

# Establishing a Successful K-12 Virtual Program



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SOLUTIONS

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## Introduction

For their myriad of proposed benefits beyond the brick and mortar environment, virtual K-12 education programs have exploded in popularity in the last decade. According to Hill (2010), “The use of virtual education to augment the traditional education system has become prominent in the hopes of solving...problems that the traditional venue cannot address.” Among the problems tackled by virtual programs are those personal (e.g., bullying, health issues, traveling) and educational (e.g., advanced placement, credit recovery) in nature.

Providing workable solutions to major education issues gives reason to virtual education’s rise. According to Gemin, Pape, Vashaw, and Watson (2015), all 50 states avail online options to students – a population of more than two million since 2013 – and more than 50 percent of school districts are exploring “ways to start homegrown online learning initiatives” (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2013).

By definition, a virtual course is one in which 80 percent or more of the content is delivered online (Allen & Seaman, 2016), and the volume of online content within a course is directly proportional to its level of flexibility. With virtual programs, students are able to experience enhanced flexibility with access to electives, advanced placement, or credit recovery courses not offered at their home schools and freedom from location or scheduling limitations if they travel, are incarcerated, or have physical disabilities (Gemin et al., 2015), (Archambault, Kennedy, Shelton, Dalal, McAllister, & Huyett, 2016).

Not only is virtual learning flexible, but it is also primed for personalization. With powerful learning management systems and tailored course options driving the top tier of K-12 curriculum organizations, “online teaching and learning is evolving as fast as the emerging technology that provides an engine for personalization (Powell, Watson, Staley, Patrick, Horn, Fetzer, Hibbard, Oglesby, & Verma, 2015).

In “What’s Possible with Personalized Learning?: An Overview of Personalized Learning for Schools, Families & Communities”, Friend, Patrick, Schneider, and Vander Ark describe personal learning as giving students “voice and choice,” allowing them to decide when, where, and how they learn. The researchers also emphasized the role of teachers in supporting students to ensure that true personalization and standards mastery occurs (2017).

## Problem

For the nearly 50 percent of school districts without virtual options, the challenge of establishing a formidable online program may seem immense. Securing implementation funding for an innovative, non-traditional program and finding experienced online instructors are not least among these tasks (Hill, 2010). In addition to proper student supports and program evaluation, Berge and Muilenberg (2001) determined technology disparities, access, and choices to be noteworthy hurdles to online education, and Powell et al. (2015) labeled community engagement and attitude as difficult to overcome. In “Management and Operations of Online Programs: Ensuring Quality and Accountability,” Watson and Gemin (2009) listed the five most taxing processes in establishing an online program, as follows:

1. Creating, buying, or leasing a curriculum
2. Hiring and managing teachers
3. Determining and building student support systems
4. Selecting and managing technology
5. Assessing a program’s success

Of these five steps, those most often analyzed by the literature include hiring and managing teachers and selecting and managing technology.

### **Hiring and Managing Teachers**

Choosing an engaging, rigorous curriculum can be an arduous process; however, a funding-dependent task deemed more challenging by districts with virtual programs is recruiting and training qualified faculty members. Without question, the online teaching environment is a shift from the traditional classroom. According to McQuiggan (2007), the transition from brick-and-mortar teaching to virtual teaching is stark, as the classroom focus shifts from teacher to student. Online courses are front-loaded, and teachers must prepare most of their materials prior to enrollment so that students may progress at their own pace (Dykman & Davis, 2008). Online teachers also must be comfortable learning and navigating various technologies and learning management systems and trained to maintain relationships and provide feedback without face-to-face interaction (McQuiggan, 2007).

As the demand for online K-12 instructors continues to increase alongside the demand for virtual offerings, teacher preparation is of utmost importance. Kennedy and Archambault (2012) suggest that field experiences are “a critical component to preparing preservice teachers who are well-qualified,” but the researchers argue that teacher education programs are struggling to properly prepare professionals to teach in all contemporary learning environments.

### **Selecting and Managing Technology**

For those districts looking to create a virtual program, selecting and/or constructing online education technologies provides another difficult funding-oriented task. Various technology issues – not the least of which is determining and maintaining a learning management system that supports personalized, multimodal learning and instant data reporting – are among the most popular factors discouraging schools from establishing an online program (Powell et al., 2015).

