

## Schools push struggling students online

Neena Satija - May 17, 2012

The popularity of online learning programs has exploded all over the country in recent years, with software promoted as a way to complement traditional classroom teaching, and to motivate students who have failed in the brick-and-mortar classroom environment.

The already \$5.4 billion nationwide e-learning industry for K-12 schools, according to data presented at Arizona State University's education innovation summit in 2012, has taken hold in Connecticut. In 2010, the legislature mandated that poor-performing school districts provide students with an option to retake courses online that they failed in the classroom, a process called online credit recovery.

Specifically, the law calls for districts with high dropout rates to establish online credit recovery programs for students in danger of failing to graduate. The law also adds the option of online coursework to remediation programs schools must offer to classes graduating in 2018. But so far, Connecticut's venture into "virtual learning" has resulted in a hodgepodge of computer programs in various districts with no oversight by the State Department of Education or any other state agency. Some programs are used in high-performing districts for students who want to take a class their high school can't afford to offer, such as Mandarin or philosophy. But often, they are used for the students who are struggling the most.

"My biggest concern is that for some of these programs, you've got kids that have been failing, and they've got a poor attendance record," said Kris Fletcher, director of school counseling at New Britain High School, where more than 150 students are taking online courses this semester. "And they're not going to get through with it [when they're told to] sit down at the computer and do the work."

The General Assembly allocated \$850,000 in 2007 to create a program called Connecticut Virtual Learning. This was to be an online credit recovery program that school districts could use. But no additional funding was ever provided, and the state's education department has no contact with the program, which is run by the Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium in a small office building in Newington. Instead, many districts are spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on a variety of online learning programs offered generally by for-profit companies.

Jim Polites, spokesman for the State Department of Education, said his agency does not collect data on online learning programs or monitor how districts are implementing them. For state representative and education committee Co-Chairman Andy Fleischmann, that's a concern. "We have a part-time assembly, so the legislature really doesn't have the capacity to monitor district compliance with statute," Fleischmann said, referring to the 2010 law. "That's the SDE's job, and I would hope and expect that in an important area like this, they're going to investigate and see what's happening."

State law makes oversight of online courses a local responsibility. Before online courses are offered, the local school board must approve a policy that requires that these courses align with traditional courses and are taught by certified teachers.

Karen Kaplan, the former state educational technology director for the Education Department, said she had just started to collect statewide data on online learning when she left in August 2010. "Some districts had kids come in at a prescribed time ... there was a teacher following up with them ... those kids did well," Kaplan recalled in a recent interview. "Districts where they just put the kids in front of [a computer] and said, 'Do it whenever you have time at home,' they didn't succeed in as high numbers." After Kaplan left, the monitoring stopped. "No one followed up on it, I'm afraid." Her position is now vacant.

### Blended learning

District teachers and administrators interviewed for this story said they use online learning software as part of a "blended learning" model -- meaning it's used in a setting with a teacher rather than as a substitute for classroom instruction. But in some cases, that teacher acts as little more than a supervisor for students, having no expertise in the subject the students are studying.

At the Pathways to Technology Magnet High School in Hartford, 15 students sat in a computer lab on a recent afternoon, taking subjects they'd failed in the traditional classroom setting. They were supervised by Beverly Moquin, a math teacher, and Lenore Mullady, a special education teacher.

Devante Burney, 17, was taking an online test for a world history course he had failed in the classroom. "I like it. It's better than a class because you can take your time on it," Devante said. He also liked the ability to retake the tests with his notebook in front of him. "In case I might fail the [test], I can take it over because I wrote down all the answers," he said. Even for the final exam, he said, "You can have your notes [in front of you] if it's in your notebook. It's no problem."

Devante was using a program offered by the e-learning company PLATO Learning, which is based in Bloomington, Minn. Pathways to Technology, which is temporarily located in Windsor, spent \$20,000 to buy 20 licenses, or seats, to the course this year. This means that 20 students can use the software at any one time.

"Some of them find it hard to learn on the computer without having a teacher to instruct them," Moquin said. "But we've had a lot of suc-

cesses, too ... it depends on the individual student." Of the few dozen students who have taken online courses at the school in the past year, 60 percent have failed, Moquin said.

