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Thirty Percent of U.S. High School Students Have Taken At Least One Course Online, NEPC Report Finds Serious Problems With Full-time Virtual Schools, More Oversight is Necessary

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Boulder, Colorado (October 25, 2011)--Virtual schooling is the fastest growing alternative to traditional K-12 education in the United States. Forty states operate or authorize online classes for K-12 students, say researchers from the University of Colorado Boulder, with more than 30 percent of the nation's 16 million high school students having been enrolled in at least one online

class. Yet these schools are subject to only minimal government oversight. “Few rules, little supervision, many students and families who struggle, and an unacceptably large number of enrollees who won’t make it through to the end,” said report co-author Dr. Gene V Glass.

Cash-strapped states and school districts are using online education – including full-time virtual schools with no face-to-face contact between students and teachers – as a lower-cost alternative to traditional public schools. In states such as Florida, virtual schools are used as a loophole in laws that limit the size of classes. According to the report, full-time “cyber schools” including scores of virtual charter schools, are now operating in twenty-seven states. In at least one case in Arizona, a private firm outsourced essay grading to low-paid workers in India.

The report, *Online K-12 Schooling in the U.S.: Uncertain Private Ventures in Need of Public Regulation*, by University of Colorado education professors Gene V Glass and Kevin G. Welner, was released today through the National Education Policy Center (NEPC). In an accompanying report, *Model Legislation Related to Online Learning Opportunities*, University of Kentucky educator professor and attorney Justin Bathon offers statutory language to bring state policies in line with the research.

This expansion in virtual schools, especially full-time virtual schools, is taking place, Glass and Welner write, despite the absence of any data on the effectiveness of full-time cyber programs for K-12 students: “There’s zero high-quality research evidence that *full-time* virtual schooling at the K-12 level is an adequate replacement for traditional face-to-face teaching and learning,” said Prof. Welner. Nationwide, more than 200,000 students are enrolled in full-time virtual school programs.

“Private operators are gaining access to large streams of public revenue to run cyber schools,” said Prof. Glass. “But the public is not getting full information on the actual costs of these programs, so it’s not clear if taxpayer money is being used properly.”

Cyber schools frequently claim they need the same per-pupil funding as traditional schools, despite the fact that they do not build or operate school buildings, have no student transportation costs, and have a much higher student-to-teacher ratio than traditional schools.

Just five companies, Glass and Welner report, account for most of the content and services sold to full-time cyber schools: K12 Inc., Education Options Inc., Apex Learning, Plato: A+LS, and Connections Academy. These firms, the researchers found, are increasingly involved in funding the campaigns of public officials, lobbying for public funding for their private operations, and writing the rules under which they can use public funds. “These are not illicit activities,” said Welner, “but in the absence of other influential voices representing the interests of students and society there is a clear danger of those interests being damaged.”

As virtual schools continue to grow, Glass and Welner offer several recommendations for state legislators and other policy-makers—recommendations codified in Bathon’s accompanying model legislation. These include:

- **Financial audits of cyber schools** to determine their actual per-student expenses, so states can determine appropriate reimbursement.

- **Authentication of student work:** An online instructor, whether located in the U.S. or abroad, has no way to determine whether work submitted via computer was performed by the student enrolled in the class. Trusted organizations should be engaged to administer in-person exams, as is currently the practice at a few virtual schools.

- **Accreditation:** To avoid abuses that have been found in other proprietary schools – such as truck driving and cosmetology academies – traditional high school accrediting agencies and state and federal departments of education should work together to develop a rigorous approach to accreditation of both part-time and full-time cyber schools.

“Cyber schools and virtual learning will be a growing part of the education landscape,” said Prof. Bathon. “The challenge for educators and policy-makers is how to use this new tool to deliver results for students in a responsible and cost-effective manner.”

“We have to make sure that cyber schools don’t become just a cheap way of providing second-rate service to disadvantaged school districts,” said Prof. Glass.

Welner added, “No matter where they live or in what form they receive instruction, all students deserve quality teachers, supported by a rigorous program of accreditation and accountability. Right now, cyber schools are the wild west of American education. Our children will benefit when policymakers address these key issues.”

The full report, *Online K-12 Schooling in the U.S.: Uncertain Private Ventures in Need of Public Regulation* as well as *Model Legislation Related to Online Learning Opportunities* were supported with funding from the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice. Both are available on the National Education Policy Center website at: <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/online-k-12-schooling>.

*The mission of the **National Education Policy Center**, housed at the University of Colorado Boulder School of Education, is to produce and disseminate high-quality, peer-reviewed research to inform education policy discussions. We are guided by the belief that the democratic governance of public education is strengthened when policies are based on sound evidence. For more information on NEPC, please visit <http://nepc.colorado.edu/>.*

These reports are also found on the GLC website at <http://www.greatlakescenter.org/>.