Student, Faculty, and Administrator Attitudes and Perceptions of Virtual High School Classes at One Suburban New Jersey Public High School

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STUDENT, FACULTY, AND ADMINISTRATOR
ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS OF VIRTUAL HIGH SCHOOL CLASSES AT
ONE SUBURBAN NEW JERSEY PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

The 2005 Summit on High Schools led to redesigning schools and promoting 21st Century Skills. Consequently, this study assesses the implementation of supplemental online courses, offered through the Virtual High School (VHS), at one suburban New Jersey public high school.

The following questions guided this research project: (1) How do the VHS courses compare to those in a traditional setting; (2) What are the advantages and disadvantages of online high school courses, and the VHS program; (3) How effectively does the VHS program meet the needs of the students; (4) Do online courses link to 21st Century Skills and college readiness; and (5) Should this high school and others nationwide, consider and implement curriculum policy changes that pertain to online high school courses.

The research design used a qualitative, cross-sectional case study of the attitudes and perceptions of those directly involved with the supplemental VHS classes. The division of the homogenous focus groups included three student groups, one faculty group, and one administrator group, for a combined total of 14 participants.

The findings indicated approval of the VHS program and a plan to continue the supplemental courses for the Academic Year 2010-2011. With an equally rigorous curriculum, the ideal virtual student is an independent, self-motivated thinker. Virtual activities relied more heavily on written assessments, and at times, posed communication challenges with teachers and peers. Nonetheless, college and career readiness necessitates 21st Century technology skills.
The high school implemented two policy changes that will further ensure student success: (1) permitted juniors and seniors to enroll in a VHS course, and (2) incorporated an interview process that will enable the site coordinator to clearly outline course objectives and program expectations. Additional recommendations include transcript policy revisions, and continued monitoring of Special Education, English Language Learners, and differentiated instruction.

Since Picciano and Seaman (2009) projected that online learning may reach between 5 and 6 million K-12 (mostly high school) students by the year 2016, educational leaders should promote virtual school opportunities and implement online course prerequisites (p. 22).
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

From the beginning, it was my ambition to contribute to this high school's academic excellence via 21st Century skills and technology integration. To accomplish this goal, I was directed by several remarkable educational leaders.

My mentor, Dr. Anthony Colella, provided constructive feedback that guided me toward educational milestones. I am indebted to him for his positive attitude, calm spirit, and professionalism. It was also a pleasure to work with Msgr. Hynes, Dr. Ankiel, and Dr. Palumbo. Giving of your time is truly the most generous gift of all. Thank you. I am inspired by you all.

Finally, this research would not have been possible without the assistance of Dr. Mary Jane McNally. As my proxy researcher, she dove into this project as if it were her own. Her time and energy is not forgotten. I hope to pay it forward one day.
DEDICATION

My family has had a profound impact on my life, and so I wish to dedicate this accomplishment to them.

To my parents, who from an early age shaped my character and self-confidence. Working in education, I realize how fortunate I am to have loving parents that believe in and support me, regardless of the circumstances. Thank you for always being present in my life. I love you both.

To my brother, Dan, who taught me the value of hard work and dedication. As my big brother, you continue to be my hero and my role model. This journey has been my Iron Man and I am grateful that you challenge me to reach my potential.

To my dear Michael, who has been part of this journey from the start. Your support and words of encouragement are cherished. Most importantly, though, you restored my faith in the possibilities of life. I hope that we share a lifetime of happiness together.

Finally, to Megan and Erin. I hope you have a thirst for knowledge and a belief that you can achieve anything. The sky is the limit.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background Information

In 1995, the first K-12 virtual school launched in Eugene, Oregon. Known as the Cyber School Project, its primary mission was to provide supplemental online courses to high school students. One year later, a virtual explosion occurred with more than five additional virtual projects. Three of the more widely known include the WebSchool in Orange County, Florida, which later became known as the Florida Virtual School (FLVS); the Cyber School Academy in Washington State; and the Concord Virtual High School that is most recently known as the Virtual High School (Greenway & Vanourek, 2006).

The Florida Virtual School (FLVS) is a state-operated supplemental online program that serves over 33,000 public, private, and home-schooled students in grades 6-12 (Greenway & Vanourek, 2006). Course offerings include core subjects, academic support classes, SAT preparation courses, and Honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Two years after FLVS opened its virtual doors, the Florida Department of Education further demonstrated its commitment to technology integration and education, as it approved House Bill 7067. More formally known as the “Virtual Instructions Program,” this legislature made it mandatory for every school district to provide a virtual school for kindergarten through eighth grade. The Florida bill provided a school-choice option for parents and gave priority to rural, low-performing, and high minority school districts. The “Virtual Instructions Program” supports Blaylock and Newman’s (2005) argument that, “using computers to deliver instruction can help to correct inequities in
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educational opportunities that exist due to race/ethnicity, budget constraints, geographical location, income, school size, and substandard teaching” (p. 373). Apparently the Michigan Board of Education had similar needs and goals as Florida, because during the same year, 1999, they adopted the Michigan Merit Curriculum, which made participation in at least one online or blended course a high school graduation requirement (Picciano & Seaman, 2007, p. 18). Likewise, in 2003, the Arkansas Department of Education began a partnership with K12, Inc. to fund the Arkansas Virtual School (ARVS). Offering only full-time online programs, ARVS equips students with appropriate technology, provides online field trips, and participates in all state testing programs (Greenway & Vanourek, 2006). Similar programs include the Cyber Village Academy (CVA) in Minnesota, and the Delta Cyber School in Alaska.

