

# Best Practices: Virtual School



## What is a Virtual School?

In a virtual school, the instruction is delivered entirely or partially in online environments. Virtual Schools utilize a Learning Management System (LMS) that hosts the classroom content and serves as the portal for online communication between teachers and students. There are many subscription based and open source LMS environments. The Texas Virtual School Network is a consortium of virtual schools within Texas. Hays CISD currently uses Blackboard as its LMS and is offering fully online courses which require no face to face instructional time. [http://www.hayscisid.net/dl/virtual\\_school.htm](http://www.hayscisid.net/dl/virtual_school.htm)

## Why do we have a Virtual School?

- **Credit Acceleration:** Students can take courses in addition to their normal course day.
- **Flexible Scheduling:** Online courses are accessible anytime, anywhere. Online classes can be used to resolve scheduling conflicts and extend the learning day.
- **Expand Course Offerings:** Students can take courses that are not otherwise offered.
- **Performance Based:** Online learning challenges traditional teaching models by providing opportunities for active learning and authentic application of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills.
- **Engages Students:** Quality online classes foster collaboration and use a variety of interactive technologies that are relevant to the student's life.

## Lessons Learned

- Reference the National Standards. There are guides developed by iNACOL for managing virtual schools, teaching online classes, and developing online curriculum.
- Online teaching is not for everyone. Online teachers must excel in written communication and be able to create a "presence" online.
- Provide teacher training. Even the most intuitive LMS environments need exploring.
- Create a handbook. Document your procedures and policies.
- Budget appropriately. Potential cost include the LMS, teacher stipend, and curriculum. The costs may be offset by tuition received if you charge for your courses.
- Developing your own curriculum takes time. Allow 4-6 months to evaluate existing curriculum, develop appropriate online activities, and create the course.
- Continually reflect on and update your curriculum. Enhance the course to with Web 2.0 tools to increase interaction and access to course related materials.
- Designate staff to manage the school such as advertising, financial bookkeeping, communication with school counselors and parents, registration, managing the LMS, monitoring course progress, grade reporting and teacher support.
- Expect to start small. It takes time to get the word out and expand your offerings.
- Develop a student advising process. Online learning is not for everyone.
- Have an orientation for students. Students should be shown how to use the LMS to navigate through their course and need to meet their teacher either in person or virtually.
- Provide opportunities for synchronous interaction. Meet in person or online as a class.
- Mentor students. Provide a campus contact for student if the teacher is off campus.
- Develop a teacher self reflection instrument. Requiring teachers to set goals for each semester fosters continuous improvement and establishes an accountability system.

## For More Information About Virtual Schools:

<http://delicious.com/haysdl/online-learning>  
<http://www.txvsn.org>  
<http://www.inacol.org>

***"I was able to get a credit ahead so I can do more things in high school."***  
~CMS Student

***"This is the best school related thing I've ever done."***  
~ HHS Student