



The History of Georgia Virtual School

Overview

The virtual school is a form of distance learning; teacher and students are separated by geographical distance and the class is conducted using different electronic communication methods. Virtual schools are considered the next wave in technology based K-12 education, joining proven distance learning delivery methods. In the 2010-2011 school year, it is estimated that approximately 1.5 million students in K-12 across the United States were enrolled in an online course (Wicks, 2010).

Currently there are 39 states with state-led online education programs (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2010). In the K-12 arena, Florida has the largest virtual school implementation, with over 220,000 course enrollments in the 2009-2010 school year (Watson et al., 2010). Also, the state of Michigan recently passed a law creating an online learning experience requirement for graduation. Florida and Michigan Virtual Schools mainly serve high school students. However, there is an increasing trend away from virtual schools solely intended for high school students to an all inclusive virtual K-12 school model.

Technologically, the trend is leaning towards single learning management system packages that manage student online interactions during a course, course content, course management, and student/faculty information management. Vendors are developing holistic packages that cover all the needs identified thus far in a virtual school environment. This is no small task as evidenced in the wide variety of learning management system offerings in this arena. These holistic packages are generally known as "portal" technology. The current leaders in holistic virtual school software are Blackboard, Moodle and Desire2Learn.





Background of Georgia eLearning

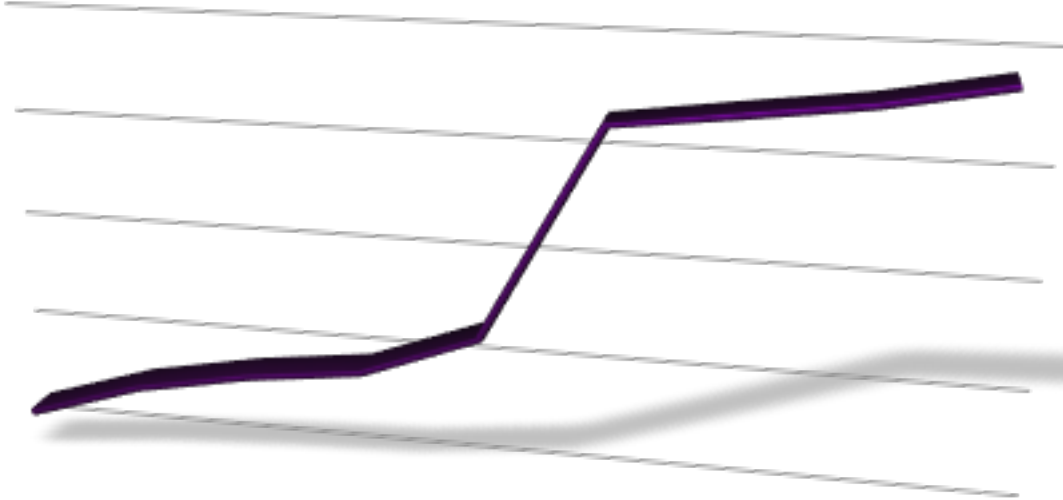
In August 2001, the Georgia State Board of Education approved the Virtual Learning Business Plan endorsing the provision of online AP and core curricular courses to students in Georgia's high schools. The need for online courses for students in Georgia schools, as well as nationally, has become apparent as schools that are unable to meet students' needs search for other curricular opportunities. Online courses provide options for schools with limited curricular offerings, scheduling conflicts, or that have difficulty providing highly qualified teachers.

Georgia's virtual learning program was transferred to Technology Services in October, 2001. At that time, Georgia was in the second year of a three-year federal USDOE Advanced Placement Test Fee Program grant targeted toward increasing the number of low-income and other disadvantaged students who take Advanced Placement (AP) courses and exams. The grant, titled AP Nexus, was written as collaboration between Georgia, South Carolina, and Tennessee and was aimed at increasing the availability of AP courses to the target population by means of online opportunities through a contract with Apex Learning, the largest provider of online AP courses at that time. Georgia public high schools with a 50 percent or greater free and reduced lunch rate qualified for the program.