The Expectations Gap

In 2004, Achieve Inc. published a study that clearly exposed an educational gap between high school course requirements and college and workplace ready skills. To close the expectations gap, Achieve Inc. and the National Governors’ Association hosted the 2005 National Education Summit on High Schools and distributed An Action Agenda for Improving America’s High Schools. The Summit’s action agenda declared that although students successfully meet state graduation requirements, and therefore graduate from high school, not all graduates are adequately prepared for post-high school success. Furthermore, 71% of students nationwide graduate from high school, and of those who go on to college, approximately one-third must complete remedial courses (p.3). In addition, “Even though the United States has one of the highest college enrollment rates in the world, our college completion rate is average to below average among developed
countries" (Achieve & National Governor’s Association, 2005, p. 4). Survived participants clearly recognized that neglecting to raise high school expectations and achievement would likely result in a decline in America’s position in the global market.

The mission of the American Diploma Project (ADP), a coalition of states that derived from the Education Summit, identified college and workplace skills, and incorporated those skills into standards, assessments, and high school graduation requirements. Since the Summit, ADP tracks individual State progress through an annual survey. Their report, Closing the Expectations Gap: An Annual 50-State Progress Report on the Alignment of High School Policies with the Demands of College and Careers, indicates the status of high school standards, graduation requirements, assessments, and accountability systems (Achieve, 2008, p. 2). In its overview of key survey results, New Jersey successfully aligned its high school standards with college and workplace expectations, but continues aligning graduation requirements, administering college readiness tests, and developing a longitudinal data system (Achieve, 2008, p. 3). Overall, the National Education Summit on High Schools and the American Diploma Project implore educators to redesign high schools with 21st Century standards.

The Silent Epidemic

Civic Enterprises, in association with Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, generated The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts. The most intriguing component of the study is that it investigates the attitudes and perceptions of the dropouts themselves. Conducted in 2005, the research methodology included focus group interviews of 467 ethnically and racially diverse students, ranging from the ages of 16 through 25, and who had dropped out of public high
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schools throughout the country, including large cities, suburbs, and small towns. Approximately 77% of the sample consisted of city residents, while the remaining 14% were from the suburbs. With nearly an equal split of men and women, 36% were Caucasian, 35% African-American, and 27% Hispanic (Bridgeland, DiJulio, & Morison, 2006, p. 2). The Silent Epidemic refers to the documented one third of all public high school students who fail to graduate with their class, with the number approaching 50% for African American, Hispanic, and Native American students. More importantly, it highlights the fact that most students believed they were capable of graduating (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. i). Although the respondents gave a variety of reasons for dropping out of school, the majority (8%) believed that more engaging teaching and curricula, along with increased relevance between school and work, would likely encourage students to remain in school. For educators, The Silent Epidemic is clear:

Instead of the one-size fits all, school districts should develop options for students, including a curriculum that connects what they are learning in the classroom with real life experiences and with work, smaller learning communities with more individualized instruction, and alternative schools that offer specialized programs to students at-risk of dropping out (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. v).

Although the authors admitted that the study is “not a nationally representative sample,” the research accurately reflected the attitudes and perceptions of the dropouts themselves. In addition, it substantiated the need to obtain the opinions of those directly impacted – the students – to explore redesign possibilities that will promote 21st Century Skills and technology integration.
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21st Century Skills

Research consistently indicates that the majority goal of existing online programs is to extend curriculum opportunities and offer more challenging coursework for all students. Although virtual schools afford students across the country a greater access to advanced courses, thereby promoting equality in education, technology integration also drives the recent policy shift endorsing 21st Century Skills. In fact, as a followup to the National Education Summit on High Schools and Achieve Inc.’s Expectations Gap report, the U.S. Department of Education focused on Connecting Students to Advanced Courses Online. The department’s report, published in 2007, documented the changes in the world economy and cited Former Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan’s 2005 testimony to the U.S. Senate, stating: “Work is becoming less physically strenuous and more demanding intellectually, continuing a century-long trend toward a more conceptual and a less physical economic output” (as cited in WestEd, 2007, p.2).

According to the United States Department of Labor Statistics, as cited in Brenner (2007), 20% of all careers will require an education at or above the bachelor’s degree level and 85% will require education and training past high school. Brenner (2007) claimed that distance education courses serve as a viable option for lowering dropout rates and increasing graduation rates. Similarly, virtual schools can satisfy the demand for fluency in a foreign language, and potentially assist the United States in competing overseas. When comparing online course availability throughout the world, Powell (n.d.) made the point that “Australia and Canada have been doing this for a long time, and Singapore even has one week a year when they shut down their schools and have an e-learning week” (as cited in Messmer, 2009, p. 14). In addition, India and China are
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utilizing e-learning, and the UK has created an International Baccalaureate (IB) online program that reaches approximately 22 countries (Shepherd, 2008). For the United States to compete globally, educators must seek options that better prepare all students for the future.

In an attempt to find answers at the secondary level, Connecting Students to Advanced Courses Online acknowledged the benefits of using online courses to deliver advanced content, examine key implementation factors for school districts to consider, and provide profiles of six different online providers. To gather pertinent data, the methodology included multiple document reviews and case studies. Specifically, an individual case study of each of the six online providers consisted of one-day site visits, and either in-person or telephone interviews of provider administrators, online instructors, school leaders using the providers’ online courses, and parents and students.

