K-12 Virtual Schools, Accreditation, and Leadership: What Are the Issues?

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When I was young, I attended my neighborhood school. It was a square brick building with three floors and was situated on a corner just five blocks from my home. That building was torn down not long ago, and I asked my family to save a brick from that building to remind me of all the experiences I had there learning to read, use math, discover other countries, understand basic scientific principles, and communicate. That brick sits on my desk at home now and evokes all kinds of memories of friends, beloved teachers, and a principal who lived just houses away from the school playground.

Soon, a brick will no longer represent the image of a child's educational experiences. With advances in technology and our commitment to learning in all contexts and at all times of the day or night, the traditional brick and mortar image will fade. With that shift in where learning is housed, and how it is structured, comes a shift in how leaders will influence the teaching and learning in the 'schools' of the future.

Virtual Schools

Virtual schools are as different from each other as traditional schools are different when you move from community to community or state to state. A virtual school typically offers a learning experience via the Internet, may or may not be supported by government funds, and may or may not be accredited. They have been in existence for quite some time but have begun to expand and now offer programs from kindergarten to the twelfth grade (Evans, 2009). According to the U.S. Department of Education, somewhere between 40,000 and 50,000 students are enrolled in virtual schools.

Evans (2009) summarizes the kinds of virtual schools available:

- State-sanctioned, state-level virtual schools are often marked as the official virtual school of a given state. They are usually free for in-state students but charge tuition for out-of-state students.
- Regional virtual schools serve a multistate region or even the entire country. They are usually comprised of a network of schools offering online classes.

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- Local public schools and district virtual programs supplement public school and are designed to reach out to homeschoolers in the district.
- Virtual charter schools and virtual private schools are simply online equivalents of charter schools and private schools, respectively.
- For-profit virtual schools are run by independent corporations.
- College- and university-based virtual schools offer mostly introductory college instruction, Advanced Placement classes, and high school courses.

In the ensuing discussion of leadership, accreditation, and virtual schools the term 'virtual schools' will be considered as schools that provide online teaching and learning environments where students no longer attend on a structured timeline basis in a physical building or setting.

Accreditation of Virtual Schools

There are a number of organizations that accredit K-12 schools and some have special units or provisions for virtual or distance education schools. The most commonly known accrediting organizations are the six higher education regional associations that have counterparts for K-12 institutions. These six associations include (College Foundation of North Carolina Resource Center, 2005):

- Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools;
- New England Association of Colleges and Schools;
- North Central Association of Colleges and Schools;
- Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities;
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools; and
- Western Association of Schools

Recently, the K-12 units of two of these six organizations (North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement [NCA CASI] and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement [SACS CASI]) merged to form Advanc-ED. This newly merged organization is now "the world's largest education community, representing 27,000 public and private schools and districts across the United States and in 65 countries worldwide and educating 15 million students." (Advanc-ED, 2010). Prior to the merger, the Commission on International and Transregional Accreditation (CITA) accredited public and private schools throughout the world (which included virtual or distance education schools that spanned regional boundaries). CITA was acquired with the merger of NCA CASI and SACS, and the accreditation process has been made more standard across all the school members in Advanc-Ed. Virtual schools are now held to the same standards as all schools in the organization.

Advanc-ED uses a set of research-based standards and a clearly identified process as guides to help schools continuously improve. Advanc-ED recently implemented the newly formed standards where schools must meet high standards, engage in continuous improvement, and demonstrate quality assurance through external review. There are seven standards linked to research that improves student achievement (Advanc-ED, 2007):

- Vision and Purpose;
- Governance and Leadership;
- Teaching and Learning;

- Documenting and Using Results;
- Resources and Support Systems;
- Stakeholder Communications and Relationships; and
- Commitment to Continuous Improvement

The process of accreditation enacted by Advanc-Ed is similar to the many other organizations that accredit K-12 and virtual schools and serves as the framework for the next section of this article on the discussion of leadership issues in the virtual school environments.

Leadership for Virtual Schools: Issues to be Addressed

Virtual schools must meet the same accreditation standards as any other type of school that is a member of the Advanc-Ed organization. Although the continuous improvement process emphasizes the involvement of all stakeholders, the leadership of any school is ultimately responsible for making certain that standards are met. In the following discussion, issues associated with each of the seven Advanc-Ed standards are raised as it pertains to the formal leadership role in the school. The discussion is provided not as a comprehensive list of issues impacting leadership, but as a catalyst for further discussion and the potential need for subsequent changes in policies and practices impacting the continuous school improvement process.

