

Michigan Virtual School

Brennan McMahon, Legislative Research Intern

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Introduction

This legislative brief profiles the Michigan Virtual School (MVS), reviewing the organization and governance, funding, student experience and accountability, and online professional development available through the school.

Virtual schools are increasingly becoming integrated into educational opportunities for younger students. A decade ago most online programs were designed to provide professional training or postsecondary education; now several states are requiring K-12 students to have some type of online learning experience before graduation.

Although online instruction is becoming more pervasive, the organization of virtual schools, target groups, and delivery methodologies can vary significantly. Some virtual schools are based within a school district, and only reach those students within the district. Other larger programs are governed at the state level, and are available to all public school students within a state.¹ Exhibit 1² outlines the different categories of virtual school organization and selected characteristics of operation.

Michigan is one state that has given virtual learning a larger role within its public education system. Following the rubric in Exhibit 1, the Michigan Virtual school (MVS) is an example of a supplemental, state-level program managed through a private

Significant Features of the Michigan Virtual School (MVS)

The Michigan Virtual School (MVS) is administered by the Michigan Virtual University (MVU), a private, nonprofit organization with management independence.

MVU provides online classes that students take on their own schedules, and the course design determines the level of interaction with other students.

MVU has developed a partnership with a consortium of school districts that have demonstrated best practices in implementing online learning and provide technical support to other school districts.

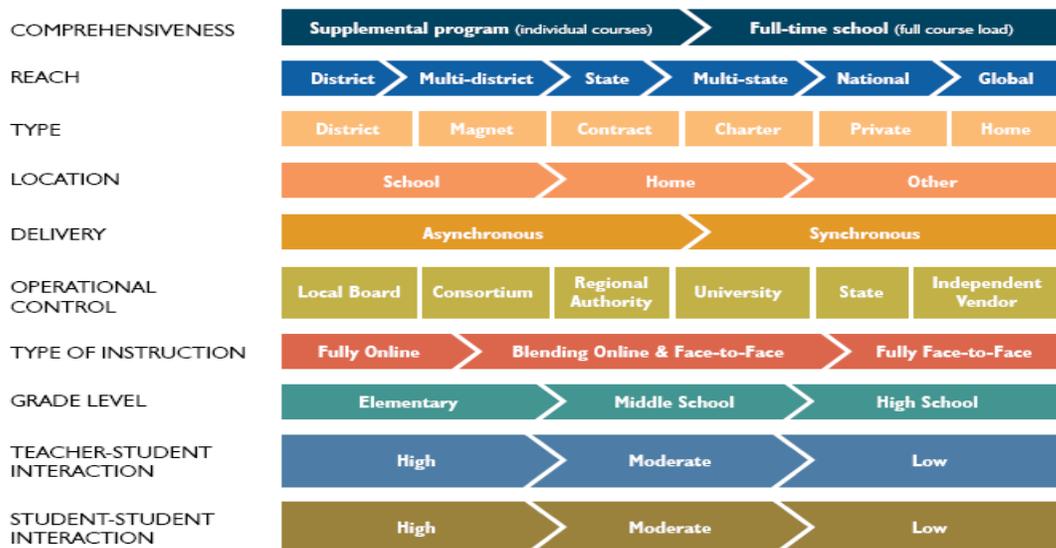
MVU funds its operation through state allocations, federal funds, course enrollment fees, and fundraising from private grants and donors.

MVU offers a comprehensive professional development catalog for traditional classroom teachers and school employees, as well as a set of courses designed for teachers who wish to teach online courses.

MVU recruited Michigan-certified, highly qualified teachers to provide online classes. Online teachers contract individually with MVU and are paid directly by MVU.

Exhibit 1: Categories of virtual school organization and selected characteristics of operation

THE DEFINING DIMENSIONS OF ONLINE PROGRAMS



Source: Watson, Gemin, Ryan, and Wicks, *Keeping Pace with Online K-12 Learning*, p 16.

Synchronous and Asynchronous Delivery

A virtual school is generally defined as a learning environment in which the teacher and student are separated and a significant amount of instruction takes place over the Internet. Even the time frame in which this learning happens varies across virtual school settings. Virtual schools often use both synchronous and asynchronous learning environments.

In **synchronous** virtual learning, the student and teacher are engaging the course content at the same time, even though they may not be in the same place. Often there is a webcam or a live chat involved in this type of instruction.

