being offered by their schools or districts. Some of these courses have been developed by teachers at the schools, while others have been created and offered by private providers.

During school year 2012-13, state virtual schools served 740,000 course enrollments across 27 states, including Illinois.

Fully online schools, in which students enroll for their entire schedule, are another important part of the digital learning landscape. Fully online schools typically are responsible for ensuring their students take state assessments, and are responsible for their students' scores on those assessments. Many fully online schools are charter schools, although there are a growing number of fully online district-led schools. These schools operate in 29 states and Washington DC, and in school year 2012-13 collectively served about 310,000 students. Ohio (35,000) and Pennsylvania (38,000) have the most fully online students. In all cases the percentage of fully online students is less than 3% of the state's student population.

1 Except where otherwise noted, statistics and online learning landscape descriptions come from *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online and Blended Learning: A guide to policy and practice 2013,* published by the Evergreen Education Group and available at kpk12.com.

2 *Keeping Pace* defines fully blended schools as stand-alone schools (not a program within an existing school) that deliver much of the curriculum in a blended form (using the Clayton Christensen Institute definition of blended learning) and have some requirement for attendance at a physical site for more than state assessments.

Online Learning

Online Solutions Meet the Needs of All Students

Students and families choose online courses and schools for a variety of reasons. These include:

- Students needing courses that are not otherwise available in their schools, including Advanced Placement®, World Language, and other courses
- Students seeking scheduling flexibility and using online courses to free a class period during their school day
- Student recovering credit by taking an online course
- Students with medical, behavioral, or social/emotional reasons that make attending a physical school difficult or impossible. For example, students with severe allergies or anxiety issues may choose an online school to avoid issues associated with attending a traditional school
- Students who have underperformed academically, and are at risk of dropping out of school (or may have dropped out and then re-enrolled in an online school)
- Families who prefer to home school their children, and feel that an online school allows them to take advantage of a public education while maintaining a home atmosphere
- Students who are pursuing advanced athletics, arts, or other extracurricular activities that require long hours or travel

Online School Performance

Online schools have attracted media attention due to a perception of producing poor academic outcomes. For example, a report by the National Education Policy Center states that "on the common metrics of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), state performance rankings, and graduation rates, full-time virtual schools lag significantly behind traditional brick-and-mortar schools." [3] The International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL), however, points out that these measures are based on proficiency of students and don't take into account student growth, or the fact that many students enter online schools after falling behind in physical schools. In most states, the "accountability framework and the once-a-year, end-of-year assessment regime, is flawed in many ways. The resulting state assessments provide an annual snapshot of school accountability at one point during the year, but that snapshot is often not enough to tell about student performance and individual growth in the context of college and career readiness. Availability of data is still weak. Partly, this is because the tests are limited in grade levels, there are many non-tested subject areas and grade levels, and the current tests lack the ability to assess critical thinking and higher order

Educators have developed best practices for serving students choosing online courses or online schools

skills."[4] iNACOL suggests that online schools—and indeed all schools—be measured based on a variety of metrics that include student proficiency, true student growth,[5] college and career readiness, a graduation rate that takes into account student mobility, and closing the achievement gap.

Despite the lack of definitive data, educators have developed best practices for serving students choosing online courses or online schools. These practices include:

- High levels of teacher involvement. Most high-quality online courses maintain student-teacher ratios that are similar to ratios in physical classrooms.
- Communication requirements for teachers determined at the start of the course or the start of the school year. Students may fall behind immediately if teachers do not proactively contact them at the beginning of and regularly during the online learning experience.
- The use of a technology platform that allows and encourages communication in a variety of ways, including real-time (synchronous) and asynchronous communication.
- Requirements for timely and consistent feedback from teachers. High-quality online courses and schools expect that teachers will respond quickly and effectively to students.

- Course design that encourages interaction among students.
- Online course content that addresses different learning styles by presenting materials via a variety of methods that include videos, audio, text, discussions, and other methods. These practices must also take into account students with disabilities.
- Using a learning coach or mentor, at the school or at home for students taking online courses. Most students require an engaged adult who is available face-to-face in addition to the online teacher.

