

## Best Practices for Alternative Charter School Programs and Virtual Charter School Programs

<b>Date</b>	February 15, 2016
<b>Request</b>	01264

### REQUEST DESCRIPTION

A state education agency (SEA) served by the Southeast Comprehensive Center (SECC) has requested information regarding research on best practices related to successful alternative charter school programs and virtual charter school programs. Specifically, the SEA is interested in research in many areas of policy and practice for alternative and virtual charter schools. Some areas are directly related to students and curriculum, including student performance and accountability, management of students and courses, special populations, dropout prevention, technology, student/parent perspectives, and postsecondary success. Other areas of interest concern school management, such as governance, funding, and charter school evaluation.

The SEA plans to use the information provided in this report to inform the evaluation process for alternative and virtual charter school programs within the state and to develop recommendations regarding these programs to state policymakers.

This Information Request (IR) document describes the process for obtaining research articles, reports, and other resources as well as considerations as the SEA moves forward. It is organized into the following sections:

- Procedure
- General Limitations
- Background
- Overview of Resource Review
- References
- Resource Summaries
- Conclusion

## PROCEDURE

To obtain information for this document, the IR team conducted online searches—through the EBSCO host database, ERIC, Google, and Google Scholar—to look for research studies, articles, reports, and other resources that describe best practices related to successful alternative and virtual charter school programs or approaches to alternative education and virtual education. The terms *alternative education* and *virtual education* were included in the resource search to increase the likelihood of locating supplementary information applicable to alternative and/or virtual charter programs. For the database searches, the IR team used a combination of the following terms.

Accountability	Grade levels	Special populations
Alternative charter schools	Management	Student/parent perspectives
Alternative education	Online/cyber/virtual charter schools	Student/parent satisfaction
Charter school evaluation	Performance metrics	Successful implementation
Dropout prevention	Postsecondary success	Technology
Governance	Quality standards	Virtual education

The IR team reviewed 79 resources and selected 18 for discussion in this report. Inclusion was based on the following criteria: (a) publication date within the past 11 years (2005–2014) and (b) the content addresses alternative charters, virtual charters, alternative education, or virtual education. The documents provide a foundation for understanding best practices for successful charter school programs and for exploring potential challenges related to nontraditional school settings.

Based on review of the content, the IR team highlights four of the selected resources in the *Background and Overview* sections below and provides summaries of the remaining 14 resources in the *Resource Summaries* section, which begins on page 6.

## GENERAL LIMITATIONS

Due to the limited research base, the IR vetting process yielded a small number of resources on alternative charter and virtual charter school programs. Although the presence of charter schools in the United States has grown in the past 25 years, little empirically based research has focused on charter school quality (Baude, Casey, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2014). The IR team identified a collection of descriptive and evidence-based articles and reports that highlight states’ efforts with the above charter programs as well as in alternative and virtual education. This IR presents the current landscape of charter schools and discusses practices related to successful charter schools and educational programs that effectively serve students in nontraditional settings.!

SECC does not offer conclusions regarding the research or practices featured in this report, but instead provides information about the above topics and related recommendations from the respective authors. The *Background* section of this IR contains contextual information to aid stakeholders in making informed decisions with respect to the content of this report, but does not endorse any of the research or practices that are discussed.

## BACKGROUND

As public school options increase, so do the challenges associated with understanding these options and ensuring high quality and accountability. Charter schools represent a growing alternative to traditional public schools, while still being public schools. A 2009 white paper from the Center on Reinventing Public Education stated that the 21<sup>st</sup> century demands for high school graduation are contributing to the demand for alternatives to traditional school models, and that charter schools are growing to fill the need (Yaktsko, Gross & Christensen, 2009). The white paper, [Charter High Schools: Alternative Paths to Graduation](#), stated that charter schools offer advantages, such as instructional focus and climates that promote relationships and safety, and pose challenges, such as competition for resources and high dropout rates.

As the charter school sector has grown, so has the body of research regarding charter school practices, performance, and accountability. Charter schools are publicly funded and are typically operated under the auspices and oversight of an authorizer, which is often a school district but can be an SEA, university, nonprofit agency, or other entity designated by law. Two options within the charter school sector include alternative education schools focusing on at-risk students, such as dropouts, and virtual schools that provide online instruction remotely via computer to a range of students, including those who have failed in traditional settings.

Alternative charter schools are not new and represent a small element of the overall charter school sector. The first charter school, [City Academy High School](#), was an alternative school organized by teachers. It opened in 1992 in St. Paul, Minnesota, and was inducted into the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools' Hall of Fame in 2012. Currently, students at the academy range in age from 17–21 and usually have not achieved success in traditional schools. "City Academy was established to meet the growing need for academic programming aimed at young adults seeking a small school with small classes, which would enable them to have productive and meaningful roles within the community," according to the school's website (City Academy, 2016). The school uses a community-centered approach, locating classes at the Wilder Recreation Center and at satellite locations.

Results across the country vary, and the approach to accountability for alternative charter schools has been undergoing change. Steps have been taken to raise the accountability bar, with educators, researchers, and policymakers seeking ways to establish what factors most influence success and differentiate performance among charter schools.