In **asynchronous** virtual learning, individuals are logged on and engaged in the learning experience independently, on their own schedules, and without real time interaction with others involved in the class.

organization.³ Students take courses either at school or at home, and instruction is largely asynchronous.⁴ MVS courses are online only. MVS is able to serve grades K-12, but mostly serves high school students.⁵ Teacher interaction is moderate and student interaction is low in the online courses MVS provides.⁶

Background

The Michigan Virtual School (MVS) evolved from the Michigan Virtual University (MVU), a public-private partnership that was originally developed to provide career-oriented services to businesses, nonprofits, and the higher education community.⁷ MVU was chartered in 1998 as a private, 501(C)(3), with an independent staff and board of directors.⁸ In 2000, in partnership with and at the direction of the Michigan State Legislature, MVU began providing online courses for K-12 students, while still providing other online services.⁹ In 2003, MVU worked with the Michigan Department of Education to establish

LearnPort, an online teacher professional development portal.¹⁰ In 2004, MVU realigned its purpose away from adult learning and began to focus on management of and K-12 curriculum-content development for the Michigan Virtual School.¹¹

Organization and Governance

The Michigan State Legislature outlined a framework of goals and courses for the virtual school and then gave MVU management independence.¹² During initial development of the virtual school, MVU contracted with online vendors to provide an online curriculum to middle and high school students. In recent years, MVU has begun to develop more of its own content.¹³

MVU has also developed strategic partnerships with several school districts that have demonstrated best practices in implementing online learning.¹⁴ One of the purposes of these consortia is to provide technical support to other school districts.¹⁵

Funding

MVU funds its operation through state allocations, federal funds, course enrollment fees, and fundraising from private donors.¹⁶

MVU had a base budget of \$4.4 million in FY09-10. State funds accounted for \$1.6 million, while federal funds accounted for \$2.7 million.¹⁷ The base budget is used to deliver the core services of developing/acquiring courses and providing online learning experiences for public school students and teachers.

Another \$1.7 million in federal grant funds is used to coordinate activities aimed at improving teacher quality. According to the stipulations of that grant, MVU must:

- assist districts in the development and use of proven innovative strategies to deliver intensive professional development programs;¹⁸
- encourage and support the training of teachers and administrators to effectively integrate technology into curricula and instruction;¹⁹
- coordinate the activities of eligible partnerships, which include higher education institutions, for the purposes of providing professional development activities;²⁰
- offer teachers opportunities to learn new skills and strategies for developing and delivering instructional services;²¹ and
- offer at least 200 hours of online professional development for classroom teachers, without charge to the teachers, for each fiscal year beginning in FY2006-2007.²²

Despite the economic climate in 2010, the Governor of Michigan and the Michigan state legislature committed to maintaining the \$4.4 million budget for MVU for the 2011 Fiscal Year.²³

Districts must pay a fee for each student enrolled in a course offered through MVU. The fee is \$275 for a single enrollment, but decreases with each additional student enrolled. If a district, or group of districts, writes a purchase order for 300 or more students, the cost drops to \$220 per enrollment.²⁴

As a private nonprofit organization, MVU also seeks outside grants and donations. For example, CareerForward, an online exploration of the globalized economy, was funded through a grant from Microsoft.²⁵

Student Experience and Accountability

Michigan was the first state to require that every one of its students take one online course or acquire a cumulative 20 hours of “online experience” before graduation.²⁶ The requirement begins with the class of 2011. Michigan students may fulfill this requirement by taking an online course through the MVS, or through a postsecondary institution.²⁷ Another route is to participate in an online learning module embedded within one of the core courses required before graduation.²⁸ The Michigan Department of Education has created guidelines for districts to define ways in which students may fulfill the requirement for 20 hours of “online experience.” (See appendix A.) The guidelines reveal that the intent of the virtual program is not only to deliver specific course content in an online environment but also to help the student “develop competency for learning in a virtual environment.”²⁹

The Michigan Department of Education has determined that students may take no more than two online courses during a semester if they wish to complete those courses outside of school hours. However, if students take online courses in a school building within regular school hours, supervised by a teacher in that school, they may take as many courses as they want.³⁰

Michigan students use the MVS both to make up credits they are lacking and to pursue advanced courses not available at their school. Though credit recovery is a significant portion of MVS student usage (approximately 24 percent), the course catalog also features a diversity of core, language, and elective courses, including 32 AP courses.³¹ All courses offered through MVS are aligned with the Michigan Merit Curriculum, the state’s standard curriculum required for high school graduation.³²

There are varying enrollment and completion rates for the hundreds of courses that MVS offers; some courses have only one participant while the most popular classes have enrollments of more than 200 students. (See Appendix B.)³³ The most commonly used measure of student accountability in online courses is course completion:

- The overall average course completion rate is 80 percent.³⁴
- Completion rates vary between zero and 100 percent.³⁵
- The 32 AP courses have an average completion rate of 89 percent.³⁶
- The 10 most popular courses have an 80 percent average completion rate.³⁷
- The most popular course, Personal Finance, has a completion rate of 73 percent.³⁸

MVU also offers online career exploration tools.³⁹ These interactive programs allow students to explore career options; what and where the demand will be for them in the future; and predicted earnings in the field. The programs also allow students to create appropriate education paths for pursuing particular careers.⁴⁰

Online Professional Development

MVU offers a comprehensive professional development catalog for traditional classroom teachers and school employees, as well as a set of courses designed for teachers who wish to teach online courses. Recognizing that implementing online course experiences as a

requirement for graduation would significantly increase the demand for online teachers, MVU recruited Michigan-certified, highly qualified teachers to provide online classes.⁴¹ Online teachers contract individually with MVU and are paid directly by MVU. Approximately 500 teachers have completed training to become online instructors.⁴²