For educators, the USDOE report, Connecting Students to Advanced Courses Online, challenged administrators to think of new and innovative ways to meet the challenges of the 21st Century, and enable students to “master advanced technical skills and solve complex problems to prepare for demanding higher education and workforce environments” (WestEd, 2007, p. v). The report further clarified: “If students are to be successfully prepared for the demands of higher education and the increasingly competitive work environment, they must have access to the right course work” (WestEd, 2007, p. 3). So, if virtual schools can increase academic performance and better compete globally, then shouldn’t educators integrate virtual schools and assess the attitudes and perceptions of those involved?
New Jersey High Schools

As a result of the 2005 Summit on High Schools and the multitude of reports produced by the US Department of Education, New Jersey formed a High School Redesign Steering Committee whose members included the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE), the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association (NJPSSA), the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA), the New Jersey School Boards Association (NJSBA), the Business Coalition for Educational Excellence (BCEE) at the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce, New Jersey United for Higher School Standards (NJU), the New Jersey Commission on Higher Education, and Montclair State University. The committee attempted to improve the college transition by generating high schools characterized by more rigor, relevance, and personalization. After two years of research and data analysis, the steering committee generated a policy paper, entitled New Jersey STEPS: Re-Designing Education in New Jersey. The paper focused on five areas of improvement, including graduation requirements, assessment alignment, teachers and school leaders, learning communities, and personalized education. Then in the summer of 2009, the New Jersey DOE published Revised Core Curriculum Content Standards (CCCC) and High School Graduation Requirements. To support the policy change, the NJDOE, in collaboration with the Center for Innovative Education at Kean University, FEA, and the New Jersey ASCD prepared a three-year model for change entitled, Creating 21st Century New Jersey Schools: The New Jersey Statewide Systemic Model for Continuous Professional Learning and Growth. Implemented during the 2009-2010 school year, Phase I encouraged educators “to understand students as digital
learners,” and evaluate “the impact of the Internet and new technologies on students’ lifestyles and learning preferences (NJDOE, 2009, p.3).

To remain current with policy reform movements, the suburban New Jersey high school under study asked the question: How can a high achieving school district, identified by the State as a District Factor Group (DFG) J school, enhance the existing curriculum, promote 21st Century Skills, and provide students with greater opportunities for post-high school success? The High School Principal, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, and Superintendent of Schools decided to implement the Virtual High School (VHS) online program; thus, this study sought to identify its implementation and overall success during the 2009-2010 academic school year. Congruent with the Silent Epidemic report and the Connecting Students to Advanced Courses Online study, this research further documented the significance in examining the attitudes and perceptions of various stakeholders, including students, faculty and administrators.

Statement of the Problem

The 2005 Summit on High Schools led to the movement to redesign high schools by integrating more rigorous curriculum that would encourage 21st Century Skills such as problem-solving, creative thinking and technology skills. The ultimate goal of closing the gap between high school graduation requirements and college expectations is to better equip students to enter college or the workforce. As a result of the 2005 Summit on High Schools, New Jersey formed a High School Redesign Steering Committee that sought to examine and better align the State’s graduation requirements. As the Steering Committee worked tirelessly for two years, New Jersey school administrators also began thinking of
local policy changes that would increase college readiness and provide students with the needed 21st Century proficiencies.

Categorized by the State of New Jersey as a District Factor Group (DFG) J, the high school under study annually sends over 95% of its students on to college. Although this statistic is significantly higher than the state and national average, the problem relates to the college success rate. Based on student Exit Surveys from the Class of 2004, approximately 95% attended a four-year institution, and another 3% attended a two-year college; however, based on student Culminating Surveys from the Class of 2004 that were completed five years post-high school graduation, only 72.8% received a college diploma. Although this figure bodes well when compared to the national average, the college graduation gap of approximately 25% is significant for the high school under study. The Culminating Surveys also relayed that barely 70% felt above-average college preparation, and only slightly more than 60% labeled technology training as above average. Considering the district’s high expectations and levels of success, school administrators must address the following problem: How can we better equip high school students with 21st Century proficiencies that will promote technology skills and result in greater college success?

Foreseeing the potential changes to the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards and correlating graduation requirements, school administrators were challenged to implement new and innovative curriculum ideas that would generate greater college success. The data obtained from the Exit and Culminating Surveys led the administration to research the growth of online coursework. Specifically, in 2005, the USDOE reported that over 200,000 public high school students nationwide were
currently enrolled in an online course. Then, in 2007, Picciano and Seaman (2007) estimated that 600,000 to 700,000 K-12 public school students were enrolled in online learning for 2005-2006 (p. 9). At the college level, The Sloan Consortium reported that, during the fall of 2006, nearly 20% of higher education students were taking at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2007, p. 1). Overall, the staggering numbers support the assertion that online enrollments are growing “substantially faster” than overall higher education enrollments (Allen & Seaman, 2007). So then, why doesn’t the high school under study have any students enrolled in an online course?

Considering the online data and the need to align with 21st Century curriculum guidelines, the High School Principal, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, and Superintendent of Schools decided to offer Virtual High School (VHS) supplemental online courses during the 2009-2010 academic school year; thus, this study sought to identify its inaugural implementation and overall success. This research was driven by the notion that effective school administrators support “identifying which types of virtual schools work, under what conditions, with which students, with which teachers, and with what training!” (Greenway & Vanourek, 2006, p. 40). Congruent with the participants in the Silent Epidemic report and the Connecting Students to Advanced Courses Online study, this research corroborates the need to examine the attitudes and perceptions of various stakeholders, including students, teachers, counselors and administrators.