3 Molnar, A. (Ed.); Miron, G., Huerta, L., Cuban, L., Horvitz, B., Gulosino, C., Rice, J.K., & Shafer, S.R. (2013). Virtual Schools in the U.S. 2013: Politics, Performance, Policy, and Research Evidence. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved February 4, 2014 from http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/virtual-schools-annual-2013/.

4 Patrick, S., Edwards, D., Wicks, M., Watson, J. (2012). Measuring Quality From Inputs to Outcomes: Creating Student Learning Performance Metrics and Quality Assurance for Online Schools. Vienna, VA: International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL). Retrieved February 4, 2014 from http://www.inacol.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/iNACOL_Quality_Metrics.pdf.

5 iNACOL advocates for student growth measures that are based on the learning trajectory of individual students based on assessments conducted over time—not growth based on student cohorts or statistical projections.

Online Learning Nationally

The National Landscape of Online Schools

Students attending fully online schools represent a small percentage of the total number of students taking some online or blended courses. Full-time online schools—but not necessarily supplemental programs like the Illinois Virtual School—have the attributes listed below.

- Operate without an onsite component: Online schools operate entirely at a distance from students, and have no requirement that students attend a physical location except to take state assessments. In some cases online schools may offer an onsite learning center for students who wish to use them.
- Attract students from across districts: Most online schools operate across districts, and many operate across entire states. This is a necessary component for most online schools because only a very small percentage of students will choose a fully online option. In order to reach operational scale the school must pull from a large student population (larger than most districts would provide). In most cases, fully online schools operate in states that allow students to choose a school from outside of their district of residence and have public education funding follow the student.
- Grade levels: All grade levels are offered in online schools collectively, although individual schools may be limited to older or younger students. The instructional model for younger students uses adult mentors (often, but not always, parents), who work with the students at home.
- Instructional materials: Online schools often send physical materials to students, including paper workbooks and science materials, to complement online offerings.
- Accountability for student achievement: Because these are full-time schools, they are accountable in the same ways as all other public schools and/or charter schools in the states in which they operate. They are responsible for facilitating state assessments for all students, regardless of geographic location, and reporting results of state assessments and adequate yearly progress (AYP). They grant diplomas and provide counseling and special needs support.

The number of states allowing full-time online schools has grown slowly in recent years, and the increase in the number of students attending these online schools has been steady but not explosive. In 2010 an estimated 200,000 students attended such schools;[6] by 2012-13 that number had grown to 310,000.

Figure 1 shows the states that allow multi-district fully online schools, and the number and percentage of students from each state attending such schools.

- Some states impose restrictions on how fully online schools operate. In some cases these apply to online charter schools, and in some cases they apply to all online schools. For

example, in California full-time online schools are limited to serving students in contiguous counties, and Iowa has set an overall cap on the number of students who can attend fully online schools at .018 % of the state's student population (approximately 900 students), with no more than 1% of students coming from any single district. In Tennessee, initial enrollment in a full-time online schools is limited to 1,500 students, no more than 25% of a virtual school's students may come from outside the LEA, and no school can exceed 5,000 students. These restrictions may be lifted based on a school's performance.

In Illinois, the Charter School Commission is making recommendations to the State Legislature regarding fully online charter schools. These recommendations may include some caps or restrictions similar to those in other states.