Research recognizes that special conditions exist for alternative education programs and students. A Texas study (Beken, Williams, Combs, & Slate, 2009) illustrated the nuances involved in assessing at-risk student performance, including matters such as peer influences and the burdens associated with students with more complex or numerous handicaps. But research by the California Charter School Association (CCSA, 2011) suggests that some charter schools do significantly better than others serving similar at-risk groups, and that patterns exist regarding what is making the difference. In an extensive analysis by American Institutes for Research (AIR) (Quinn & Poierer 2006), studies suggest effective programs require a complex blend of expectations and support. In 2013, the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) released [Anecdotes Aren't Enough: An Evidence-Based Approach to Accountability for Alternative Charter Schools](#). NACSA studies authorizing trends and offers guidance for evaluation of charter school proposals, performance monitoring, and renewal and closure decision making. In its report on alternative charter schools, NACSA discusses definitions

for alternative charter schools (p. 6), measuring performance of these schools (p. 9), establishing parameters for accountability for alternative charters (p. 25), as well as federal policy and state activity.

Of more recent vintage are virtual schools, which have grown rapidly but still remain a small element of the overall charter school sector. Virtual schools have increased opportunities for individualized learning and broadened accessibility to a new range of instructional options. Even so, a 2015 national study by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) on virtual school performance showed, on average, that these schools lag far behind traditional public school counterparts. Questions also have been raised about the quality of oversight of some virtual schools and the manner in which they operate.

Schools that operate online pose a variety of complex challenges in the selection and teaching of curriculums, use and monitoring of technology, engagement of students and parents, and compliance with laws covering special student populations, such as students with disabilities. NACSA urged in an October 2015 [statement](#) that the 2015 CREDO virtual school study should “sound an alarm” with authorizers and policymakers. NACSA offers best practices for authorizers, including its [Index of Essential Practices 2012](#) and the 2011 issue brief [School Quality in the Cloud: Guidelines for Authorizing Virtual Charter Schools](#).

State policy toward these schools and how they are organized, managed, and monitored play important roles in outcomes. Additional information on these topics and others is provided in the following sections, which highlight other articles, reports, and documents selected for inclusion in this IR.

## OVERVIEW OF RESOURCE REVIEW

As school districts strive to meet the needs of their diverse student populations, nontraditional schooling options continue to expand. To aid decision making in this area, an SEA served by SECC requested assistance with research on best practices related to successful alternative charters and virtual charters.

Based on the SEA’s request, the IR team selected resources that are applicable to alternative charters, virtual charters, alternative education, and/or virtual education, as explained previously. The majority of the resources are described in the *Resource Summaries* section, which consists of two categories: Alternative Education and Virtual Education.

The five documents in the first category—Alternative Education—discuss topics such as governance, accountability, student performance, grade levels, special populations, and charter evaluation. A few examples are provided below:

- Porowski, O’Conner, and Luo (2014) found that the majority of alternative schools serve secondary-level students who have exhibited discipline problems. Their report provides a perspective on how 43 states define alternative education.
- Beken and colleagues analyze the performance of students in alternative school settings as compared to their peers in traditional school settings (Beken, Williams, Combs, & Slate, 2009).
- Schlessman (2014) discusses accountability policies for alternative schools in the state of Arizona.
- Quinn and Poirer’s (2006) study of alternative education programs identifies program components that were successful in meeting the needs of students with disabilities.

In the second category—Virtual Education— nine resources discuss topics that include the potential benefits of virtual schools for students and educators, challenges associated with these schools, and recommendations regarding operations, course management, instruction, and funding of virtual schools.

The resources discussed in this category indicate that one chief benefit of virtual schools is flexibility. Some students need the flexibility that virtual schools offer to continue their schooling while balancing the demands of their private lives. For example, a recent study of online charters (Woodworth et al., 2015) indicates that while virtual schools may serve as a viable option for students with multiple family obligations, students attending virtual schools consistently underperform as compared to their counterparts in traditional classroom settings. Also, the authors suggest that policy considerations and accountability oversight should be considered when developing virtual campuses and online learning opportunities for students.

An in-depth discussion of the remaining selected resources occurs in the *Resource Summaries* section. It contains details on the authors, hyperlinks to the documents, and information related to the operation, governance, performance, and evaluation of alternative education programs and charter schools.

## REFERENCES

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- Yaktsko, S., Gross, B., & Christensen, J. (2009, November). *Charter high schools: Alternative paths to graduation* (NCSRP White Paper Series, No. 3). Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved from [http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/whp\\_ics\\_altpaths\\_nov09\\_0.pdf](http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/whp_ics_altpaths_nov09_0.pdf)

## RESOURCE SUMMARIES

### Alternative Education

**Beken, J., Williams, J., Combs, J. P., & Slate, J. R. (Winter 2009). At-Risk Students at Traditional and Academic Alternative School Settings: Differences in Math and English Performance Indicators. *Educational Research in Alternative Education*, 3(1), 49–61. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ903005.pdf>**

This article describes a study that compares the academic performance of at-risk high school students attending traditional high schools with the performance of at-risk high school students attending academic alternative education campuses (AECs) in the state of Texas. Students who are not successful in traditional high schools, for a variety of reasons, may be referred to these alternative settings. AECs were created “based partly on the belief that when students are in nurturing and supportive environments, they are able to thrive” (Beken et al., 2009, p. 49).