Purpose of the Study

This study assessed the implementation of supplemental online courses, offered through the Virtual High School (VHS), at one suburban New Jersey public high school. Specifically, the study served as a qualitative assessment of the attitudes and perceptions
of those directly involved with the supplemental Virtual High School classes, which included a select group of students, faculty, and administrators.

To better appreciate the rationale behind the selection of the research participants, one must have a solid understanding of the VHS program, including its structure and contract requirements. To begin, the most popular membership option, Fully Participating School, permits a high school to enroll 25 students per semester (50 per year) in any VHS online course. In return, the participating school district provides a teacher who serves as the instructor for one online course. To remain consistent with the membership requirements, this school district piloted the VHS program to the first 25 senior students who volunteered to enroll in a VHS course. The initiation of the VHS courses, which occurred during the 2009-2010 academic school year, permitted students to select one online course that was unavailable at the high school. Twenty-five senior students actually enrolled in an online course, and their attitudes and perceptions of the VHS program were vital to understanding its strengths and weaknesses, the type of student best suited to complete an online course, whether the VHS program met individual student needs, and to compare the traditional and online settings.

In return for 25 free student enrollments, this school district agreed to allow one of its current faculty members to also serve as an online instructor. Since this particular teacher served as both a traditional teacher within the school district, as well as an online VHS instructor, his input generated pertinent data. His perceptions of the VHS program were critical in understanding the dynamics of an online classroom, and the requirements and expectations placed upon students. More importantly, though, he was the best person
in this school district to compare the day-to-day traditional school setting with the online setting.

The VHS contract also requires participating schools to assign one individual as the site coordinator, and districts that can guarantee that the coordinator has one period free each day to monitor students, receive a $9,000 annual stipend from VHS. At this particular high school, a female guidance counselor applied for, and received, a stipend position from the school district. To further clarify, the district used a portion of the $9,000 stipend to provide a monetary compensation to the guidance counselor for her added responsibilities. The school guidance counselor served as a liaison between VHS and the student and his parent/guardian. Since she worked directly with the students enrolled in an online course, her opinions and perceptions were appropriate to this study. Specifically, she discussed student progress, including grades and motivation levels, and objectively evaluated support services provided. In addition, the guidance counselor best understands the college acceptance process and, therefore, provided essential information with regard to college preparedness. Together, the teacher and guidance counselor will form one faculty focus group.

Finally, since school administrators influence, implement, enforce, and assess policy changes, they hold valuable perspectives. In this particular school district, the High School Principal and Director of Curriculum and Instruction provided multiple perspectives that assisted in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the VHS courses, and suggested recommendations for improvements. The school administrators were also able to shed light on the potential long-term impact of online courses at this high school, as well as make predictions for its implementation throughout the state and nation.
Since the 2009-2010 school year served as a trial period for the VHS program at the high school under study, this research compared the traditional versus online setting, looked at its overall advantages and disadvantages, and assessed its ability to meet students' needs. In addition, it served as a means of remaining aligned with New Jersey's newly revised Core Curriculum Content Standards that link students to 21st Century Skills. Overall, the study uncovered the possibility of expanding the online curriculum offerings, as well as revealed the feasibility in offering online courses to a wider range of students in coming years. Finally, the study set the groundwork for additional research at this high school on the effectiveness of the VHS courses in preparing students with college readiness skills, and outlined the relevance of technology integration and online courses at the secondary level. This study attempted to better understand the attitudes and perceptions of those directly involved, which included students, teachers, counselors, and administrators. From a global perspective, this study shed light on the future possibilities of online integration at the secondary level.

Research Guiding Questions

After selecting a virtual school, administrators must assess the overall success of the program, including perceptions and attitudes of those involved. Accordingly, this is the primary question: How do students, teachers, counselors, and administrators perceive the VHS supplemental classes?

The following guiding questions assisted in answering the research problem:

1. How do the VHS courses compare to those in a traditional setting?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of online high school courses, and the VHS program?
3. How effectively does the VHS program meet the needs of the students?
4. Do online courses link to 21st Century Skills and college readiness?
5. Should this high school, and others nationwide, consider and implement curriculum policy changes that pertain to online high school courses?

**Significance of the Study**

Nearly 30% of U.S. students fail to graduate from high school within four years, if at all, with the number approaching 50% for African American, Hispanic, and Native American students (WestEd, 2007). "Distance education can mean lowered dropout rates and increased graduation rates" (Brenner, 2007, p. 33). In addition, "Using computers to deliver instruction can help to correct inequities in educational opportunities that exist due to race/ethnicity, budget constraints, geographical location, income, school size, and substandard teaching" (Blaylock and Newman, 2005, p. 373).

According to the International Association of K-12 Online Learning (n.d.), presently “forty-five states have significant supplemental online learning programs, or significant full-time programs (in which students take most, or all, of their course online), or both.” In addition, 50% of the United States’ public secondary schools provide online learning access to students, and over 70% of school districts with distance education programs plan to expand their online offerings in the coming year.

This project served as a means to explore the success of one online virtual high school, as seen through the eyes of those most directly involved – students, teachers, counselors, and administrators. The attitudes and perceptions of the survey participants provided key understandings of the overall success of the VHS supplemental online courses at this particular high school. This data supported one New Jersey public high
school in preparing students for college and the workforce, so that they may be
contributing members of society. The research also aided other school districts interested
in best practices for evaluating virtual school implementation, and supports the need to
research the attitudes and perceptions from the student perspective.

