

7 Steps to Starting Your Virtual School

A primer for developing a district-operated virtual school program
for public school administrators

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Virtual schooling. Distance learning. Online education. No matter what you call it, there is a growing national trend in public school districts to provide an online alternative to the brick and mortar classroom for Kindergarten through 12th Grade students. Why? Because now more than ever, parents and students are seeking academic alternatives and there are more and more solutions from which they can choose.

By offering virtual school options to families, innovative public school districts seek to:

- Provide a complete set of academic options to students and families.
- Provide students a high-level of educational flexibility, enabling them to work in a self-paced, individualized, and engaging environment.
- Prepare students to be college- and career-ready in a global society
- Protect district budgets.
- Allow faculty to provide ground-breaking instruction through new tools and techniques.
- Keep students who are seeking alternatives from leaving their district.

As of 2010, 39 states had virtual school initiatives in operation providing over 450,000 course enrollments and serving 200,000 full-time students. pK-12 students and their families around the country have an increasing number of virtual school options. If other districts establish state-wide programs before you, then you run the risk of losing your students to those programs and the funding that goes with them.

How do you start a district-operated virtual school?

Starting a virtual school in your district can seem overwhelming. It is important to establish a partnership with a trusted organization to help you navigate the administrative challenges and expand your offering to your community.

When you run your own virtual program, you can address the needs of those families seeking alternatives and keep your students from heading out the door. It is easy to get started with a district-operated virtual school when you work with Calvert Partners.

There are 7 essential steps to starting your district-operated virtual school:

1. Develop the vision and policies governing your virtual school
2. Understanding the funding structure
3. Curriculum review and selection
4. Hiring or assigning Supervising Teachers and teacher training
5. Student recruitment and family communication
6. Technology implementation
7. Access to special education instruction

1. Development and evaluation of the policies governing your virtual school

When you are establishing a district-operated virtual program, there are two types of policies to evaluate; (1) policies in your state regarding the development and oversight of a district-run virtual school, and (2) the policies and procedures you institute as the foundation of your new organization. Questions to ask are:

- What are the laws in my state about the establishment of a virtual program?
- How large of an organization am I going to build?
- What grade levels will my program serve?
- Can I recruit students from outside my district? Can I operate as a statewide program?
- What are the standards regarding time online/offline?
- Can a student be part time in my program?
- How is attendance recorded? What are the attendance requirements for virtual programs? Do they differ from brick and mortar requirements?
- How does funding flow from the student's resident district or the state to my program?
- What will be my teacher:student ratio for a virtual program?
- How will I train, manage, and evaluate my teachers?
- What curriculum should I use?

Information about your state policies regarding district-operated programs can be researched here:

<http://kpk12.com/states/>

Action steps:

- Contact your state board of education regarding specific policies related to running a district-operated virtual school.
- Conduct a "policy session" with thought leaders in your district to establish the vision for your virtual program.
- Contact Calvert Partners to discuss policies in your state or mission statements established by other virtual schools.

2. Understanding the funding structure

Once you understand the state-level policy about virtual schools, the funding of your virtual school program is more easily understood. There are a number of ways that states reimburse virtual schools: District-Operated Programs (Single District): Single district programs are often funded the same as any other school or program within the district. The main policy consideration for this type of program is to be clear on the requirements for a student to be counted for state funding.

District-Operated Programs (Multi-District or Statewide): Whether a consortium model, a charter school, or a state-wide virtual school run by a single district, the funding of multi-district programs is usually more complicated than single district programs. A clear understanding of the legislation or policy at the state level is critical as funding decisions are included in the legislation or policy action.

Grants: Grants are often available to supplement other funding sources, particularly during the start-up phase. For grants, it is generally much easier to obtain funding for a specific project than general program operations.

Action steps:

- Understand your state's legislative position on statewide or multi-district virtual school programs established by a single district regarding funding.
- Review grant opportunities for virtual school start-ups available through your state board of education. Many states offer multi-year startup funding for virtual schools. Work with Calvert Partners to understand the state policies and, if necessary, to establish a legislative advocacy task force to enact changes in your state's legislature.

3. Curriculum review and selection

Curriculum selection for your virtual school program is a critical component to success. In addition to ensuring alignment to state and common core standards, you want to be sure that the curriculum program translates well to the unique environment of home-based instruction with the parent playing the critical role as Learning Guide.

