

Book Review – Development and Management of Virtual Schools: Issues and trends

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Book Review – Development and Management of Virtual Schools: Issues and trends

Editor: Catherine Cavanaugh (2004). *Development and Management of Virtual Schools: Issues and Trends*. 274 pages. Softcover. Hersey, PA.: Idea Group. ISBN: 15 9140 2174.

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Within Canada, the virtual school movement is growing. Contact North, the virtual school serving Northern Ontario, reported 11,222 registrations in their 548 courses for the year 2000-01 (Betty, Hebert, and Sefton, 2002). In British Columbia, a partnership of eighteen school districts offered a pilot electronic distance education program for 2,200 students in 2001-02, while the Vancouver School Board (that province's largest school board) was in the process of setting up its own virtual school (Kuehn, 2002). Over the past four years, the Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation in Newfoundland and Labrador has increased its offerings from 200 student enrolments from 76 different schools in ten courses in 2001-02 to 1,500 student enrolments from 95 different schools in thirty-five courses in 2004-05 (Government of Newfoundland, 2004). From 1995 to 1999, there were "23 online programs [that] have begun operating in the province [of Alberta]" (Muirhead, 1999). "Alberta leads the [virtual schooling] pack with about 4,500 full-time and 2,500 part-time K-12 students in online schooling – over 20 schools offer online courses" (O'Haire, Froese-Germain and Lane- De Baie, 2003, p. 6). However, there has yet to be a book published that has really addressed the virtual school movement across Canada. Cavanaugh's *Development and Management of Virtual Schools: Issues and Trends* is the first step in addressing that deficiency.

While not exclusively about virtual schooling in Canada, Cavanaugh's book provides a truly international perspective on this new and growing sector of K-12 education. This begins with the opening chapter by Glenn Russell, which provides both a background and context to the rise of virtual schools in North America from an Australian perspective. Russell starts with a discussion of historical efforts in distance education and how virtual schooling is the next step in that progression due to globalization and advances in technology. He then enters into a brief discussion about the philosophy behind virtual schooling and how its practice may be supported by various theories of communication. Russell concludes the chapter with a thorough discussion of some of the problems facing virtual schools and the potential solutions to those problems.

The first instance of a Canadian perspective is provided by Margaret Haughey and William Muirhead. Their chapter provides a consideration of the development of virtual schools in Canada, with a specific focus upon the province of Alberta. Unique in its origins, Alberta is the only province where the push for the virtual school movement came from those involved in homeschooling. The authors briefly describe the history of K-12 distance education in Canada and the virtual school movement in other provinces, before focusing upon the history of and

administrative issues associated with virtual schools in Alberta. Unlike many of the other chapters, Haughey and Muirhead pose many unanswered questions about the future of virtual schools to consider, presumably in an attempt to provoke reflection in the reader.

Another example of a Canadian perspective is provided by Ken Stevens in his chapter about the use of school district digital intranets to create open school models in Atlantic Canada and New Zealand. He describes how the creation of a virtual learning environment for the delivery of Advanced Placement courses connected rural schools “academically and administratively integrating with one another for at least part of a school day.” Stevens considers how this open school model provides challenges to the traditional school organization in three areas, the administrative issues in connecting these schools, the ability to integrate students into both physical and virtual classes, and the differences in pedagogy for both teaching and learning in these virtual environments.

A truly international scope is achieved, not only through these Australian, Canadian, and New Zealand perspectives, but also through an additional Australian perspective, a variety of American perspectives, and even a chapter focusing upon a virtual school initiative in Singapore. For the practitioner, this book provides a good American and non-American consideration of the history of – and some of the major issues facing – virtual schooling. For the researcher, the various chapter authors provide considerable background on what has happened in the field and pose many questions that remain unanswered, many of which will require scholarly inquiry to address. This book is highly recommended as a starting point for any individual interested in virtual schooling.

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