

# Five Academic Reasons

## *Why State Virtual Schools are Important to Your State*

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While there are many reasons why middle grades or high school students may need online access to courses, five academic reasons why state virtual schools are important to achieving state educational and economic goals are most often cited.

### **1. State virtual schools provide courses that schools cannot or do not provide.**

Many local schools are simply too small to offer all of the courses that students need today to prepare for college or careers. Cost is a major factor, especially if only a handful of students want or need a particular course. In addition, many schools are unable to attract teachers because of where the schools are located. Despite the efforts of some states, many schools continue to lack the ability to offer all of the courses their students should have available to them.

This issue has increased significantly in recent years as states have — or will be — increasing or changing high school graduation requirements. As states have moved to “set the bar” higher to ensure that a diploma truly represents quality, more schools are faced with an inability to provide a quality fourth year of mathematics, multiple years of even one foreign language, and two or more Advanced Placement (AP) courses.

Today, SREB state virtual schools can provide the middle grades and high school courses that are needed. In fact, several SREB states now offer a full range of quality middle grades and high school courses, including multiple foreign languages, AP courses and higher-level mathematics and science courses.

### **2. State virtual schools provide credit-recovery courses in support of improving high school graduation rates.**

Dropping out of school not only has an impact on the quality of life of that student, but it also affects state economic development. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, “The nation would save approximately \$45 billion if it could cut the number of dropouts in half.” The Alliance study shows that “if high school dropouts who currently head households in the United States had earned their diplomas, the U.S. economy would have benefited from an additional \$74 billion in wealth accumulated by families.” The current graduation rates in SREB states range from about 60 percent to 80 percent, indicating a significant portion of lost earnings and other economic benefits in the region.

In a report titled *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives on High School Dropouts*, young people who had dropped out of high school were asked a series of questions designed to determine why they had not finished school. Thirty-five percent of the participants said they dropped out

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because they were failing in school, and **45 percent said they were not academically prepared for high school courses due to the low quality of earlier schooling.** The report *Easing the Transition to High School: An Investigation of Reform Practices to Promote Ninth Grade Success* states that “academic failure during the transition to high school is directly linked to the probability of dropping out ... over 60% of students who eventually dropped out of high school failed at least 25% of their credits in the ninth grade, while only 8% of their peers who eventually graduated had similar difficulty.”

No one approach will be the “silver bullet” for students who have a history of poor academic preparation. However, courses offered by state virtual schools can help by providing these students and their high schools with a fresh start. An increasing number of SREB state virtual schools provide credit-recovery courses that are making a difference for these students. In addition, more state virtual schools are providing middle grades courses to supplement locally offered courses, especially when the local school is unable to obtain a certified, academically prepared middle grades teacher.

### **3. State virtual schools give high school students access to many different AP courses.**

Because of size or location, many high schools do not offer any AP courses. According to the College Board, 60 percent of U.S. high schools offer AP courses, which means that 40 percent of the nation’s high schools have no AP offerings. Others typically offer only a small number of the more popular courses. With few exceptions, the only schools that offer a significant number of AP courses are suburban schools that have larger student populations and have access to qualified teachers to teach AP courses. Available AP course offerings across a state illustrate what some refer to as “education by zip code” — access to courses depends on where the student resides.

The good news is that all SREB state virtual schools offer some AP courses. In total, 31 AP courses are provided by one or more SREB state virtual school, out of a total of 37 AP courses that the College Board makes available. One SREB state, Virginia, has mandated that its virtual school provide AP courses, and it now provides approximately 20 AP courses. The important point here is that today any high school, regardless of where it is located, has the possibility of providing many AP courses to its students — even if there is only one student who wants the course. This is especially important since several SREB states have enacted laws in recent years mandating that their schools offer two to four AP courses. Why limit the number to a few courses when so many are now available electronically?

### **4. State virtual schools provide quality teachers to all middle grades and high schools, regardless of where the students reside.**

All SREB states have problems obtaining highly qualified teachers in every classroom, especially in remote, rural or high-poverty areas. The Alliance for Excellent Education notes that a shortage of high-quality teachers can create problems. **“The consequence of having our least qualified educators responsible for our neediest students is clear: The achievement gap continues to grow.”** In its report *Every Child a Graduate*, the Alliance states that “nearly three in 10 high school students are taught by teachers without a college major and certification in English (30 percent), mathematics (31 percent), science (27 percent), or social studies (28 percent).” Findings from the National Center for Education Statistics support these numbers. In *The Condition of Education 2004*, statistics show that in high-poverty

schools, out-of-field teachers teach 14 percent of mathematics students. In high-minority schools, 15 percent of math students are taught by out-of-field teachers. In low-poverty schools, 7 percent of math students are taught by out-of-field teachers, and in low-minority schools, 7 percent are taught by out-of-field teachers.

Not only do SREB state virtual schools provide quality online courses for their students, they also provide quality teachers. SREB states have worked together for more than a year to create the SREB *Standards for Quality Online Teaching* that most are now using. The quality of online teachers employed by state virtual schools is a key factor in the success rates of those schools. All state virtual schools currently employ only fully certified, qualified teachers, including many with advanced degrees in their field and a growing number who are National Board Certified. One of the advantages state virtual schools have over brick-and-mortar schools is that they have access to teachers who reside anywhere and who may not necessarily be interested in working full time.

**5. State virtual schools provide students with access to quality teachers and quality courses to improve their chances of academic success.**

Middle grades students today were born after the launch of the Internet. For many middle grades and high school students, access and use of technology is the norm. This is one of the reasons national student surveys indicate that many students are bored or “turned-off” by their traditional school experience. Other related reasons include lack of access to many courses and teachers.

Several SREB state virtual schools survey their online students regarding their online course experiences. Their findings are consistently positive. Students report that they enjoy the *level of interactivity with other students and their teacher* and find this to be extremely helpful in mastering the course content. Other reasons include the *beneficial effect of alternative pacing of the course* that allows students to spend more time on what they do not understand and to move more quickly over what they do understand. Access to a broad range of courses is always cited as well. It should be noted, however, that online learning is not for all students. Students must possess adequate communications skills, be able to manage their time wisely, and be willing and able to meet the academic demands of courses that focus on their learning.

**In sum**, state virtual schools are not about technology, but rather about *using* today’s technology to meet the tremendous academic needs of middle grades and high school students in ways have never before been available.

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