The Michigan State Legislature also requires MVU to provide professional development resources for Michigan teachers who teach in traditional classrooms.⁴³ MVU accomplishes this through LearnPort, a portal that provides access to 280 online courses.⁴⁴ These courses are available to all K-12 teachers, as well as to other K-12 employees

such as administrators and counselors. As of December 2009, LearnPort had more than 50,000 user accounts.⁴⁵

MVU also has under development an online academy that will focus on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). The academy will provide courses for students and subject-focused professional development for teachers in math and the sciences.⁴⁶ The courses are being developed in collaboration with Michigan Mathematics and Science Centers Network, a group of 33 regional facilities that provide curriculum support and professional development in math and sciences to Michigan school districts.⁴⁷

End Notes

¹Tom Clark, *Virtual Schools: Trends and Issues—A Study of Virtual Schools in the United States*, Washington, DC, Distance Learning Resource Network, 2001, pp. i-iii; John Watson, Butch Gemin, Jennifer Ryan, and Matthew Wicks, *Keeping Pace with Online K-12 Learning: An Annual Review of State Policy*, Evergreen, CO, Evergreen Education Group, 2009, p. 5.

²Watson, Gemin, Ryan, and Wicks, *Keeping Pace with Online K-12 Learning*, p. 16.

³Ibid, p.100.

⁴Jamey Fitzpatrick, President and CEO Michigan Virtual University, telephone interview, July 17, 2010.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.; Tom Clark, *Virtual High Schools: State of the States—A Study of Virtual High School Planning and Operation in the United States*, Macomb, IL, Center for the Application of Information Technologies, Western Illinois University, 2000, p. 8.

⁸Michael F. Shaugnessy, *An Interview with Jamie Fitzpatrick: Michigan Virtual University*, Educationnews.org, <http://www.educationnews.org/michael-f-shaugnessy/91611.html> (accessed June 29, 2010).

⁹Jamie Fitzpatrick, telephone interview, July 17, 2010.

¹⁰Shaugnessy, *An Interview with Jamie Fitzpatrick*.

¹¹"About Us," *Michigan Virtual University*, <http://www.mivu.org/Default.aspx?tabid=108> (accessed June 17, 2010); Jamie Fitzpatrick, telephone interview, July 17, 2010.

¹²Shaugnessy, *An Interview with Jamie Fitzpatrick*; *Michigan Compiled Laws* 388.1698 (3).

¹³Jamey Fitzpatrick, telephone interview, July 17, 2010.

¹⁴Watson, Gemin, Ryan, and Wicks, *Keeping Pace with Online K-12 Learning*, p. 101.

¹⁵*Michigan Compiled Laws* 388.1698 (6).

¹⁶Jamey Fitzpatrick, telephone interview, July 17, 2010.

¹⁷*Michigan Compiled Laws* 388.1698 (1), (4),

¹⁸*Michigan Compiled Laws* 388.1698 (4)(a).

¹⁹*Michigan Compiled Laws* 388.1698 (4)(b).

²⁰*Michigan Compiled Laws* 388.1698 (4)(c).

²¹*Michigan Compiled Laws* 388.1698 (4)(d).

²²*Michigan Compiled Laws* 388.1698 (5).

²³*Michigan Compiled Laws* 388.1698 as amended for Fiscal Year 2011.

²⁴Jamey Fitzpatrick, telephone interview, July 17, 2010.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Watson, Gemin, Ryan, and Wicks, *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning*, p. 100.

²⁷Jamey Fitzpatrick, telephone interview, July 17, 2010

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Michigan State Board of Education, *Michigan Merit Curriculum Guidelines: Online Learning Experience*, Sept. 2009.

³⁰Jamey Fitzpatrick, telephone interview, July 17, 2010

³¹Michigan Virtual University, *A Report to the Legislature*, 2009, p. 2, pp.13-15.

³²Watson, Gemin, Ryan, and Wicks, *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning*, p.100.

³³Michigan Virtual University, *A Report to the Legislature*, pp. 13-15.

³⁴Ibid., p. 2.

³⁵Ibid., pp. 13-15.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid., p. 2.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Watson, Gemin, Ryan, and Wicks, *Keeping Pace with Online K-12 Learning*, p. 101.

⁴⁰Jamey Fitzpatrick, telephone interview, July 17, 2010

⁴¹Watson, Gemin, Ryan, and Wicks, *Keeping Pace with Online K-12 Learning*, p. 100.

⁴²Jamey Fitzpatrick, telephone interview, July 17, 2010

⁴³*Michigan Compiled Laws* 388.1698 (3)(g).

⁴⁴Watson, Gemin, Ryan, and Wicks, *Keeping Pace with Online K-12 Learning*, p. 100.

⁴⁵Jamey Fitzpatrick, telephone interview, July 17, 2010.

⁴⁶Watson, Gemin, Ryan, and Wicks, *Keeping Pace with Online K-12 Learning*, p. 101.

⁴⁷"About Us," Michigan Mathematics and Science Centers Network, <http://www.mimathandscience.org/aboutus1.html> (accessed July 7, 2010).