Gretchen Hayden is the director of Connecticut Virtual Learning, the program created by the legislature. Nearly 90 percent of the program's students taking credit recovery courses have passed, and about one-third received grades of A. But only a few hundred students have used the program since it started, compared with thousands who have used software provided by for-profit companies. Hayden said that's in part because there's no money to market Connecticut Virtual Learning.

"They're stomping kids into a room with a T.A. [teaching assistant], and these are our kids who have failed, and now they're in a lab with no teacher," Hayden said. "I think it's an absolute atrocity. It's happening all over Connecticut."

### **Last resort**

Online courses are also becoming increasingly popular in alternative schools, which serve students who struggle the most academically. Edwin Colon, an education lawyer, said he's dealt with many cases where students who should be in special education are instead given online courses after they fail in the classroom. Colon works at the Center for Children's Advocacy, based at the University of Connecticut School of Law in Hartford.

One student he represented was failing high school and was transferred, against his wishes, into an alternative setting where he took only online courses with limited teacher supervision. The student, Hector, lives in one of Connecticut's worst-performing districts. He asked not to be identified by his last name or school district to protect his privacy.

"You just go there for three hours on the computer," Hector recalled in a phone interview. (He was using software from the company Apex Learning, based in Seattle.) "They [the computers] don't repeat nothing. They just repeat it once. If you don't get it, you've got to just keep going." The boy's parents suspected he had a learning disability, but the school's special education assessor insisted otherwise. With Colon's help, Hector got an independent assessor to prove that he did, in fact, have a reading disability and needed extra support. He now studies in a private, therapeutic school setting.

Colon said he's heard from the families of many students who need special education services and were instead given online courses to finish school. "Some of the kids go in these programs, and they already have a taste of failure," Colon said. If they fail even the online courses, "they end up dropping out altogether."

### **Supplement to the classroom**

Some districts use the software in addition to teacher support, in a true "blended learning" model. In Meriden, students who are failing biology use a program from the Arizona-based company OdysseyWare. They log in from the library after school to brush up on material they struggled with during classes at Maloney High School. The district bought 41 seats at \$800 each for the courseware in 2010, and the price dropped to \$700 this year.

"It's helped a lot," said sophomore Edwin Fulke, 17, who had a 30 percent in biology before he started using OdysseyWare. "You can focus more, and you don't have the other people talking and distracting you." Edwin still takes biology in a traditional classroom setting during the regular school day, though.

"We were not going to take students out of the class," said Maloney High School's assistant principal Jennifer Straub. "In other words, [we weren't going to] let them fail for two or three quarters and then come onto the computer for six or seven weeks at a self-pace and make up that credit." But OdysseyWare is also used in Meriden's summer school, where students don't have supplementary classroom instruction. Last summer, the district had only 40 seats for the summer school classes and offered them on a first-come, first-serve basis for \$50. Straub said dozens of students who wanted to recover credits online were turned away for lack of space.

Straub said the district plans to encourage online credit recovery during the school year through a new Saturday Academy, so that students can use OdysseyWare at Maloney on the weekends and still attend regular biology class during the week.

But in New Britain, the school district lacks the money for something like a Saturday academy. More than 100 students who have failed English, science and social studies courses are retaking them online this semester, with a supervising teacher who may not teach one of those subjects. The district is in its second year of a three-year contract for courseware with the Texas-based company Compass-Learning, paying about \$5,000 in annual subscription fees and \$58,000 in startup costs.

"To be honest, some of the kids do struggle," said Fletcher, New Britain High School's director of school counseling. "They're not self-motivated." Fletcher estimated that half the students taking such courses online pass. New Britain students do, however, take online math courses with PLATO Learning under the supervision of a math teacher. Fletcher said these students are usually more successful.

Karen Kaplan, the former state educational technology director, said she wasn't sure credit recovery programs like New Britain's are complying with the 2010 law. The law states that an online course "engages students and has interactive components, which may include, but are not limited to, required interactions between students and their teachers, participation in on-line demonstrations, discussion boards or virtual labs. If you use it as part of a regular classroom where there is a teacher, it's terrific," said Kaplan, who is now director of instructional technology for Hamden Public Schools. "But as a standalone product, without a teacher, it would not be something that I would endorse for the students of Hamden."

This series is part of a reporting partnership with WNPR. Part II: The growth of online credit recovery and other online learning options has opened the door for private companies to sell their products to school districts.