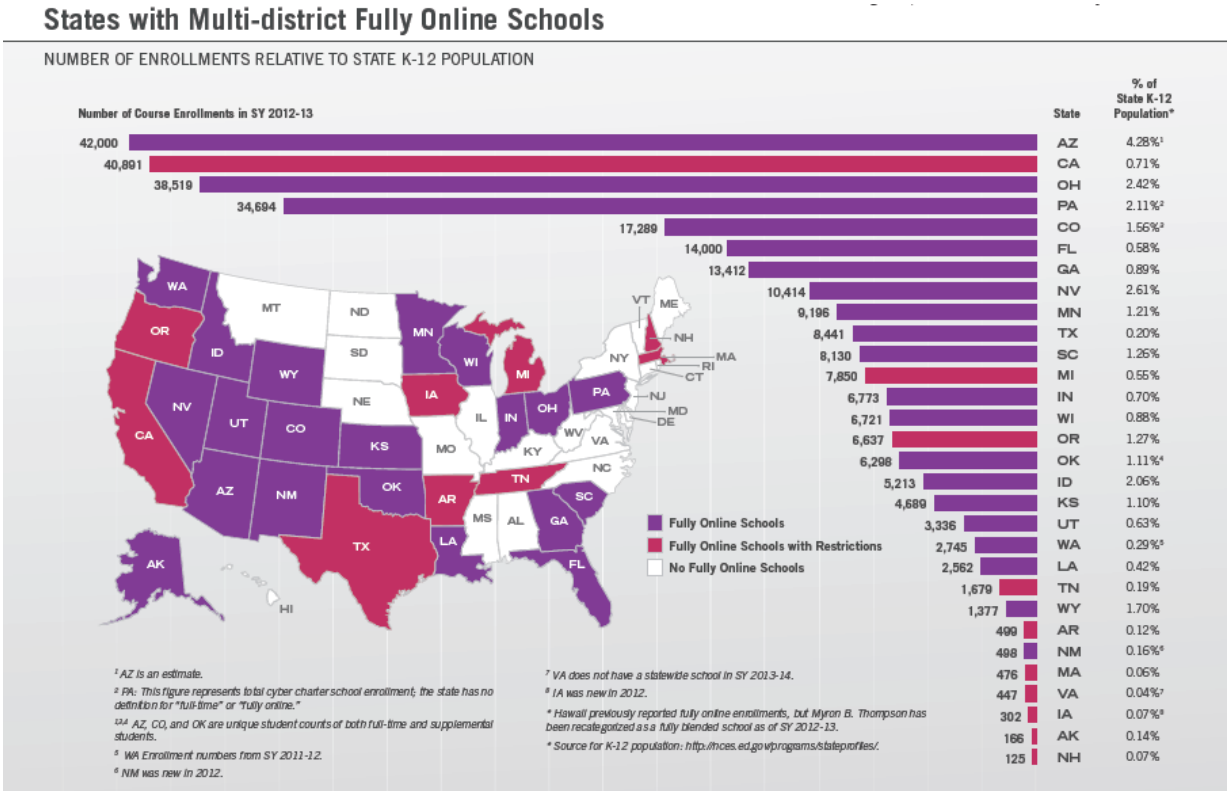

Figure 1: States with multi-district fully online schools

6 *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online and Blended Learning 2010,* published by the Evergreen Education Group and available at kpk12.com.

Online Learning In Illinois

The Illinois Online and Blended Learning Landscape

Illinois has a state virtual school, Illinois Virtual School (IVS), several district-level online and blended schools, and at least one consortium of districts working together to offer online courses. No statewide fully online schools exist as of early 2014 due to the policy restrictions.

The Illinois Virtual School has developed a set of services designed to help districts offer resident students fully online options.

The Illinois Virtual School provides individual online courses to students who are enrolled in physical schools across the state; it served 3,185 course enrollments (one student enrolled in one semester-long online course) in fiscal year 2013. Its budget is set by the State Board of Education; course fees may be paid by school districts or parents of enrolling students. IVS is the online provider for original credit online courses for the Chicago Public Schools. It expanded its course offerings in 2013 to include courses for grades 6-8 in most core subject areas, and launched a new credit recovery program that is competency based. In addition, IVS provides teacher professional development to Illinois teachers through both self-paced asynchronous and instructor-led online courses. IVS plans to offer a set of services designed to help districts provide fully online school options for students beginning in fall 2014.