Limitations of the Study

The primary goal of this qualitative study was to investigate the implementation
of online supplemental courses via the Virtual High School (VHS), thus gaining more
knowledge of student, teacher, counselor, and administrator attitudes and perceptions.
The data developed from five homogeneous focus groups. All students who participated
took an online course during the 2009-2010 school year. In addition, the development of
focus groups depended on the individual's role within the online coursework and/or
program. It is assumed that participants gave honest responses, and recalled information
and facts as accurately as possible. The bias of the respondents, as well as the
interpretation of the data, may produce potential limitations.

Delimitations of the Study

This research was a case study of one public New Jersey high school, recognized
as District Factor Group (DFG) J by the New Jersey Department of Education. In
addition, only students that participated in an online course during the 2009-2010 school
year were invited to participate in the study. Similarly, only faculty and administrators
who were directly involved in the implementation and day-to-day activities of the VHS
program were invited to participate. This study intentionally limited the attitudes and
perceptions of the VHS online coursework, and is not necessarily a representative sample
of other schools in the State or nation.
**Definitions**

**Blended/Hybrid Course:** Blends online and face-to-face delivery with approximately 30-79 percent of the content delivered online (Allen & Seaman, 2007).

**Culminating Survey:** A survey sent to former students five years after high school graduation. Performed by an independent organization, its goal is to provide school districts with valuable insight into student opinions and demographics that relate to their high school and post-high school experiences.

**Distance Education:** Formal education in which a majority of instruction occurs while teacher and learner are separate (Clark 2001; Verduin & Clark, as cited in Blaylock & Newman, 2005, p. 374).

**District Factor Group (DFG):** The New Jersey DFG represents an approximate measure of a community’s relative socioeconomic status, ranging from A to J, with J being the wealthiest (New JerseyDOE, 2009).

**Exit Survey:** A high school survey that students complete in May of their senior year. Performed by an independent organization, its goal is to provide school districts with student opinions and demographics relating to their high school experience and post-high school plans.

**Online Course:** Also known as a virtual course, in which at least 80% of the course is delivered online (Allen & Seaman, 2007).

**Traditional Course:** A course with no online technology used – content is delivered in writing or orally (Allen & Seaman, 2007).
Virtual Course: Also known as an online course, where at least 80% of the course is delivered online (Allen & Seaman, 2007).

Web Facilitated Course: A course using web-based technology to facilitate what is essentially a face-to-face course, where approximately 1-29% of the content is delivered online (Allen & Seaman, 2007).
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Most would agree that virtual schools have arrived, challenging our notions about school and schooling (Greenway & Vanourek, 2006). Political reform is complicated as online programs cross paths with other controversial reforms, such as charter schools. Nonetheless, school districts are obligated to research the existing data on virtual schools. An intensive investigation includes identifying existing educational data, theory, and best practices. More importantly, though, a valuable research project analyzes virtual schools from a variety of viewpoints, placing strong emphasis on the opinions of those directly impacted. For this reason, this literature review documents pertinent information and facts relating to the virtual school movement, while at the same time supporting a research plan that seeks to obtain the attitudes and perceptions of students, faculty, and administrators.

*The Silent Epidemic* is a groundbreaking study in which the researcher conducted focus group interviews of 467 ethnically and racially diverse students, ranging from the ages of 16 through 25, and who had dropped out of public high schools throughout the country, including large cities, suburbs, and small towns (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. 2). This monumental study shed light on the student perspective and opened a new path for educational research. Equally, *Connecting Students to Advanced Courses Online* gathered student and parent input, while doctoral student Heather Carr researched administrator and teacher perceptions of online student-teacher relationships and the perceived advantages and disadvantages of implementing online courses. Congruent
with these studies, this research further documents the significance in examining stakeholder attitudes and perceptions.

Continuing, Picciano and Seaman, in conjunction with The Sloan Consortium prepared two reports on the perceptions of public high school administrators. Their reports, K-12 Online Learning, reinforced the need to look carefully at those who influence and implement policy changes at the local level. From the administrative perspective, what are the pros and cons of integrating virtual schools, and what barriers might infringe on its future growth? When answering the tough questions, Picciano and Seaman noticed the relevance in seeking administrative input.

Finally, a worthy analysis of virtual schools includes comparing a traditional and online classroom, weighing the advantages and disadvantages, identifying how well the program meets the needs of the student learner, and identifying a possible correlation to 21st Century Skills and college readiness. What matters most is the school's ability to educate children; without good curriculum, instruction, training, resources, support, and leadership, virtual schools will flounder (Greenway & Vanourek, 2006, p. 41). The following literature review highlights relevant research relating to this study.

**Traditional Versus Online**

In 2009, the U.S. Department of Education performed a meta-analysis and review of online learning studies and found that “classes with online learning (whether taught completely online or blended) on average produce stronger student learning outcomes than do classes with solely face-to-face instruction” (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia & Jones, 2009, p.18). The findings also suggest that the combination of additional learning time, materials, and opportunities for collaboration play a critical role in both online and
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face-to-face courses. Researchers caution educators, noting that few studies exist for K-12 online learning; thus, much of the report focused on studies performed in other settings, such as medical training and higher education. In addition, online and face-to-face conditions generally differed on multiple dimensions, including the amount of time learners spent on task (Means et al., 2009, p. xiv). Presumably, additional time on task will obviously improve student performance; and thus, is questioned the degree to which the medium for instructional delivery influenced learning. Regardless, the intriguing findings prompt further investigation into the variations between a traditional and online classroom.