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**California Charter Schools Association. (2011). Assessing the Utility of State Academic Indicators for Measuring Performance in 58 California Charter Schools. Retrieved from <http://www.ccsa.org/2011/12/assessing-the-utility-of-state-academic-indicators-for-measuring-performance-in-58-california-charte.html>**

This report summarizes the efforts of the California Charter School Association's (CCSA) to determine if charter schools designations of low Academic Performance Index (API) status and growth fairly reflect performance, obtain the charter school leaders' perspectives of their own performance, identify common characteristics of the schools, and test the ability of the CCSA's framework to identify the state's lowest performing charter schools. The project involved extensive analysis of academic performance data. CCSA identified 58 schools (out of a potential 503 charter schools in 2009–2010) to participate in the study based on the following selection criteria (pp. 3–4):

- Charter school operating for at least four years
- A 2010 API growth score of less than 700 (an API score of 700 is one of CCSA's recommended minimum criteria for renewal)
- Three years of cumulative API growth of less than 30 points (greater than 30 points is another of CCSA's minimum criteria for renewal)

The study focused on three questions (p. 2):

1. Do these schools share common characteristics in terms of students served, school design and governance, school leadership, instructional approach or other circumstances?
2. What is the academic performance of these charter schools?
3. Does CCSA's accountability framework accurately identify the lowest performing charters in the state?

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative data analyses. Key characteristics were studied, including school structure, student population, mission and goals, curriculum and academic focus, leadership, staffing, and professional development. The study found that a greater percentage of students from traditionally underperforming subgroups, such as transient students and those eligible for free and reduced price lunch, were served in the 58 charter schools. These charter schools also had more nontraditional structures, such as independent study and/or a K–12 grade span. CCSA indicated that many of the 58 schools appeared to be struggling to resolve issues, such as school governance and instructional approach, as they relate to the schools' specific population and structure (pp. 9–20). The charter schools also were performing at comparatively low achievement levels, especially in the area of mathematics, when compared to other schools with similar student demographics and student population challenges (p. 1).

Based on the analysis of the data and site interviews conducted, CCSA confirmed that its accountability framework does accurately evaluate school performance and identify the lowest performing charters in the state (p. 37). However, CCSA states, "This study concludes that there is no single, clear answer that tells us whether a school is effective or not with absolute certainty of judgment, yet our adopted framework is a reliable tool to deploy as an orienting policy" (p. 38).

The report includes a list of school resources geared to assist charter schools in assessing their performance as compared to other charter schools (pp. 34–37).



**Porowski, A., O’Conner, R., & Luo, J. L. (2014, September). How Do States Define Alternative Education? (REL 2014–038). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic. Retrieved from [https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/midatlantic/pdf/REL\\_2014038.pdf](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/midatlantic/pdf/REL_2014038.pdf)**

Porowski, O’Conner, and Luo (2014) interviewed SEA officials and reviewed information on alternative education definitions and programs to help the Maryland State Department of Education identify a transparent definition of alternative education programs to ensure compliance with Maryland Senate Bill 362. As a foundation of the review, four dimensions of alternative education programs were considered (pp. 2–3 and 17–18):

- Program student population — Students at risk of dropping out or who have dropped out as well as pregnant and parenting students should be considered for inclusion in alternative education programs. Considerations for targeted populations include students with behavioral problems, academic challenges, and attendance problems. Although students in all grade levels are potential candidates for an alternative school, secondary students are the primary focus in most states’ alternative education programs.
- Program location — Options include within a school, outside a school, or a standalone school.
- Program offerings — A variety of potential services include regular academic instruction, counseling, social skills and life skills training, workplace and job readiness, and behavioral interventions. Credentials offered could be regular high school diplomas, GED diplomas, and occupational certificates.
- Program structure — Services may be provided during the regular school day, after school hours, on weekends, and/or during summers.

In answering the question “How do states define alternative education?,” Porowski et al. propose five key findings (cover page and p. i):

1. Formal definitions of alternative education are found in 43 states and the District of Columbia.
2. The literature reviewed for this report suggests that target population, setting, services, and structure should be included in the definition of alternative education.
3. Alternative education programs primarily serve students with behavioral problems.
4. Services that are most prevalent in alternative education programs are regular academic instruction (21 states), counseling (14 states), social life skills (13 states), job readiness (12 states), and behavioral services (11 states).
5. Alternative education exemptions to compulsory school attendance laws are implemented at the district level.

The report includes extensive state-by-state tables for definitions, grade levels and ages of students served, target populations, settings, and services, as well as compulsory school attendance ages and exemptions for selected states. There are three appendices. Appendix A describes the methodology employed in the report, while Appendix B lists the actual state definitions of alternative education. Appendix C contains the protocol employed when interviewing SEAs regarding their criteria for compulsory attendance laws. Also, references are provided at the end of the report.