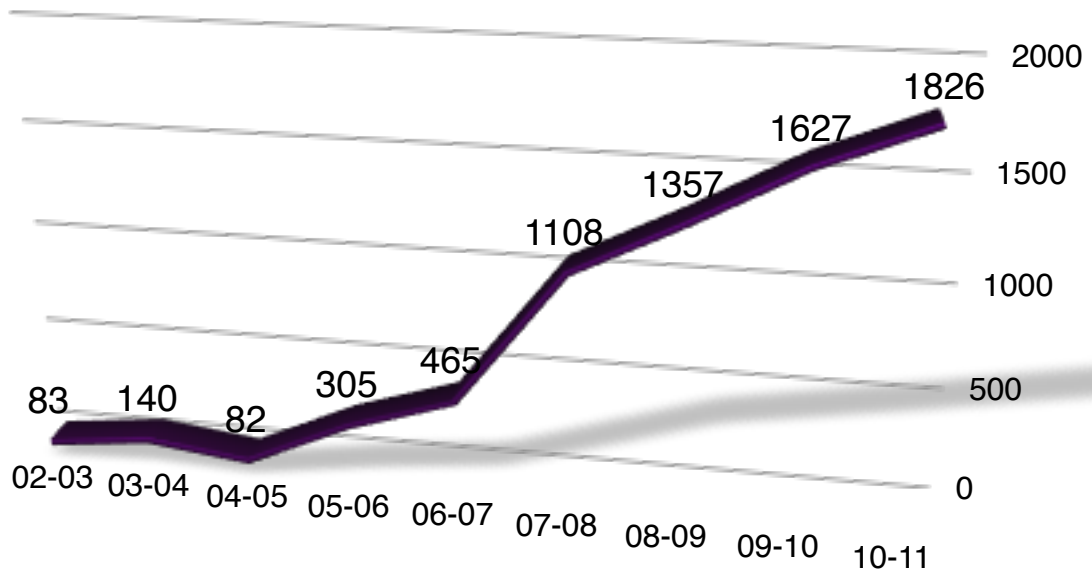
As word of the AP Nexus program spread, more and more schools contacted the Department of Education to ask how they could also participate. Most of the schools that inquired, however, did not qualify to participate in the grant, and many schools expressed the need for core courses in addition to AP courses. This prompted the Department to begin expanding its online program through additional contracts with several vendors. The figures below show the growth in recent years in both the number of AP courses offered by Georgia Virtual School as well as an overall increase in the number of students enrolling in AP courses at the school.



— AP Courses Offered



— AP Enrollments





Thirteen school systems from across the state that had been participating in virtual learning initiatives on their own were convened in Atlanta to discuss the desirability of a state-sponsored virtual school. The response was overwhelming. Several school systems expressed that they were in the process of creating their own programs simply because they believed little else was available. All of them stated that they would prefer to be a part of a statewide program rather than expend enormous amounts of time and money to create their own programs, which would result in duplicate efforts across the state. All were willing to collaborate on and contribute to a statewide program.

The Establishment of Georgia Virtual School

On May 4, 2005, Governor Sonny Perdue signed the Georgia Virtual School bill, O.C.G.A. 20-2-31, into law establishing the first official state virtual school. Broadcast live by Georgia Public Broadcasting from Winder Barrow High School over the Internet, Governor Perdue signed the bill and answered questions about its creation to a face-to-face class of AP Government students and to 18 other classes and public libraries across the state of Georgia via the Internet video stream and a virtual chat room.

Like the previous e-Learning program, Georgia Virtual School offers a wide- variety of courses to Georgia high school students. However, Georgia Virtual School serves public, private, and home school students and has expanded its course offerings to 125 unique core curriculum, AP, and elective courses with 281 variations, including SAT Preparation, each meeting GPS or College Board standards. These classes are offered in both block and semester formats on various schedules to meet the differing course offering and scheduling needs of local school districts. Furthermore, Georgia Virtual School is continuously adding and refining courses, especially in the AP area, to meet local needs. All courses are developed or revised by trained, highly qualified teachers, and courses are no longer leased from other institutions.

Georgia Virtual School's instructors are all highly qualified teachers, specially trained to teach in the online learning environment. Each of its online instructors must successfully complete a virtual training course, addressing the pedagogy of online learning and instruction as well as the policies and procedures specific to Georgia Virtual School. Trainees who successfully complete the online learning program are then given the opportunity to mentor with an experienced online instructor before teaching their own courses. This helps insure the quality and consistency of online instruction. In addition, AP instructors are required to successfully complete AP





training before teaching Georgia Virtual School program's AP courses. Currently Georgia Virtual School has 108 highly qualified teachers who have been trained to teach online. Of those, 44 are certified to teach one or more Advanced Placement courses.

In addition, Georgia Virtual School, Georgia Department of Education and Georgia Professional Standards commission convened a task force to develop standards for online instructors. In December 2006, these standards were passed by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission and are now the basis for Georgia teachers to earn an online teaching endorsement. Because of this, all teachers in Georgia are able to complete a series of online courses to obtain the add-on endorsement to their Georgia certification.

Georgia Virtual School plans to continue expanding its course offerings and programs to best serve the students of Georgia through online programs. In 2007, Georgia Virtual School introduced Georgia Credit Recover and AP Exam reviews. Georgia Credit Recovery offers a teacherless, self-paced environment where students are able to show mastery of the full course content that is aligned to the GPS. The program is offered free of charge to public school students in the state and serves over 10,000 students per year. The AP Exam reviews allow students and teachers across the state to gain online access to practice AP exams and review material.