When comparing a traditional classroom setting to an online setting, key differences occur with time, learning, and technology. The most obvious distinction is that online students have greater flexibility in attending class and completing assignments. In fact, Cavanaugh (2009) noted that distance learning can expand school learning time - a concept generally used to refer to the lengthening of the school day and/or year, or by supplementing class time with extracurricular activities (p. 2). Expanding school learning time likely results in better student performance. Most virtual schools, such as VHS, offer asynchronous communication, which means that class materials are available 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. Having the ability to access class any time, from any place, enables students to juggle extracurricular activities, sporting events, and even employment schedules. On the other hand, greater flexibility can result in student procrastination and missed deadlines. Since virtual schools typically define deadlines for assignments and activities, the learner must have effective organizational and time management skills. In fact, Allen and Seaman (2007) surveyed
more than 2,500 U.S. colleges and universities, and relayed that “academic leaders cite
the need for more discipline on the part of online students as the most critical barrier” to
widespread adoption of online programs (p. 3). Their documented conclusions in an
*Online Nation: Five Years of Growth in Online Learning* appear even more alarming
when one considers that the information pertains to college students. In all probability,
high school students will experience even more significant struggles with the online
structure. Even so, the USDOE supports asynchronous discourse, claiming it promotes
self-reflection that often results in more impactful learning (Harlen & Doubler, 2004;
Hiltz & Goldman, 2005; Jaffee, et al., 2006; as cited in Means et al., 2009). Mutually
reinforced is the notion of researching high school students’ attitudes and perceptions.

Published by the Center for American Progress and written in conjunction with
the Broad Foundation, Cavanaugh listed a variety of online advantages in her work
entitled, *Getting Students More Learning Time Online.* The author portrayed the virtual
experience as being student-centered and self-paced, preventing boredom that often
occurs in a traditional classroom. In fact, she argued that the self-managed course
structure enables learners to expand their knowledge, as needed, while having the
teacher’s support throughout (Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 2). Cavanaugh reinforced the notion
of differentiated instruction, which encourages teachers to adapt learning to individual
student needs and abilities, and claimed that it is even more possible via an online course.
Likewise, school administrators argue that the degree to which a teacher differentiates
depends on his/her own education, professional-development opportunities, class size,
and overall school support. In addition, online courses provide an enhanced course
catalog and foster superior flexibility in resolving scheduling conflicts. Since students
and teachers are often from various time zones and countries, it even lends itself to teaching tolerance and character education, thus intensifying the academic experience.

Greenway and Vanourek (2006) appear to have agreed with Cavanaugh, as they communicated that virtual classrooms have greater dependence on technology, and that students receive more individualized, interactive, and self-paced instruction (p. 38). Nonetheless, technology plays a critical role. Indeed, McCombs and Vakili (2005) drew attention to the lags between real-world and education, emphasizing that a lack of access to new technologies continue to plague educators. More specifically, school districts with limited funding lack the ability to purchase adequate hardware or software, and worse yet, they are unable to maintain the technology or support the integration process. Although poor technology is often a direct result of unavailable funds, it is worth investigating technology’s role in meeting students’ academic needs.

Virtual Teaching

In many respects, teaching online shares characteristics of a traditional classroom. First and foremost, teachers must genuinely care for their student’s well-being and commit to supporting them reach their academic potential. In addition, sound educational philosophy reinforces the need to provide rigor and relevance throughout the curriculum, while at the same time considering the various needs of the student. Educators know that students learn differently, and that they bring unique educational and life experiences to the classroom. For this reason, traditional and virtual instructors, alike, ought to tailor their instruction and assessment techniques to meet the individual needs of the student. In fact, some even propose that virtual classrooms encourage greater levels of differentiation.
According to Cavanaugh, Barbour, Brown, Diamond, and Lowes (2009), the interaction between the instructor and learner offers the most critical ingredient of a student's online success (p. 4). Their report, Research Committee Issues Brief: Examining Communication and Interaction in Online Teaching, cited a 2003 research study of the Virtual High School Global Consortium (VHS) performed by Zucker and Kozma, in which the authors found a connection between VHS success and the effort of capable and effective teachers and site coordinators (Cavanaugh et al., 2009, p. 4). This finding prompts one to ponder the characteristics constituting an effective online instructor.

Effective online instructors create a highly interactive learning environment that fosters intense collaboration among classmates. The student-centered classroom instills confidence in the learner and develops trustful relationships, so that he or she feels safe in expressing their personal thoughts and feelings. In the virtual setting, the teacher serves as a facilitator and role model, providing direction and leadership throughout. To combat claims that online students only participate in self-directed learning, Cavanaugh et al. (2009) argued that teachers are still needed to carefully direct instruction. In addition, virtual teachers provide clear objectives and expectations for students, and provide feedback in a timely manner. Although some assessment strategies seem similar to the traditional classroom, the virtual instructor must introduce and underline the need for self-assessments, so that students learn to objectively evaluate and revise their work. Finally, the online teacher must communicate with the parent, especially when situations appear more problematic.
Effective online instructors remain up-to-date with technology and master chat rooms that enhance the educational experience. “Online learning environments that are designed to use the many available collaborative communication tools can offer a more active, constructive, and cooperative experience than classroom learning” (Cavanaugh et al., 2009, p. 5). Finally, effective online instructors must have proper credentials and receive adequate professional development training throughout their career. Eighty-five percent of VHS teachers hold master’s degrees and 19% of those also hold doctoral degrees or other additional credentials (WestEd, 2007, p. 31). Yet, even though online teachers are typically subject to the state’s highly qualified teacher qualifications, Cavanaugh et al. (2009) noted that online education only now begins to define specific credentials and skills for highly qualified online teachers.