Vision and Purpose

Standard 1: The school establishes and communicates a shared purpose and direction for improving the performance of students and the effectiveness of the school.

Vision-setting and communicating that vision to the stakeholders is at the center of this standard. In addition, the leader ensures appropriate goals are set, profiles of the school are maintained, the vision guides the teaching and learning, and the vision is reviewed as needed.

Within the virtual school the leader is going to be challenged by the following issues:

- How does a virtual community efficiently and effectively establish the vision and purpose of the school? Are there required or optional 'faculty' meetings, parent meetings, and student meetings (virtual, asnynchronous) for all participants in the school? How do you motivate participation in the vision setting process when participants are scattered throughout large areas and operating in differing time zones?
- How do you communicate the vision and subsequent goals? How is the school community defined? Who should receive this information and how? Will the Internet be the only form of communication?
- How will faculty be guided in establishing a process for reviewing goals to establish connections to their own teaching and to those of the students?
- How will the leader ensure faculty and students participate in such 'collaborative' activities when they have little personal knowledge of or rapport with others in the school?

Governance and Leadership

Standard 2: The school provides governance and leadership that promote student performance and school effectiveness.

The governing board and the school leadership both play an important role in achieving Standard 2. The governing board establishes practices and procedures, preserves the prerogatives of the leader, and ensures compliance with all applicable laws and regulations. The school leader is charged with using a system for critical reviews of student performance and school effectiveness, fostering a learning community where all have opportunities to lead, providing meaningful roles to stakeholders, and controlling activities sponsored by the school. Finally, the leader ensures responses to stakeholders to gain satisfaction and implements an evaluation system for the professional growth of all personnel.

Within the virtual school, the leader is going to be challenged by the following issues:

- In virtual schools, who is the governing board? Is it an elected set of clients or educators? Do expectations for meeting parts of this standard totally rest with the 'owner', or is it the leader (principal or director) of the school? Will responsibilities be differentiated, and are there clear policies and procedures to follow?
- How are the powers of the leader negotiated and/or protected?
- Are there laws or regulations that are inconsistent or in conflict given possible multi-state, multi-national boundaries?
- What do leadership opportunities look like in a virtual school? Are there student councils, parent organizations, teacher leadership teams?
- What kinds of activities can the school reasonably provide and supervise? What does supervision look like in a virtual environment where you might not be even be certain who is participating?
- Does the teacher evaluation system reflect the unique skills, knowledge, and dispositions required for a virtual environment?
- Will teachers be held accountable for the student growth in just the courses they teach? Can you hold all teachers accountable given their varying work conditions and tools they have available in their location?
- Will stakeholders be able to place undue pressure on leaders for inappropriate decisions with their ability to withdraw funds or remove students when there is dissatisfaction?

Teaching and Learning

Standard 3: The school provides research-based curriculum and instructional methods that facilitate achievement for all students.

The third standard addresses implementation of the curriculum based on clearly defined student expectations, and it requires students to be actively involved in challenging learning. Data-driven decisions regarding curriculum, research based strategies, articulation and alignment among and between all levels of the school, interventions to help all students meet expectations, school-climate monitoring, and comprehensive information and media systems are to be provided.

Within the virtual school, the leader is going to be challenged by the following issues:

- How will leaders monitor the implementation of curriculum? Will they enter the classroom via the Internet? Will they require lesson plans in the same format as the traditional schools?

- How will leaders ascertain suitability of instructional materials? Will leaders know enough about the range of materials suited to an online environment?
- How are the data to be stored and accessed from all locations?
- How will teachers identify and share interventions appropriate to all students when these interventions must be tailored for the online environment?
- What are the 'levels' in the school, if any, and how are feeder schools and schools where students will transition going to provide input to the process of teaching and learning for this school? Can feeder and transition schools be identified, and will their data be in a useful form for a virtual school?
- Has the research base kept pace with the needs for virtual school environments? Are there strategies that have been proven to work in this environment?
- How would a leader determine the nature of the school climate? Does a school climate exist, or should it be the teacher's 'classroom climate' that is considered?

Documenting and Using Results

Standard 4: The school enacts a comprehensive assessment system that monitors and documents performance and uses these results to improve student performance and school effectiveness.