In 2010, Georgia Virtual School introduced shared resources and premium shared resources. The shared resources offer the full course content for five classes on a public webpage accessible to students and teachers across the state and beyond. The premium shared resources allow Georgia public schools to download full versions of our course content in 55 courses.

During the 2011-2012 school year, nine schools across the state will take part in a blended learning pilot where students and teachers in those schools will have full access not only to Georgia Virtual School's course content, but also the entire Learning Management System.

Why Students Take Online Courses

There are many reasons why schools want to offer courses online and why students wish to take them. One reason is the ability for a school to expand its course offerings, both in Advanced Placement and in core subject areas. Approximately 77 of Georgia's high schools (22 percent) offer no AP courses at all, and 19 of them offer only one. Bright students in these schools are at a disadvantage when





applying for and entering college. They have not had the opportunity to experience college-level content or apply college-level skills.

Many of Georgia's school systems are too small and too understaffed to be able to offer the kind of variety they'd like to their diverse student populations. Sixty-four (35 percent) of Georgia's 180 school systems have a total population of less than 2,500 students. More than a third of Georgia's school systems have only one high school. Thirty-seven (10 percent) of the high schools in the state have less than 500 students. Many of these schools are forced to limit their course titles since they do not have highly qualified teachers to put in their classrooms.

Students want to take courses for many reasons: to increase their content choices, relieve scheduling conflicts, get ahead in their course work, or retake a previously failed class, so they can graduate on time. Other students may be homebound or may have transferred in from other school system and are missing certain required courses.

Georgia Virtual School & FTE

During fall and spring semesters, Georgia Virtual School offers a limited number of FTE-funded seats to students throughout the state of Georgia. Students can register for courses to take during their state-funded school day schedule. While registration priority is given to public school students, private and home school students are also given the opportunity to register for these seats. However, these seats are limited.

Registration for FTE-funded seats in Georgia Virtual School is a two-phase process. Phase I involves public school registration. Public school students are able to register for courses during a specific amount of time before registration is open to private and homeschool students. Private and home school students are able to register during Phase II. Enrollment for these students in courses is based on the number of FTE-funded seats available after Phase I of registration is complete.

However, no student is enrolled in his or her course(s) until local school approval is received. For home school students, a Georgia Virtual School support specialist approves the courses.

Georgia Virtual School & Tuition

Georgia Virtual School also offers tuition-funded seats to public, private, and home school students during the fall, spring, and summer semesters. These seats are not



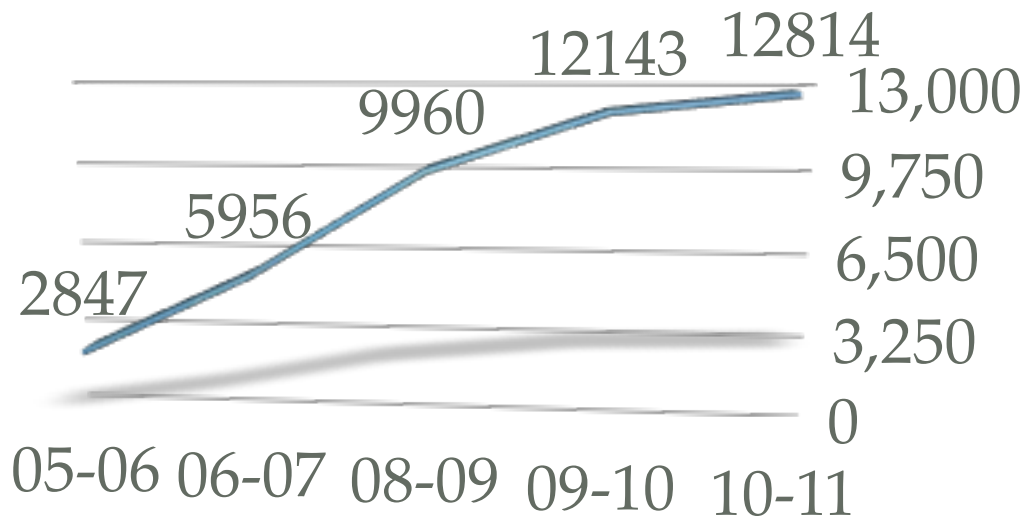


limited, but, as with FTE-funded seats, local schools must approve students' course selections before they are enrolled. Tuition costs \$300 per .5 Carnegie unit course (1 segment) or \$600 per 1 Carnegie unit course (2 segments).



Dr. John D. Barge, State School Superintendent

— Enrollments Per School Year





References

Wicks, M. (2010). A national primer on K-12 online learning. 2. Retrieved from www.inacol.org

Watson, J., Murin, A., Vashaw, L., Gemin, B., & Rapp, C. (2010). *Keeping pace with K-12 online learning: An annual review of policy and practice*: Evergreen Education Group.