**Quinn, M. M., & Poirer, J. M. (2006). Study of Effective Alternative Education Programs: Final Grant Report. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research. Retrieved from [http://cecp.air.org/AIR\\_alternative\\_education\\_final\\_report\\_6-12-07.pdf](http://cecp.air.org/AIR_alternative_education_final_report_6-12-07.pdf)**

This report chronicles a grant-sponsored research study designed “(1) to identify components of systems that effectively meet the diverse, ever changing needs of children with disabilities for whom traditional school settings do not work; and (2) to develop a conceptually clear and empirically grounded definition of alternative schools” (p. 4). The investigation used a mixed methodological approach research design, with both qualitative and quantitative research methods that included a literature review, survey data collection, and the collection of case study data. This information was analyzed and synthesized into a final report. The report identified differing opinions regarding how best to address the needs of students identified as at-risk and offered various risk factors, including “grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, and suspensions,” used to identify at-risk students (Quinn & Poirer, 2006, p. 1).

The research project was initiated following the 1997 mandate by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for alternative programs and schools for students not successful in regular education settings. Additionally, this was a period when very little was known about alternative schools and the students they served. The research, called the Alternative School Project (ASP), was funded by a grant sponsored by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) of the U.S. Department of Education (ED) and was issued in 2001. The ASP was a five-year project that used an expert panel to assist with developing criteria for case study participation of exemplary programs as well as determining relevant data to be used in determining program effectiveness.

The literature review revealed the characteristics most often considered as important for student success by experts, administrators, and practitioners. The characteristics included small class or school body size, a personalized environment, choice, flexibility, high expectations, teacher training, and parental involvement. Classroom management, flexibility, and class size were reported to be integral to all successful programs studied. Less frequently reported were the characteristics of community support, administrative leadership, focus on a targeted population, and transition support. Data collection instruments used were the At-Risk Student Services Assessment (ARSSA) to determine the extent to which programs have been implemented; the Effective School Battery (ESB) to survey teachers and students regarding specific school characteristics; and the School Archival Records Search (SARS) to identify students who might be at risk for dropping out. The ARSSA yielded 5 of 10 program features being implemented well, and the ESB revealed a mostly female, mostly White teaching staff with less than five years of experience. A highly male (77 percent to 91 percent) student population with 84 percent being identified as having an emotional or behavioral disability was indicated in the SARS results (pp. 17–25). Case study research was collected from three nationally recognized alternative schools.

A recommendation for further study of alternative programs and alternative schools was one of six listed in the report. Additional recommendations included the development of a student placement tool, increased dialogue to foster professional discussion, and user-friendly guides for parents and other stakeholders. The report also provided a series of tables, two appendices, and references.

**Schlessman, A. (2014, April). Innovations in Arizona's Accountability Policies and Frameworks for Alternative Schools. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Philadelphia, PA. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED545470.pdf>**

Schlessman (2014) describes Arizona's context for alternative school accountability policy and frameworks and presents a timeline of key statutes and regulations regarding Arizona's alternative school accountability (pp. 2–8). Arizona has two accountability models for its alternative schools, the Arizona Department of Education's (ADE) Alternative A-F model and the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools (ASBCS) Academic Framework for Alternative Schools.

The author describes and compares ADE's Alternative A-F model and the ASBCS' Academic Framework for Alternative Schools. The Alternative A-F model consists of two indicators (pp. 10–11):

- Academic outcomes (30 percent) and growth (70 percent). The growth component has two measures, student growth percentile (35 percent) and improvement (35 percent).
- There also are three additional point components: English language learners (ELLs) reclassification, graduation rate, and academic persistence.

The ASBCS Academic Framework for Alternative Schools contains four indicators (pp.13–14):

- Student progress over time/growth — This first indicator has two growth measures: (a) student growth percentile (SGP), and (b) SGP for the bottom 25 percent of elementary and middle school students. High schools use improvement on the Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) performance band.
- Student achievement/proficiency — The two proficiency measures for this second indicator are (a) overall percent passing, and (b) subgroup (ELLs, free and reduced lunch, and special education) proficiency.
- A-F letter grade state accountability — This indicator is the letter grade the school received under ADE's Alternative A-F model.
- Postsecondary readiness (for high schools only) and academic persistence — Postsecondary readiness is calculated based on high school graduation rate. Academic persistence is measured by a student's enrollment in an alternative school at the end of one school year and subsequent re-enrollment in any public school the following year.

The ASBCS also published academic performance dashboards in 2012 and 2013 for alternative schools that it authorized.

In comparing the two accountability systems for alternative schools, Schlessman (2014) examines the similarities and differences in the calculation and use of the systems' indicators, namely student growth percentiles, improvement, proficiency, graduation rate, and academic persistence. A summary of the comparison of the two accountability systems is included in the report (pp. 15–18).

Two years of results (fiscal years 2012 and 2013) of alternative school labeling for both of the accountability systems are presented for Arizona's alternative schools. Although schools are labeled differently using the two alternative school accountability models, Schlessman (2014) found a strong correlation between the ADE's Alternative A-F model and ASBCS' Academic Framework (pp. 22–24).

The report states that in February 2014, Arizona’s State Board of Education approved a revamped alternative school definition and process for receiving alternative school status. Furthermore, ADE is proposing revisions to its Alternative A-F model. These changes may also encourage a review of ASBCS’ Academic Framework (p. 26). References are provided at the end of the report.