Students in the Chicago area have access to some blended and online options through their districts. Virtual Opportunities Inside a School Environment (VOISE) Academy is a fully blended school; it is a Chicago Public Schools (CPS) performance school created under the CPS Renaissance 2010 initiative. K12 Inc. provides curriculum and services for three charter schools with significant virtual components: The Chicago Virtual Charter School (CVCS), Youth Connection Charter School Virtual High School, and Cambridge Academy at Cambridge Lakes Charter School.

The Illinois Online Learning Policy Landscape

In 2009, Illinois enacted its first online learning law, HB2448 (Public Act 96-0684),[7] which allowed school districts to establish “remote educational programs” and count these enrollments toward the general state aid formula. The law required that the program be delivered in a classroom or other traditional school setting, and on days the district was in attendance during the regular school year. In 2011, HB3223 (Public Act 97-0339)[8] amended the law by allowing districts to receive state funding for students in a remote education program

delivered “in the home or other location outside of a school building” and on any day of the year, including those outside the standard school calendar. The district must submit the school board policy and remote education plan to the Illinois State Board of Education.

HB494,[9] passed in 2013, amended the Charter Schools Law of the School Code to establish a one-year moratorium on charter schools with “virtual-schooling components” through April 1, 2014. The moratorium did not apply to a “charter school with virtual-schooling components existing or approved prior to April 1, 2013.” HB494 required the State Charter School Commission to submit a report on the effect of virtual schooling to the General Assembly including its effect on student performance, the costs associated with virtual schooling, and oversight issues, on or before March 1, 2014.

In early 2013 the proposed Illinois Virtual Charter School @ Fox River Valley (ILVCS@FRV) approached 18 school districts in the Fox Valley region to approve and participate in a new virtual charter school that would serve students in the 18 districts. The school would have been governed by a nonprofit group, Virtual Learning Solutions, and managed by K12 Inc. All 18 school districts rejected the ILVCS@FRV proposal. Virtual Learning Solutions then filed 18 separate appeals (one for each district) to the State Charter School Commission. While those appeals were pending, HB494 was signed into law, and the appeals were withdrawn.

7 Illinois HB2448 (2009); retrieved February 4, 2014, http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/billstatus.asp?DocNum=2448&GAID=10&GA=96&DocTypeID=HB&LegID=44612&SessionID=76

8 Illinois HB3223 (2011); retrieved February 4, 2014 http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/97/HB/PDF/09700HB3223lv.pdf

9 Illinois HB494 (2013); retrieved February 4, 2014, http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/publicacts/98/PDF/098-0016.pdf

Expanding Opportunities

The Outlook for Digital Learning in Illinois: Opportunities for Innovative Districts

In states that allow fully online schools and inter-district student choice, district administrators feel that they are losing students, and the funding associated with those students, to the online schools. The result in some states has been a rapid proliferation of online and blended options being offered by districts in order to keep students in-district. For example in Pennsylvania the non-profit organization Blendedschools.net (BSN) works with schools to set up their own online, supplemental, and blended learning programs. BSN is currently working with 77,000 students in 169 out of 500 Pennsylvania school districts, providing a mix of supplemental, blended, and technology-enhanced programs[10] designed to attract students back from the online charter schools—or to keep them from leaving the districts at all. Other districts have created their own programs, or partnered with different vendors.

With the moratorium on virtual charter schools in Illinois set to expire in early 2014, it is likely that fully online schools will be operating in Illinois in the relatively near future, and districts across the state will need to be ready to respond. Some have already done so; a consortium of suburban Chicago districts has banded together to create a blended learning program that will serve students across all of the member districts.

Illinois districts that begin to explore providing online and blended learning options to students will find these benefits:

- Retaining students who might otherwise choose to leave the district to attend a full-time online charter school
- Attracting back into the district students and families who have chosen to be homeschooled
- Providing via supplemental online courses a wider variety of courses to students, including Advanced Placement®, honors, and World Languages, and other electives
- Creating scheduling flexibility for students who may want to accelerate their learning, or who have a scheduling conflict due to athletics or other extracurricular activities
- Bringing the innovative practices of online and blended courses into traditional instructional models used in school classrooms

The Illinois Virtual School is prepared to help districts across our state take on these opportunities and challenges.

