

IT Vendors: Beware the Overselling of K-12 Virtual Education

Posted At : December 30, 2011 10:29 AM | Posted By : Chris Dixon

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A recent [Associated Press story](#) on K-12 distance learning perfectly captures all the perils IT vendors face in the overselling of virtual learning. IT vendors should recognize that the potential total number of students who can be enrolled in K-12 online programs is limitless. However, the real gains from online learning will come as supplements to the bricks-and-mortar high school classrooms (i.e., blended online-onsite learning), not as a replacement for these classrooms.

Let's take a look at the hype around virtual learning with excerpts from the AP story: "But as states pour money into virtual classrooms, with an estimated 200,000 virtual K-12 students in 40 states from Washington to Wisconsin ... regulation isn't moving nearly as fast as the virtual school boom."

Unfortunately, few reliable data sources exist for virtual school enrollment. Most widely cited statistics are produced by organizations with a stake in promoting such a boom. A 2009 U.S. Department of Education [meta-study](#), which is cited in the AP story, offers this statistic:

Online learning—for students and for teachers—is one of the fastest growing trends in educational uses of technology. The National Center for Education Statistics (2008) estimated that the number of K-12 public school students enrolling in a technology-based distance education course grew by 65 percent in the two years from 2002-03 to 2004-05. On the basis of a more recent district survey, Picciano and Seaman (2009) estimated that more than a million K-12 students took online courses in school year 2007-08. (PDF p. 13)

Enrolling in "a technology-based distance education course" is a far cry from being a full-time online student. However, from a vendor perspective, a seat is a seat, whether the student is taking multiple courses or is full time online. Picciano and Seaman (cited in the DOE study above) have produced [more recent peer-reviewed research](#) (2011) predicting "that by 2016, five million K-12 mostly high school students will be enrolled in these (online) courses."

For further analysis, please read the complete analyst recap, located [here](#).