## **Virtual Education**

**Bailey, J., Patrick, S., Schneider, C., & Vander Ark, T. (2013, July). Online Learning: Myths, Reality & Promise. Digital Learning Now (DLN)! Smart Series. Retrieved from [https://www.flvs.net/docs/default-source/research/Online\\_Learning\\_Myths\\_Reality\\_and\\_Promise.pdf](https://www.flvs.net/docs/default-source/research/Online_Learning_Myths_Reality_and_Promise.pdf)**

This paper is the eighth interactive paper in the Digital Learning Now! Smart Series. Papers in the series offer guidance pertaining to the adoption of Common Core State Standards and shifts in education toward online learning. This paper discusses three areas of promise associated with online learning (customization, motivation, and equalization) and makes recommendations supporting online learning based on priorities noted in state policies.

The introduction presents an overview of trends in personalized learning. It begins with a reference to the rapidly growing demand for online education as evidenced in the evolution of the North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL) into the International Association for K–12 Online Learning (iNACOL) between 2006 and 2013. It also provides a link to NACOL’s 2006 publication of *Top Ten Myths About Virtual Schools*. Finally, it lays out 20 benefits of online learning; included among the noted benefits are the removal of geographic and budgetary barriers to educational opportunities; the empowerment of teachers, students, and parents to choose the environment best for them; and access to innovations in learning platforms, data, and assessments.

The authors discuss three types of myths: myths related to students receiving online instruction, those associated with teaching and learning, and those linked to systems and policies. Possibilities for students receiving personalized and socially engaging online instruction, the types of students receiving online instruction, and the number of students enrolled full-time in online courses during the 2012–2013 academic year were among the student-focused myths confronted. With regard to teaching and learning, the authors use research to challenge misconceptions regarding rigor, quality, and compliance. Finally, the authors tackle systems and policy myths dealing with accountability, laws regulating enrollment, and costs associated with online schools versus brick-and-mortar schools.

The paper also covers strengths, challenges, and opportunities for improving online learning, as documented in related literature and as captured in a number of multimedia formats, including videos, e-mails, interviews, and case stories. The authors state that challenges associated with traditional schools are also impacting online schools. Possibilities for expanding learners’ access to excellent teachers, providing greater career flexibility for teachers, and expanding teachers’ impact were noted as opportunities linked to online learning.

The *Possibilities* section of the paper noted three key possibilities for bolstering achievement and equity: customization, motivation, and equalization. In addition, blended learning, competency-based learning, performance-based funding, college credit opportunities, and the emergence of parent groups are “harnessing the power of online learning” (p. 22).

The authors also include the following policy recommendations (p. 27):

- All students should have full- and part-time access to online learning without caps or barriers and without regard for their previous enrollment status.
- States should support efforts to improve Internet access, both devices and broadband infrastructure.
- Courses should be available on a rolling year-round basis, and end-of-course tests should be available on-demand or frequently scheduled.
- Teachers should have reciprocal and performance-based certification.
- Funding should be weighted, flexible, portable, and performance-based.
- States should authorize multiple full- and part-time providers.


The final section of this paper offers 16 links to online learning resources and research; six additional links to case studies and research from online education programs, including some in Florida and Minnesota; links to a database of state virtual/online schools and to a Southern Regional Educational Board (SREB) listing of state virtual schools programs. It also contains tables illustrating legislative activity from the 2011–2012 school year (evidencing that nearly every state in the nation enacted a bill to further digital learning policies), biographies of the authors, acknowledgements, disclosures, and endnotes.

**Beck, D. E., Maranto, R., & Lo, W. (2014, May). Determinants of Student and Parent Satisfaction at a Cyber Charter School. *Educational Policy*, 28(3), pp. 209–216.**

Beck, Maranto, and Lo (2014) review the research regarding student and parent satisfaction with cyber charter schools and present findings of their study of student and parent satisfaction at SunTech, a charter high school of about 700 students, which was established to serve urban youth. According to the authors, “Research indicates that in traditional public schools the subjective well-being of students and parents varies by gender, race, and special education status. Prior studies suggest that general education students are more satisfied with their schooling than special education students, that female students have greater satisfaction with their schooling than male students, and that Caucasian and Latino students report greater school satisfaction than African-American students” p. 209.

The authors’ investigation at SunTech used a “student (n = 269; 53.7% response rate) and parent (n = 232; 48.7% response rate) survey,” which found “statistically significant differences in subjective well-being across demographic groups of students, and also significantly higher satisfaction among special education students in the cyber school environment” p. 209.

The survey administered to the students at SunTech focused on 66 items that assessed three scales, the reasons for choosing the school, involvement, and satisfaction. The parent survey included 67 similar items. Results of the study indicated that “girls rated SunTech as more satisfying,” which confirmed research findings in the literature cited (Ding & Hall, 2007; Epstein, 1981; Gibbons



& Salva, 2011; Huebner, 1994; Huebner et al., 2000; Nickerson & Nagle, 2004; Okun et al., 1990; Samdal et al., 1998; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002)” p. 214. Beck and colleagues also report positive perceptions for diverse students; “interestingly, special education students were significantly more satisfied with SunTech than general education students. Unfortunately, there were no peer-reviewed research studies available on special education student satisfaction” p. 214.

Regarding parents’ perspectives of online charter schools, Beck et al. (2014) indicate that most of the research focuses on traditional school settings. However, they cited one example of positive perspectives: “parent surveys in Denver and Milwaukee indicated that parents of special needs students report greater satisfaction with charter schools than with their prior traditional public schools, perhaps because the charter school offered a fresh start (O’Brien, Hupfeld, & Teske, 2010)” p. 214.