10 Keeping Pace with K-12 Online and Blended Learning 2013, published by the Evergreen Education Group and available at kpk12.com.

Key District Challenges in Offering Online Options for Students

Providing any online or blended learning option is challenging; offering a fully online school presents a set of issues that go beyond those associated with single online or blended courses. The Illinois Virtual School has developed a set of services designed to help districts offer resident students fully online options in middle and high school. IVS provides a variety of services, while the resident district retains responsibility for the student, along with providing site-specific assistance to students who require it. For example:

- The Remote Education Act (105 ILCS 5/10-29) provides districts with the means for offering online options, including a fully online program. The state school code requires a school board policy to serve students under a remote education plan. In addition, each student participating in a remote education program must have a written remote educational plan.

  IVS offers a crosswalk document that shows how we can support a district developing a remote education program. Support includes a writing guide for school board policy as well as services that meet specific requirements of the student remote education plan.

- Schools must acquire or create online content that is aligned with Illinois state content standards or with the Common Core.

IVS offers a robust catalog of 135 semester courses in grades 6-12 that meet Illinois and Common Core standards. The courses include both IVS developed courses and vendor-developed courses selected through a request for proposals (RFP) process. Whether IVS-created or vendor-created content, each offering includes custom teacher-created content and resources to support students. IVS offers both original credit and credit recovery solutions.

- Flexibility in supporting student's course needs.

  IVS provides multiple opportunities for students to enroll in an online course. This includes supporting students who need non-traditional start times, and offering both semester 1 and semester 2 of courses in all terms.

- Teachers must be Illinois-certified and highly qualified.

  IVS teachers are Illinois-certified, highly qualified instructors. Each teacher is properly certified in the content area in which he/she teaches. IVS requires all interested

11 Common Core State Standards Initiative; retrieved February 4, 2014, http://www.corestandards.org/

instructor applicants to complete the online course Teaching Online 101: Teaching in an Online Learning Model before an application can be submitted. Candidates selected after the application process participate in an IVS technology platform training course as well as an online course in online teaching pedagogy. Ongoing professional development is provided through synchronous meetings throughout the year and annual face-to-face professional development in the summer.

- Special needs students taking online courses must be addressed. The student's remote education plan must work within guidelines of a student's individualized education program (IEP) or 504 plan.

  The local district will continue to play a key role in providing services to students with special needs. The unique learning environment that IVS provides is a valuable alternative for students with disabilities. The design of IVS online courses supports a variety of learning preferences and levels. IVS administration and instructors work with each student's special education team to provide individualized accommodations and modifications in our courses.

- Academic and technical support must be provided for students.

  IVS instructors utilize a variety of communication tools to stay connected with their students in an effort to provide academic support and feedback. This includes an online Help Desk, which provides all users (students, schools, and parents) with a 24x7 system for requesting technical support.

- Schools need access to student progress and attendance data.

  IVS offers a secure, robust student information system (SIS) that reports student gradebook and login attendance as well as other student data. This information is available to students, parents, and schools using credentials assigned by the SIS.

Conclusion

The online and blended learning landscape in Illinois is poised for significant change. Already, some districts are adding supplemental online learning options and blended learning opportunities. In the near future, the state may change policies to allow for online schools to draw students from across multiple districts, with students and families having the choice to enter a full-time online school not affiliated with the student's district of residence.

The Illinois Virtual School is prepared to help districts across our state take on the opportunities and challenges that these changes present. With the above services and additional guidance, IVS can help Illinois districts create and operate their own online schools, serving their own students and attracting back into the district students who have dropped out and families that have chosen homeschooling.

For more information about how IVS can help your district, please contact us:

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UPDATE:

After the publication date of this document, the Illinois Charter Commission recommended to the Illinois Legislature that the moratorium on new virtual charter schools be extended.

As of April 15, 2014, the House passed the modified HB 3937, which extends the moratorium to December 31, 2017. The bill is currently in the Senate.

ILLINOIS VIRTUAL SCHOOL
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Published February 2014