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*“Technological constraints, including access, infrastructure, and hardware and software issues stifled early [online learning] initiatives. Finding quality content and software programs that integrate with a school’s Learning Management System is a major issue, combined with the lack of translatable, universal data reports able to flow into teacher dashboards coherently.”*

*- Powell et al. (2015)*

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Although virtual K-12 programs can empower schools and their students with a multitude of unique education options, the challenges inherent in establishing such a program from scratch can overwhelm and deter district administrators.

### **Solution**

Alleviating the complications present in establishing an online program, some education leadership organizations assist school districts in making the transition to virtual education (Hill, 2010). One such organization providing these services is Lincoln Learning Solutions of Rochester, Pennsylvania.

In their web guide, “How to Start an Online Program: A Practical Guide to Key Issues and Policies,” the International Association of K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) elaborates upon the

major steps to establishing a successful virtual program (2015), a summarization of which follows:

<b>iNACOL's Steps to Establishing a Successful Virtual Program</b>	
1.	Determining potential student population and stakeholders
2.	Analyzing faculty and staff needs
3.	Establishing funding
4.	Choosing curriculum
5.	Determining technology needs and arranging related services
6.	Recruiting, hiring, and training staff members
7.	Marketing program to students and families
8.	Training students and families
9.	Evaluating the program's effectiveness and future success

For partnering organizations, Lincoln Learning's turnkey programs alleviate nearly 80 percent of this workload. Clients must define their student populations and secure funding for their programs, but Lincoln Learning Solutions delivers curriculum, teaching, technology, training, marketing, student support, and program evaluation services.

<b>Curriculum</b>	Lincoln Learning Solutions' PreK-12 curriculum, Lincoln Empowered™, features more than 160 researched-based, standards-aligned core, elective, and credit recovery offerings. Clients may establish their own full programs or select à la carte offerings to meet their students' specific needs.
<b>Teaching</b>	Lincoln Learning Solutions' highly qualified, experienced teachers are available to lead all Lincoln Empowered™ courses. In addition to teaching and grading coursework, the instructors offer a variety of resources to support student learning.
<b>Technology</b>	Lincoln Learning Solutions' technology department provides districts with single sign-on access to its learning management system and student information system and provides clients with 24-hour technical support.
<b>Training</b>	Lincoln Learning Solutions' Professional Development team assists clients through customized implementation, training, and ongoing professional development. This team provides modules of support for individual teachers, trains the trainer teams, and leads groups through webinars, in-person sessions, and ongoing sessions – all of which is supported by precise documentation.
<b>Marketing</b>	The Lincoln Learning Solutions Marketing team helps clients to create customized marketing materials that promote their pilot virtual programs while driving community engagement.

<b>Student Support</b>	The Lincoln Learning Solutions Student Support Services team offers educational assistance and special education support, advocating for every student’s success through regular communication and monitoring.
<b>Program Evaluation</b>	Lincoln Learning Solutions partners with organizations to monitor student progress and evaluates a program’s outcomes in comparison to its goals. Schools agree to data collection, including access to student course and state assessment data, for an effective evaluation (“Services,” 2017).

**Keys to a Successful Virtual Program**

According to Mark Gensimore, Senior Sales Specialist at Lincoln Learning Solutions, although the organization provides a majority solution for districts wishing to establish virtual programs, the keys to a district’s success lies within itself. Having been involved in various successful pilot programs, Gensimore suggests that districts wishing to create meaningful online programs must not only arrange for sufficient funding, but they must ensure that their administrations and communities fully support virtual education. Additionally, Gensimore advises that, prior to program implementation, districts should select a motivated, enthusiastic professional to serve as the single point of contact for Lincoln Learning Solutions. This targeted communicator bridges the gap and streamlines communication between the two partnering organizations (2017).

**Conclusion**

Across the nation, K-12 online education initiatives are growing in popularity. As a result of these initiatives, districts are reaping the benefits of establishing their own virtual programs, including:

1. Opportunities for personalized learning options, including advanced placement and credit recovery
2. Freedom from limitations including location and scheduling
3. Flexible schedules for students with physical and other issues (Archambault et al., 2016)
4. Ability for schools to regain students and take control of their learning environments (Gensimore, 2017).

Accompanying the establishment of these programs is a bevy of hurdles, however. Securing funding, hiring and managing teachers, selecting and maintaining technology, and more challenge and often discourage districts from pursuing expanded, online curriculum offerings. With these challenges in mind, education leadership organizations such as Lincoln Learning Solutions now offer turnkey solutions to assist districts in creating their own virtual programs with minimal difficulty; this allows schools across the nation to more effectively and efficiently personalize learning for their students.

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