In conclusion, Beck and colleagues report that both students and parents at SunTech believed that the charter school setting provided a more empowered environment than that of a traditional school setting. However, the authors caution that the survey focused on subjective impressions instead of other long-established measures and that SunTech may not be typical of most online charter schools. They also stress that additional research is needed on the topic and that student and parent satisfaction with educational settings is extremely important.

**DiPietro, M., Ferdig, R. E., Black, E. W., & Preston, M. (Spring 2008). Best Practices in Teaching K–12 Online: Lessons Learned from Michigan Virtual School Teachers.**  
 , 7(1), pp. 10–35. Retrieved from <http://www.ncolr.org/jiol/issues/pdf/7.1.2.pdf>

This empirical article details the results of a study of 16 highly-qualified virtual teachers from the Michigan Virtual School (MVS). The term highly-qualified is defined by the researchers as three years of virtual teaching experience and certification status. The researchers set out to understand virtual teaching and learning processes as well as instructional best practices in K–12 virtual schools across content areas (math, science, and English) from the perspective of teachers. The article focuses primarily on online teaching practices and strategies associated with the participants representing “successful” online teachers. However, it does not illuminate findings in a way that is content area-specific.

The researchers posed seven questions (p. 15) to unearth teachers’ perspectives regarding their pedagogical practice, related strategies, and technology considerations. The study’s findings pinpoint teaching best practices in addition to implications for practice, research, and policy from triangulation of observation, interview data, and existing research. The findings are detailed in the form of a table (Table 1., p. 16), which includes each category, related practices, a description of those practices, an exemplar in the form of a quote from a study participant, and research references that support the practices in virtual, face-to-face classroom environments, or online postsecondary courses.

Three categories of findings emerged from the study: general characteristics, classroom management strategies, and pedagogical strategies/practices. The findings associated with these categories represent online teaching and learning characteristics and strategies observed, represented, or stated by all participants. General characteristics address personal and instructional characteristics associated with successful virtual teachers (including teachers’ commitment to student learning and to developing the new strategies needed to promote it, teachers’ skill with the basic uses of technology, teachers’ deep understanding of both students’ diverse learning styles and their teaching content area, and teachers’ sound organizational skills).

Practices in the area of classroom management include teachers' maintaining a nonthreatening course environment by correcting inappropriate student behavior in virtual contexts and monitoring course-related communication to identify learners in crisis and intervene to assist them. Pedagogical strategies deal with content and instructional delivery of content in virtual schools. The strategies are subcategorized as assessment, engaging students with content, making courses meaningful for students, providing support, communication and community, and technology.

**Gemin, B., Pape, L., Vashaw, L., & Watson, J. (2015). Keeping Pace With K–12 Online Digital Learning 2015: An Annual Review of Policy and Practice. Evergreen Education Group. Retrieved from [http://www.kpk12.com/wp-content/uploads/Evergreen\\_KeepingPace\\_2015.pdf](http://www.kpk12.com/wp-content/uploads/Evergreen_KeepingPace_2015.pdf)**

This is the twelfth annual report by the Evergreen Education Group and partner organizations about the state of digital learning for school and districts across the nation. In addition to a description of the current digital landscape, this report emphasizes the users and suppliers of digital learning and highlights ways digital learning activities occur at every level from school to district to state.

After detailing relevant definitions pertaining to digital learning used throughout the report, Gemin, Pape, Vashaw, and Watson (2015) provide a brief overview of the origins of computer-assisted instruction and online learning that have led to the current landscape. They explain how the distinction between schools (users) and suppliers of digital learning content has become blurred as both schools and suppliers may develop, maintain, and provide digital learning services, courses, online systems, technology hardware, and even teachers for student learning.

The second section of this paper opens with a description of three general types of digital learning for K–12 students: (a) students enrolled in full-time online schools, (b) students taking supplemental courses online, and (c) students attending a hybrid school that allows them both online and face-to-face learning experiences. Gemin et al. (2015) highlight the largest state virtual school in the country, Florida Virtual School (FLVS), and explain the variety of virtual course options provided through its district franchise, district, and charter virtual schools. They also describe how FLVS funds its virtual programs.

The authors explain that in 2014–2015, 40 percent of the nation's students were taking supplemental courses offered by state virtual schools. The authors estimate that an additional 2.2 million students are able to take online courses offered by suppliers. Data show that most students are taking courses in core subject areas (p. 17). Washington was featured as the state providing the widest range of online course options for students.

Gemin et al. (2015) indicate that although virtual charter schools “accounted for the large majority of full-time online students and 3.3 million course enrollments,” the growth of virtual charter schools across the nation was limited. The authors further indicated that existing charter schools were sometimes limited by restrictive requirements put in place by the states, but also found that “no state that has allowed online charter schools has subsequently eliminated them” (p. 19).



The descriptive analysis in this study showed that online charter schools

- Attract a diverse student population whose average enrollment is approximately two years.
- Often use a self-paced, independent study instructional approach that reduces the amount of synchronous interaction between teachers and students.
- View student engagement as a challenge to online academic success.
- Offer one-on-one instructional support and other services to promote student success.
- Encourage parents to monitor their child's education and participate in training sessions designed to facilitate student engagement.
- Use online tools to monitor student participation.
- Hire full- and part-time teachers willing to provide extensive individual attention to students.
- Are commonly considered their own local education agency while some are affiliated with school management organizations that typically provide curriculum and instructional materials, professional development, technical assistance, and assessments.