**Advantages and Disadvantages**

Online courses have significant advantages for students, as well as the school districts serving them. The vast majority of districts select virtual schools to supplement their existing curriculum (Clark, 2001; as cited in Blaylock & Newman, 2005). Additionally, online courses provide great scheduling flexibility. For instance, many Advanced Placement (AP) courses are offered as “singleton,” a course only offered one period a day. For those who are interested in completing several AP courses, singletons often require students to choose between one course and another. This is one example of how access to advanced courses can be limited and unequal. With online courses, however, students may enroll in as many advanced courses as he/she can manage.

Picciano and Seaman researched K-12 public school administrators’ attitudes and perceptions of fully online and blended learning courses. They generated two K-12
Online Learning reports, one in 2007 and another in 2009. Clearly the second study provided greater insight into the changes that occurred throughout the two-year period. In their findings, administrators pursued online learning because of the following values: Online courses are not otherwise available at school; online courses meet the needs of specific groups of students including minority and low-income families; online courses offer Advanced Placement or college-level courses; online courses reduce student scheduling conflicts; and online courses permit students to re-take a failed course. They also recognized potential barriers that may slow the growth of online courses, including course quality, course development and/or purchasing costs, funding questions based on student attendance, and the need for teacher training.

According to Greenway and Vanourek (2006), families choose virtual schools for the curriculum quality, individualized instruction, flexible scheduling, and technology interest. For instance, military families and students who pursue acting or athletics may require additional flexibility as they travel throughout the country. For students, the flexibility of online course work enables them to complete assignments anywhere and at anytime. Although many students may work from home, many opt to complete course work during school. In addition, studying online not only provides greater access to more advanced courses, but it also expands information technology skills. Research also suggests that as virtual schools become more mainstream, they serve more students with visual impairments, hearing impairments, and other low incidence disabilities (Watson, Gemin, & Ryan, 2008). More explicitly, online special educators utilize webcams, microphones, and web conferencing to enhance instruction, while concurrently providing accommodations that are outlined in the student’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP).
In summary, over 80% of teens and parents believe the Internet helps teenagers do better in school (INACOL, n.d.).

When considering the type of interaction between the student and instructor, several pros and cons arise. Murphy and Manzanares (2008) explained that the virtual classroom requires more planned, conscious formal and informal interactions among the teacher and student. In the virtual classroom, “students may not have the same anxiety about raising their hand, voicing opinions and talking in front of 15 or 20 people,” but the negative is that teachers can no longer rely on visual cues, body language, and facial expressions to check for understanding (Murphy & Manzanares, 2008, p. 1069). With distance education, instructors have the opportunity to differentiate the instruction and assessments. Learning depends on the student and his or her active participation. With that being said, the United States Department of Education's report, Connecting Students to Advanced Courses Online, acknowledged the need for teachers to provide online students with clear and realistic expectations, so they can fully understand what is involved and what will be expected of them (WestEd, 2007). Furthermore, successful students are self-motivated, have good time management skills, and bring a taking-care-of-business attitude toward completing their course work (WestEd, 2007, p. 40). Since research suggests that students need more discipline to succeed in an online course than in a face-to-face course, guidance counselors should consider and discuss items like course pacing with students and parents (Picciano & Seaman, 2007, p. 11). A conversation with a student new to advanced coursework may require selecting a course with less flexibility in completing assignments, thereby helping the student remain on track.
When comparing pros and cons, one must recognize that virtual classes are not appropriate for all students, and that the student’s level of motivation and commitment are critical components. “The isolation of distance learning can mean that a good student will not always find success, and a student who found the distractions of the classroom created an environment in which it was impossible to learn, will be able to achieve at a higher level” (Brenner, 2007, p. 32). Although motivation and commitment are intrinsic to some students, others require engaging teaching and/or content (WestEd, 2007). In addition to motivation and commitment, time management is essential. Shepherd (2008) highlighted that procrastination constitutes a key disadvantage, as it can be quite easy to lag behind. To succeed, students must learn to properly manage and complete their assignments, thereby preventing an overwhelming buildup of work.

Unlike any other school, virtual schools also face many challenges. In particular, Greenway & Vanourek (2006) remained concerned that students with limited English proficiency, visual impairments, severe or multiple disabilities, and motivational problems may experience difficulties with virtual programs. There is also concern among certain educators that virtual learning may result in a less socially adaptive child. Conversely, learning to communicate and develop relationships online is a critical skill needed for the 21st Century workforce, as is the ability to utilize online resources to perform research and make critical decisions. In fact, an online course may offer a practical and flexible way to enrich an academic program and offer advanced courses to greater numbers of students, with the added benefit of helping students develop key technology-related skills (WestEd, 2007, p.10). Perhaps educators can even use students’ technology interests to improve academic performance.
Regardless of whether it is a traditional or virtual school, education simplifies to meeting the needs of each individual child, thereby providing access to the best opportunities and experiences available. Therefore, when assessing a virtual school program, one should take a deeper look at the overall pros and cons, and adapt accordingly.