To fulfill this standard, there must be a comprehensive, secure, and accurate assessment system that measures student learning yielding reliable, valid, and bias-free information. In addition to using assessment data to improve teaching and learning, a systematic analysis of instructional and organizational effectiveness is expected. All of the assessment results are to be communicated to stakeholders, and trend data should show growth in student performance.

Within the virtual school, the leader is going to be challenged by the following issues:

- Is 'school' effectiveness an issue if there are students entering and leaving without a program of study with required numbers of courses or concepts?
- Should effectiveness be documented for content areas only, for equivalent grade levels only, or for diploma or program completers only? How are comparable groups established to show trend data?
- What would more formative or qualitative forms of assessment look like in a virtual environment? How often do you assess if students are all on individual plans or schedules? How is the assessment monitored to ensure the student is the person performing the task?

Resources and Support Systems

Standard 5: The school has the resources and services necessary to support its vision and purpose and to ensure achievement for all students.

Achievement of this standard rests on the leader being able to acquire and retain sufficient numbers of qualified staff, assign responsibilities appropriately, and ensure their continuous professional development. In addition to staffing, the leader must budget for sufficient resources, monitor financial activities, maintain all facilities and related equipment, and ensure a safe, orderly environment. Finally, the standard requires written security and crisis management

plans, adequate services for all the needs of students, including those with special needs.

Within the virtual school, the leader is going to be challenged by the following issues:

- Do the financial concerns differ in a virtual world? How will funds be allocated when the maintenance of a building is not as big an issue, but where there may be needs to support personnel with a strong infrastructure that rests on linking multiple environments?
- Do services for faculty include their own equipment? Who and how will all equipment in the homes of students and faculty be maintained? How much software can be required for students and faculty use?
- How is safety ensured in the Internet environment? How are data protected from hackers? How are student issues kept confidential in cyberspace? What types of policies and procedures are in place for professional communication where font size, abbreviations, use of humor, and other rhetorical devices could be misinterpreted?
- Who has access to all forms of communication among teachers, students, parents, administrators, and the community?

Stakeholder Communications and Relationships

Standard 6: The school fosters effective communications and relationships with and among its stakeholders.

Standard 6 is met when schools foster collaboration with community stakeholders to solicit their knowledge and skills and has formal channels to communicate with them.

Meaningful and useful communication with stakeholders should include expectations for student learning and growth and goals to achieve those expectations.

Within the virtual school, the leader is going to be challenged by the following issues:

- How are collaborative environments established via the Internet? Would face-to-face meetings ever be necessary or desirable? Would virtual or asynchronous meetings work best?
- How does the leader make information useful without burdening the client with detailed written explanations?
- Will leaders need more expertise in the creation of electronic forms of newsletters, behavior reports, and explanations of student and school effectiveness?
- Will the goals for the students' learning and the school's effectiveness look different from a traditional school? Is the use of technology given a higher emphasis, given the context?

Commitment to Continuous Improvement

Standard 7: The school establishes, implements, and monitors a continuous process of improvement that focuses on student performance.

The fulfillment of Standard 7 requires a continuous process of improvement that engages stakeholders and aligns with the vision and purpose of the school. To assist with improvement, professional development is to be provided, and results of improvement efforts are to be shared with stakeholders. Finally, the entire continuous process of improvement is to be evaluated and documented for effectiveness.

Within the virtual school, the leader is going to be challenged by the following issues:

- How does the leader maintain a continuous improvement process in a school that may not have tenured teachers (or the expectation of continuing contracts)?
- Are there unforeseen challenges in maintaining an interested base of stakeholders when student/client membership is fluid?
- How will teachers in the school have a sense of the vision and purpose if they are not actively engaged in the entire school process? How do you simulate activities that engage a mix of teachers, students, parents, administrators, and community members so that they can visualize the totality of the school?

Conclusion: Implications for Policies and Practice

As school leaders, organizations that employ leaders, and institutions that prepare leaders consider virtual schools through the lens of school accreditation, any number of issues have and will continue to be raised. Each of the standards generates issues specific to the fulfillment of that particular standard. These issues are not necessarily absent in traditional schools, but they do take on additional or differing challenges in virtual schools because of the major changes in the setting or context of the school.

Reflection and discussion surrounding the challenges of leaders of virtual schools must continue. Some form of organized deliberations will be required to identify the needs of leaders for these special contexts. In the process of determining needs, some policies may need to be changed, clarified, or created to suit this environment of the future. Finally, changes in the needs and policies affecting the leadership of virtual schools must be considered so that institutions of higher education can provide programs consistent with those changing needs.

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