Gill et al. (2015) suggest that a reliance on online parent and student engagement brings into question the effectiveness of virtual charter schools (p. 39). Since online schools are limited in their ability to monitor student engagement and provide substantial teacher-student interaction, parents are expected to encourage appropriate student behavior (e.g., completing assignments) and provide supplemental instructional support. Participation from parents is essential to academic achievement and online charter school success.

**Huerta, L., Barbour, M. K., & Miron, G. (2015). Virtual Schools in the U.S. 2015: Politics, Performance, Policy and Research Evidence. Boulder, CO: University of Colorado Boulder National Education Policy Center. Retrieved from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/virtual-schools-annual-2015>**

This report offers a detailed examination of policy and performance trends in the development of virtual schools in the United States, including charter schools. It is the third annual report on the subject from the National Education Policy Center. The report is broken down into three sections covering key finance and governance issues, a review of empirical evaluation data, and description and analysis of the full-time virtual school landscape.

Huerta, Barbour, and Miron (2015) describe activity in state legislatures regarding virtual schools. The report includes the outcomes of proposals in a variety of states, including North Carolina's action to create pilot K–12 virtual charter schools. A significant issue with virtual school development has been a debate about how costs and spending compare with traditional brick-and-mortar schools. For example, virtual schools might have lower facilities costs but higher expenditures related to technology infrastructure than traditional schools (p. 9). The authors note that no state has established a comprehensive formula linking allocations to actual expenditures (p. 8). They examine the specific practices of individual contractors and how those practices comport with state law. They also provide examples of companies' financial performance (p. 12). While virtual instruction potentially offers advantages for individualized, expanded and more accessible instruction, the report notes that evaluating the quality of instructional materials, which come in many types and formats, poses a challenge for authorizers (the entities that oversee charter schools) (p. 14).



The report states that methods are needed to track accomplishments of students leveraging various learning options and venues (p. 18). States have approached teacher quality issues in a variety of ways. Utah, for example, provides for certain licensure exemptions for online teachers, while North Carolina requires virtual teaching staff to hold “appropriate state certification” (p. 22). According to the Huerta et al. (2015), “States do not appear to be tailoring teacher evaluation policy” (p. 23) to cover the virtual school circumstances.

The authors review performance of both for-profit and nonprofit virtual school management companies. A description of the landscape of full-time virtual schools covers patterns of enrollment, student characteristics, and performance. The virtual school landscape is changing and growing rapidly and includes a complex layering of school and instructional types, including blended learning that involves both in-person and online teaching and learning. Enrollments in virtual schools of Black and Hispanic students, those qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch, and special education students are proportionally lower than the national public school average.

The report provides extensive research references and offers analysis of the types of organizations providing information. Analysis also is provided of the development of standards for virtual school operations, including standards for quality online instruction. Policy recommendations, also offered in the report, cover a wide range of issues, including school funding formulas and boundaries, regulation of growth and support for independent research, imposition of sanctions, and design of outcome measures.

**Papa, L., Wicks, M., & the iNACOL Quality Standards for Online Programs Committee. (2009, October). National Standards for Quality Online Programs. VA: International Association for K–12 Online Learning (iNACOL). Retrieved from <http://www.inacol.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/national-standards-for-quality-online-programs.pdf>**

This standards document is the third in a series prepared by iNACOL, following the *National Standards of Quality for Online Courses* and *National Standards for Quality Online Teaching*. *The National Standards for Quality Online Programs* is intended to offer program leaders a foundational, overarching set of standards for guiding the design and maintenance of a quality online program. It contains an introduction; institutional, teaching and learning, support, and evaluation standards; references; and a self-evaluation form for online programs in the appendix.

The introduction explains the document’s grounding in evidence (i.e., literary review, a cross-reference of standards, and survey of iNACOL members and experts regarding the efficacy of standards adopted), and recommendations for the use of guidelines provided.

The document provides a rating scale for four standard types: Institutional, Teaching and Learning, Support, and Evaluation and 19 standard-related, subcategories. The rating scale, which provides a brief description of each rating option, is a 5-point scale (Exemplary [5], Accomplished [4], Promising [3], Incomplete [2], and Confusing [1]) with a Not Applicable (N/A) option. The rating options are to be applied to the standards and their 19 subcategories.

The subcategories clarify each of the four standards and specific expectations relevant to online programming, including mission/vision; leadership; operations, teaching and learning considerations; technical support; and accountability. Incorporated in Institutional Standards are mission, governance, leadership, planning, staffing, resources, equity and access, and accountability. Teaching and Learning

Standards are detailed in the curriculum and course design, instruction, and assessment of student performance subcategories. Support Standards are the focus of the faculty, students, guidance services, organizational support, and parents/guardians subcategories. Evaluation Standards account for two subcategories—program evaluation and improvement. The rating of the subcategories in each of the four standards allows program leaders a detailed format for assessing the quality of their online program.

The references section provides 20 entries from 1999 to 2008, which range from checklists, rubrics, and handbooks to federal guidelines and organizational reports. Finally, an online program self-evaluation form is provided in the appendix.