The transposition of your brick and mortar curriculum to your virtual program is not a foregone conclusion. Your brick and mortar curriculum is based on the premise of the student/teacher classroom relationship. Think about the learning experience that you want your virtual program to present. What core values are important to your district? It is best to partner with an organization with expertise in the development of a home-based, distance learning program. The core philosophies you may want to consider in the review of your virtual school curriculum are:

- A balance of subject matter that includes cultural literacy
- Integration and application across content areas
- Content mastery with balance of new and review
- A strong foundation of basic skills and application of high order thinking skills
- An emphasis on oral and written expression
- Clear expectations for highest quality of work possible

The development of character, curiosity and commitment. Other issues to consider in the selection of your curriculum program:

- Credit recovery (making up a failed class)
- Advanced Placement
- Electives
- Project-based mini classes
- Interactive lessons

Action steps:

- Review curricula from a variety of sources looking for a program that accomplishes an appropriate blend of online and offline resources.
- Identify an accredited program for use in your virtual school.
- Look for a curriculum program espousing the core philosophies outlined above.
- Identify a curriculum partner that is responsive to your unique district needs.
- Review your state standards and work with provider curriculum teams to ensure alignment.

4. Hiring or assigning Supervising Teachers and teacher training

Proper staffing and faculty training are the most important aspects of the virtual school development process. To ensure a quality academic experience, you need to ensure that your educational staff is informed, committed, and prepared.

Does your current staff have the capacity to oversee your new virtual program? You will need to consider:

- Recruitment, hiring, prep, training
- Conferences and training for teachers
- Mentoring
- In-service days (programming)

Online and Offline Professional Development

Look for a partner who provides an online and offline system of support for professional development. A properly designed online portal can give instant and full-time access to the highest standards of 21st century instruction and empower them to deliver virtual instruction even if they have never done it before. It will provide opportunities for collaboration with other supervising teachers as well as current information in effective educational practices, tools, and resources.

Action steps:

- Consider your existing team—is there a teacher who has shown an ability or willingness to spearhead your virtual school program?
- Recruit and hire teachers who are outstanding educators, who are flexible, and comfortable with the latest technology tools.
- Work with Calvert Partners to develop a professional development plan that orients and supports your teachers throughout the program.
- Identify a partner that provides extra support when it's needed, especially prior to and at the start of a families program.

5. Student recruitment and family communication

Just because “you build it”, that does not mean “they will come.” Building awareness of your distance learning program is as critical to your long-term success as developing the actual program. You will want to leverage existing district resources to attract and retain students (district web site, newsletters, email communication), but in order to remain competitive in the virtual school environment, a marketing plan is appropriate and even necessary. Both traditional and new media marketing tools should be part of your

student recruitment campaign. Again, this is a component of development where selection of a service provider is critically important. Your partner should work with you to establish and execute your marketing plan so you can focus on your main mission, serving students. Your student recruitment, enrollment, and communication plan should account for:

- Inquiry gathering
- Conversion to enrollment
- Enrollment processing
- Training and orientation of students and parents
- Student retention strategies

Planning your recruitment strategy before you begin your communications will enable you to maximize your budget and achieve results. Some questions you may wish to consider before developing your marketing plan are:

- Who is your target market?
- Will you enroll only students residing in your district or those outside your jurisdiction?
- How many students do you want to enroll?
- How long is your recruitment period?
- Have you established a marketing budget?
- Who will be the media contact for interviews?
- Is your enrollment period mandated by your state?
- How do parents of school-age children receive their information about services and opportunities?
- Can you host recruitment meetings in local venues such as libraries, boys and girls clubs?

Do not forget to use the resources already available—discuss your program with guidance counselors and faculty so they may consider this option for students that may need an alternative to the classroom.

Planning a Web-Based Marketing Strategy

Establish a web site specifically for your virtual program

Incorporate site meta-tags, site title tags, optimized heading tags and keywords in order to improve the search engines' ability to index your website, improve search retrieval and drive students to your program.

Keyword Advertising

Google and Facebook both offer geographically targeted and reasonably priced advertising opportunities that can promote your program for a modest investment.

E-Mail Marketing

Regular e-mail communication to your database provides a low cost means of distributing information to your community.

