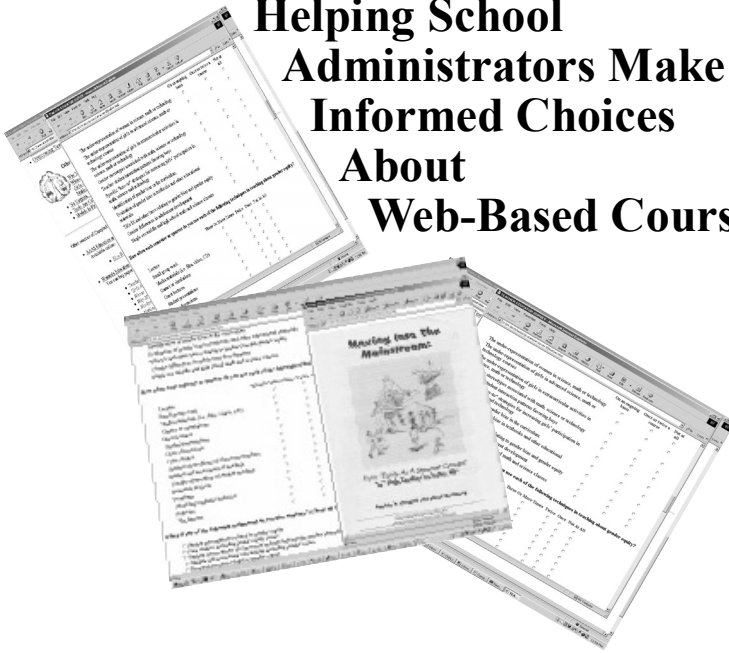# Going Web-Based?

## Helping School Administrators Make Informed Choices About Web-Based Courses

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Why Web-Based Courses?

Web-based courses use the web as the primary source of information, activities and student interaction. Some courses have e-teachers (who interact with students electronically) and supplementary materials. Schools can use web-based courses:
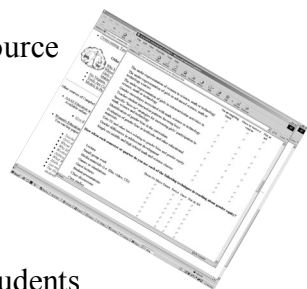
To increase the variety of courses open to students. Currently there are web-based courses for every skill level from Basic Math to Advanced Placement Calculus and for subjects from Business to Japanese. Web-based courses can be used when there is no qualified subject area teacher.

To increase scheduling options. Most web-based courses can be taken at any time, offering flexibility in scheduling, providing options for students needing specific courses and an alternative to too many senior study halls.

To serve out-of-school students. Providing access to web-based courses can be a relatively inexpensive way to support students who are unable to attend school.

To provide alternatives to summer school. Students can use web-based courses to retake failed subjects, reducing the need for summer school.

To expand educational options. Web-based courses can provide an instructional alternative for home schooled students or for those who are not doing well in conventional classes.

What Do Schools Need To Consider Before Implementing Web-Based Courses?

Schools need a lot of up front preparation before they can successfully use web-based courses... including teacher preparation and technological preparation... Schools need to know what their students will need to be successful in a web-based course and how much mentoring they as the school are willing to do. (e-course Company Executive, 2001)

These questions may help with up-front preparation.

Content: For what purposes do you want to offer the courses? In what content areas? For what grade levels?

Students: About how many students will enroll? Will students need prerequisites in order to enroll? A specific GPA? Teacher recommendations?

Teachers: Will e-teachers be used? Will there be additional on-site instructional support? What training will be provided to on-site teachers?

Technology: What servers, computers and broadband access are available? Will students be able to access courses out of school? Who will provide students with technical support?

Management: Who will coordinate the overall effort? Are resources available to pay for the courses and other related costs?

Who Does Well In Web-Based Courses?

The students who are the most successful are the ones who have learned on their own to be self-motivated and have some drive. (e-learning Teacher, 2001)

Ideally, and in many marketing materials, the answer to who does well in web-based courses is "everyone." The reality is much more complex. The typical distance learning student, which includes web-based students, has been described as a 16 year old with a GPA of at least 3.0, who plans to enroll in college upon graduation. This description reflects the wider view that "students must be mature, self-disciplined and motivated to use distance learning effectively".[1] Teachers currently working with web-based students are not sure that web-based courses work for students who are already in trouble. Their concern reflects earlier work that found distance learning can actually exacerbate students' academic difficulties.[2]

Not surprisingly, web-based courses don't work very well if students are unmotivated, especially if the students don't like the subject covered. In the words of one student: "if you don't like what you are studying, don't take it on-line".[3]

Web-based courses can attract at-risk students who like the subject area or who are excited about the novelty of working on the web. Their teachers feel at-risk students are most apt to be successful if the web-based courses are:

◊ well organized

◊ easy to follow with clear instructions

◊ written at an appropriate reading level

◊ include an on-site educator to provide supervision and guidance.

[1] Campbell, Patricia B. and Jennifer Storo. "Reducing The Distance: Equity In Distance Learning." *Journal of Science Education and Technology.* 5, #4, Dec., 1996, 285-295.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Trotter, Andrew "Cyber Learning at On-line High." *Education Week,* Jan. 24, 2001, 28-33.

What Helps Students Succeed In Web-Based Courses?