**Rhim, L. M., & Kowal, J. (2008). Demystifying Special Education in Virtual Charter Schools (Special Report). Alexandria, VA: National Association of State Directors of Special Education Retrieved from**

<http://www.nasdse.org/portals/0/web%20copy%20of%20rhim%20report%20jan%202008.pdf>

Rhim and Kowal (2008) aim to dispel common misconceptions/reservations about special education in the virtual school environment. They present information about special education issues that are unique to the virtual environment based on a review of research, an examination of documents, and interviews they conducted with virtual school operators, state charter authorizers, and state department personnel. After discussing general information about different types of virtual schools and charter schools, the authors present some of the advantages and disadvantages that impact students using virtual education. They found that there are a number of reasons that enrolling in virtual education is especially attractive to students with disabilities (e.g., individualized instruction, pacing, variations in feedback and presentation of information, and flexible scheduling).

The authors point out the lack of definitive research about the enrollment of students with disabilities in virtual charter schools or how the instructional mode affects them. “There is a great need for this type of research and enormous potential to learn from current virtual charter schools where staff tell inspiring stories of success with their special education populations” (2008, p. 9). Rhim and Kowal also emphasize that the federal and state laws for special education students enrolled in virtual environments are the same as those for students in traditional schools. Virtual charter schools must abide by the same federal regulations for students with disabilities that require individualized support, evaluation, and modifications to curriculum that will accommodate student learning needs.

Rhim and Kowal (2008) present the information they gathered about special education in virtual environments in specific sections, such as Instructional Personnel, Discipline Issues, Monitoring, Assessments and Accountability, Transitions, and Technical Assistance. The information is presented in a Q&A format. For example, under the heading, “Must specialized technology be provided to students with disabilities?” the authors indicate that if called for in the students’ IEPs, they must be provided with a range of alternatives, such as on-screen keyboards. Technology training resources also must be provided to students and parents. The report also notes, with regard to the challenge of finding qualified instructors, that specialized training programs for online instructors have emerged.

Throughout the sections, the authors provide samples of exemplary school profiles, resources, and forms that support their discussion.

The appendix includes 33 references and a list of acronyms and definitions.

**Woodworth, J., Raymond, M., Chirbas, K., Gonzales, M., Negassi, Y., Snow, W., & Van Donge, C. (2015). Online Charter School Study. Retrieved from [https://credo.stanford.edu/pdfs/Online\\_Charter\\_Study\\_Final.pdf](https://credo.stanford.edu/pdfs/Online_Charter_Study_Final.pdf)**

The Center for Research on Education Outcomes, Mathematica Policy Research, and the Center on Reinventing Public Education produced a 2015 report to present the latest in research on the effects of online schooling on the academic performance of students.

Woodworth et al. (2015) sought to “measure academic impact by comparing the annual academic growth of online students with the growth of equivalent students who attend schools with traditional settings, i.e., brick-and-mortar district schools” (p. 2). The researchers used qualitative and quantitative methodologies to investigate the impact of student differences, virtual school characteristics, and state policies on online students’ academic performance. Within the report, the authors provided data about how the academic outcomes for students in online charter schools can vary by student demographics, such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and learning capabilities.

According to the authors, “The findings look at performance at several levels: at the individual student level, at the student population level, at the organizational level of the online schools and at the state policy level. Each facet of the analysis offers its particular insights about the influence of online charter schooling on the students who attend them” (2015, p. 2).

Results indicate that students attending online charter schools demonstrated weaker academic growth in math and English than their counterparts in traditional school settings. “The pattern of weaker growth remained consistent across racial-ethnic subpopulations and students in poverty” (2015, p. 62). Other findings included: (1) students who attend online charter schools had higher mobility rates than their peers, even though their mobility rates prior to entering online schools did not differ; and (2) “some online charter schools which were part of multi-school networks had average impacts on academic growth, which were stronger than the typical online charter” (p. 62).

Woodworth et al. (2015) suggest that while online charter schools may provide flexibility and access for some students, states must consider their oversight and expansion policies of online charters, given that the “academic benefits from online charter schools are currently the exception rather than the rule” (p. 63).

The report includes three appendices. The first appendix provides a descriptive profile of students attending online charter schools. The second includes explanations of some of the statistical techniques employed to analyze student growth data and develop virtual-matched groups for student comparison analyses. The third appendix provides the correlation results between school-level effects and responses to a principal survey about online school practices.

## CONCLUSION

Educators and policymakers face important decisions about guidance and regulation for charter school alternative education programs and charter virtual schools, especially in a rapidly changing K–12 public education environment. The research and resources presented in this report provide a foundation to orient leaders about critical issues associated with these school types that focus on students whose needs have not been met in traditional school settings. The success of these schools and their communities hinges on many factors, not the least of which is the knowledge that educators and policymakers bring to the support and accountability table. The resources and references provided in this Information Request offer information and insights to help leaders see beyond labels and to aid development of effective school options.

**Information Requests** are customized reports that are prepared to fulfill requests for information by the departments of education of the states served by SECC (Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina). The requests address topics on current education issues related to the requirements and implementation of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. For additional information, visit the SECC website at [secc.sedl.org](http://secc.sedl.org).

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