Action steps:

- Take inventory of the communications assets your district already has (web site, e-newsletters, printed newsletters, etc.).
- Assign a point person to serve as your communications liaison with your service provider.
- Work with Calvert Partners to develop a marketing plan considering your growth objectives, your budget, and your expectations.

6. Technology implementation

The suite of technology tools offered as part of your virtual school program accomplishes several tasks—online instruction, student assessment, communication between school and home, and student tracking and reporting.

The Administrator and Teacher View

Virtual school administrators and Supervising Teachers should be able to access information about their students through a quality Student Information System (SIS). The SIS provides recording capabilities for each student's test and other assessment scores, building student schedules, tracking student attendance, and managing many other student-related data. The SIS can contribute to the success of your school program by allowing you full access to the student's academic profile. Summary results for all students may be exported in standardized formats and merged with district wide student records for reporting purposes.

The Parent View

The parent online portal should provide your families a single access point for all student accounts, answer keys, grades, and placement.

The Student View

A virtual school employs the latest tools in online instruction to prepare your students for a world of continuing education and tomorrow's workplace. Each student enrolled in your district's program will require a personalized online resource center containing tools to enhance and reinforce their education. Elements such as online lessons, supplemental game-based activities, tutorials, and computer skills lessons should be part of that portal.

Action steps:

- Review the technology offered by various service providers.
- Understand how student grades will be reported into your SIS.

7. Access to special education instruction

A virtual school often proves an ideal academic environment for students with special education needs. The individualized approach and the one-on-one instruction inherent in virtual schooling allow the pace and content to be adjusted to fit each student's learning style. Comprehensive lesson plans, specialized instructional methodologies, customized course configuration, individual learning plans, flexible pacing by

subject, assistive technologies, innovative computer-based learning aids, and expert professional educator support combine to turn struggling students into independent learners.

When you partner with a service provider, it is important to understand what they have to offer in the way of specialized instruction for students who are struggling with reading, writing, or math.

Action steps:

- Review the differentiation and academic support offerings of various service providers.
- Ask Calvert Partners about Verticy Learning—their specialized curriculum for students who struggle with reading, writing, and math.

Calvert Implementation – MVPS

In April 2011, Calvert Education Services (CES) was selected to support the Maize Virtual Preparatory School (MVPS), a new K-8 public virtual school program managed by the Maize Unified School District 266. MVPS serves students throughout the state of Kansas, and began offering classes in the fall of 2011 with over 200 students.

Gary Lewis is the Director of Educational Outreach for the Maize school district. Lewis, an experienced leader in public virtual education, has defined the mission of the school to provide excellent educational options for young people, many of whom he says learn in ways that are not always best served by the brick and mortar classroom environment. Mr. Lewis is committed to creating an alternative learning environment where teachers have the flexibility to help their students find “their own love of learning”.

Challenges

Mr. Lewis said, “In order to develop a successful virtual school, you need to consider a host of issues: What is your school mission and philosophy? Do you have the right faculty? What curriculum and technology will we use? What about a professional development plan? Marketing? Retention? All of these elements have to be considered before you even start to develop and manage a successful virtual program.”

He also notes that getting out in front of families and being “the face of the school” is critical to its ongoing success. “I need to be out in front working with families and teachers so, at the end of the day, there are no surprises after enrollment is completed, and everyone knows where they stand.”

Success with Calvert

Lewis makes a point to say that that one of the most important elements in tackling the many challenges in starting and managing a virtual school is having the right partner. “If you don’t have the right curriculum and services partner, you simply are not going to be successful.”

Lewis said he was initially attracted to Calvert as a partner because of the curriculum, which provided the flexibility he valued most highly. “The way in which Calvert’s curriculum is written and coordinated allows parents and teachers to explore and learn concepts versus being stuck in a prescribed and structured schedule where you have to move to the next topic.”

“But what has really made the difference and contributed directly to the success of MVPS – is the way in which Calvert as an organization has been truly committed to the success of our school, going far beyond just providing a solid curriculum. “The right partner has to listen, be responsive, and work with us to help solve problems and challenges as they arise. As we have worked with Calvert, we realized how engaged they have been with us, and how they have listened and responded to our needs and concerns in a way that supports the best interests of our school and our students.”