Teachers, working with e-students, rated the following factors as important to student success.

e-teacher Student Feedback: Timely, informative feedback to students and, as necessary, to on-site supervisors is key. Unlike the classroom, where response to questions is immediate, web-based students often wait a day or more for their answers.

Student Academic Ability: Average and basic students can do well when web-based courses are matched with students' ability levels and there is on-site support.

Student Ability to Keep to Deadlines: Providing students with deadlines for the completion of units, activities, tests and the course as a whole can help students to progress through courses.

Regularly Scheduled Times to Work on Courses: Specific locations and times for students to work on their courses can be helpful.

Frequent Access to Computers: More access can be provided by making school computers available before and after school, giving students passwords and/or course CDs so they can work on their web-based courses out of school, giving them "loaner laptops" and letting them print course components so they can work on their courses off-line.

Other Sources of Student Support: Supports can include on-site adults with technical and subject area knowledge, tutors, books and other instructional materials.

What Shall I Look For In Selecting A Web-Based

Once we worked out the bugs, it was good. We had a wonderful set up. (Teacher, 2001)

We've had some unsuccessful experiences with [a company]. There were additional materials that they failed to tell us we needed to purchase after we had paid our tuition. It was hard to get ahold of them, it took a long time to get the teacher feedback – students had to email quite a bit to get a response. And there was no one to call. [4](Teacher, 2001)
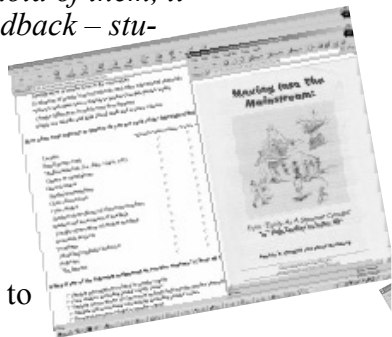
Some web-based course providers will do a better job of meeting your needs than will others. The following criteria can be useful to keep in mind as you select a provider.

Course Quality: Having teachers and students review courses is a good way to assess course quality. They can assess:

◊ content level and accuracy

◊ appropriateness of the activities and assessments

◊ the value of feedback given to students

◊ course potential to keep students interested and motivated.

Accreditation: If accreditation is important to you, you should check if the course and/or program is accredited and if so, by whom.

State Curriculum Standards: Even if courses are described as "standards based," you may want to check which of your state or local standards are met by the courses and how that's determined.

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[4] This teacher interview was part of a CLASS evaluation; however this quote referred not to CLASS but to a provider they previously used.

Course Provider?

Costs/Licensing Options: "How much?" and "What is and isn't included?" are bottom line questions. It is useful to ask if the cost includes all student instructional materials, necessary instructional and technical support (including maintenance and upgrades) and on-site teacher professional development.

There are a variety of ways to "buy" web-based courses including site licensing, where for one price there is no limit on the number of students or the number of courses they take; individual enrollments, where there is a fee for each student enrolled; and collaborations   of districts who negotiate agreements with course providers.
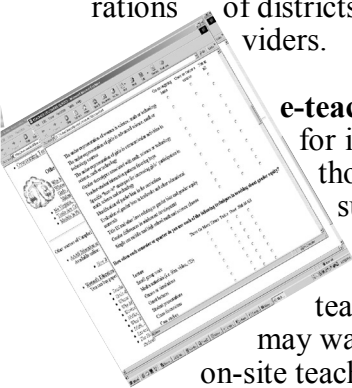
e-teachers: Some course providers use e-teachers for instructional support. You may want to ask those who do about their e-teacher training and supervision, the quality, quantity and timeliness of e-teacher communications and what you can do if you are dissatisfied with an e-teacher. If you are using your own teachers, you may want to ask about professional development for on-site teachers.

Technical Issues: Some basic issues include if the courses will run on your existing computer hardware and web connections, if course and student data will be on your server or theirs and if other websites are accessed through the courses.

Technical Supports: It is important to know where students can go for help when they have technical problems, what support is available and if it is available by phone as well as e-mail.

Evaluation: You may want to ask for evaluation information including the numbers and percentage of students completing the courses and any information that ties course completion to increased standardized test scores. You may also want to know if they have provisions for students to drop a course with a full or partial refund and what percentage of students do this.

Some Sources of Courses

Remember things on the web change quickly. Some resources that are here today may not be tomorrow. The following URLs are listed as resources only; no endorsement is intended or given.

http://apexlearning.com

Apex Learning offers 30+ courses including Advanced Placement courses. They provide schools and districts with instructional, administrative and technical support services.

http://www.class.com

class.com offers 40+ high school courses. It builds partnerships with districts, consortiums, and high schools providing the technical platform, courses and support services.

http://www.jonesknowledge.com/

Jones Knowledge offers the Florida Virtual High School and Apex professional development courses. They have web-based course management, a delivery platform, e-mail and telephone technical support.

http://www.ncslearn.com/

NCS Learn offers courses from preK through adult learners including GED Preparation. They offer on-site support, telephone support and software installation, as well as teacher professional development.

http://www.govhs.org/website.nsf

Virtual High School is a collaboration of high schools, that develops web-based course and offers them to students in member schools others. It also offers teacher professional development.

http://www.dlrn.org/

Distance Learning Resource Network offers further information.