

Be True to Your Cyberschool

Some big players in online education are betting that online high schools will pay off

by [Alison Damast](#)

Ask a typical teenager what he or she likes about high school and the teen will rattle off a list that includes such quintessential traditions as homecoming, prom, and spirit days.

It is estimated the total online higher education market at \$8.1 billion in 2006.

That might not be so hard. About 700,000 public pre collegiate students were enrolled in at least one online or blended course, according to a survey released in March by the Sloan Consortium, an education research group that reviewed K-12 online learning. Sixty-three percent of the public school administrators who responded to the survey said their schools offer students the chance to participate in some form of online learning. "I think there is a lot of potential for particularly the high school to really start offering more courses fully online or blended," says Anthony Picciano, a co-author of the Sloan report and a professor at New York's Hunter College. "I could see a lot of the growth following what happened in higher education."

An online course is generally defined as one in which all or most of the content is delivered online, while a blended course is one that mixes online and face-to-face delivery of instruction.

Spurred by State Decisions companies are entering the virtual high school market at an opportune time, says Trace Urdan, a senior research analyst at Signal Hill Capital in San Francisco, who follows the

for-profit education industry. "Schools and students and parents are all becoming more comfortable with the online delivery of education, so that this is all kind of gaining steam in real time," Urdan says.

The growth of the online market is spurred by important policy decisions being made by states like Florida and Michigan, Picciano says.

Meanwhile, Michigan became the first state in the country last year to require every high school graduate to take one online course in order to graduate, Picciano says. "There are a lot of other states that are following or will be following them," he says

Picciano says for-profits are eyeing the nation's 50 million high school students, a number far larger than the 15 million to 16 million students in higher education, according to Picciano.

Deal Makes Strategic Sense

And the transition to delivering online courses at the high school level should be relatively simple for companies that already have years of experience with this education model.

"To them, I guess it is just another source of revenue, plus it is not a bad thing if you do have online high school students if you're trying to sell SAT courses. They are certainly their target audiences," Jaffe says.

Appeals to States with Rural Students

Online high schools may sound counterintuitive to the idea of proms, football games, and teenage crushes. But online schools and courses are becoming a popular option for states with significant populations of rural students, said Jeffrey Silber, an analyst with BMO Capital Markets. In some cases, it can prove too expensive for cash-strapped

districts to provide students with transportation to schools that are miles away, he said. "They don't have the funding to open up schools and provide transportation for people not close to schools, and a virtual high school is one way of getting around that," Silber said.

May Pose Risk to Students

In the meantime, the companies also will have to deal with wary politicians, teachers' unions, and public education watch groups, which are closely following the growth and performance of online charter schools, Urdan said.

Barbara Stein, manager of 21st century education at the National Education Assn., is concerned that students who attend virtual high schools may be losing out on the benefits of a traditional high school experience. She says many online virtual high schools do not meet the NEA's criteria for a quality education and have come under scrutiny by public education groups. "We think those are not a great idea. Most students do not do that well when they have no face-to-face interactions," says Stein. "There may be extreme situations where that is the appropriate recourse, but for most students it is not."

Students who sign up for an online high school may be taking a academic and professional risk, worries Gene Maeroff, author of *A Classroom of One: How Online Learning Is Changing Our Schools and Colleges*. He says it is unclear yet how online high school diplomas will be viewed by college admissions officers and employers. "Whether or not entities can make this into a profit program really depends on recognition," says Maeroff. "If they expect to grant a diploma, who will recognize this diploma besides state education officials?"

Those fears may subside as online courses and high schools become more commonplace. But it is unlikely that these schools will ever replace traditional brick-and-mortar high schools. After all, there's little room for school spirit in the hallways of cyberspace.