Meeting Student Needs

Educational reformers Dewey and Freire, as cited in Oblender and Glass (2004), emphasized understanding the student world from both an academic and personal perspective. They implored educators to combine these worlds so students could find relevance in their new learning, thereby constructing new knowledge from prior learning and experiences. Prensky (2001) argued that “digital natives,” those born after 1980, are painfully bored with the slow pace of the traditional classroom (as cited in Berge, 2008, p. 408). Similarly, Murray (2007) claimed that “Digital natives are adept at, and enjoy multitasking, working in groups, and absorbing information rapidly with greater access to information and resources” (as cited in Berge, 2008, p. 408). The changing student prompts us to take a further look into what it truly takes to meet their needs, and to consider using their technological curiosity to enhance academic performance.

Socialization and Relationships

Research has shown that learning is enhanced in “contexts where learners have supportive relationships, have a sense of ownership and control over the learning process, and can learn with and from each other in safe and trusting environments” (McCombs, 2003; McCombs & Whisler, 1997; as cited in McCombs & Vakili, 2005, p. 1586). This statement serves to support online programs that develop positive and collaborative
relationships among peers, as well as teachers. In fact, effective online programs integrate technology as a means to “support complex non-linear learning in ways that connect individual learners in meaningful dialogue, learning, and change across traditional boundaries of teachers, students, schools, classrooms, and individual communities” (McCombs & Vakili, 2005, p. 1586). For instance, VHS builds peer-to-peer interaction into the curriculum by way of threaded discussions and journaling. It also integrates newer applications, such as wikis and blogs, where information is instantly shared.

Virtual schools also strive to develop positive peer relationships through extracurricular activity school involvement. While some schools offer virtual clubs, other online providers create real-world opportunities to bring students. For example, K12 Inc. created the Making Waves Leadership Conference, which is a summer program that enables a select group of students to build friendships, participate in collaborative projects, and exercise leadership skills (Watson, Gemin & Evergreen Consulting Associates, 2008, p. 12). According to the North American Council for Online Learning, the Internet transcends the possibilities within physical schools and offers socialization opportunities that exceed what most traditional schools can provide (Watson, Gemin, & Evergreen Consulting Associates, 2008, p. 5). The varying opinions on the socialization piece of online learning promote the need for qualified teachers and further research.

Learner-Centered Framework

Expanding the discussion on student need, McCombs and Vakili referred to the learner-centered principles that were established in the early 1990’s. At that time, the American Psychological Association (APA) appointed a Task Force on Psychology in
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experiences. It is our goal, then, to differentiate learning to meet the needs of all students, while simultaneously offering challenging and advanced curriculum options.

In summary, Wagner and McCombs (1995) claimed that “distance education provides a unique context in which to infuse learner-centered principles” (as cited in McCombs & Vakili, 2005, p. 1590). Yet, there are other researchers, such as Zucker and Kozma (2003), who believe that virtual schools are not taking full advantage of their ability to incorporate learner-centered principles, but instead are simply mirroring our existing schools (as cited in McCombs & Vakili, 2005, p. 1590). Still others, like Cuban (2009) argue that although many high school students will take online courses here and there, “the comprehensive high school in most suburban districts and proliferation of small high schools in urban systems will continue to enroll the vast majority of eligible teenagers” (p. 43). Overall, a virtual school’s ability to meet the needs of its students is the most essential component to its future success and livelihood.

Advanced Placement Courses Online

Two existing virtual schools, the Florida Virtual School (FLVS) and the Virtual High School (VHS), have expanded their Advanced Placement (AP) options. FLVS saw AP enrollment more than double between 2003 and 2006, with enrollments rising from 976 to 2,348. “The upward trend included a rise in the percentage of minority students taking AP courses online, from 35 percent of all FLVS AP enrollments in 2003 to 43 percent in 2006” (WestEd, 2007, p. 14). Equally, VHS received a grant from the U.S. Department of Education’s Advanced Placement Incentive Program to develop an Online AP academy, which enabled them to offer online AP courses to 52 low-income high schools (WestEd, 2007, p. 39).
After reading the U.S. Department of Education's report, prepared by WestEd (2007), it is apparent that “if students are to be successfully prepared for the demands of higher education and the increasingly competitive work environment, they must have access to the right course work” (p.3). The report further identified the need for acquiring higher-level thinking and research skills, thereby needing access to advanced course work. Picciano and Seaman (2009) supported this argument, as their study of school administrators indicated that “high school students in rural areas are less likely (6.8% versus 26.5%) to take advanced placement science courses than students in central cities and in suburban fringe areas because of a lack of teachers and resources” (p. 6). In fact, studies suggest that students who have taken AP courses in high school have a greater tendency to attend their college courses, complete college, and even go on to graduate studies (Santoli, 2002, as cited in Shepherd, 2008, p. 288). In addition, those taking AP courses online often score higher on tests than those taking the courses onsite (Carnevale, 2002; Pape, 2006; Richard, 2004; as cited in Shepherd, 2008). It is still unknown, however, how traditional students, with access to AP courses and qualified teachers, will perform online.

Several benefits to online learning exist, as outlined in Connecting Students to Advanced Courses Online, prepared by WestEd on behalf of the Department of Education. Student advantages for enrolling in advanced online courses include the ability to select from Honors, Advanced Placement, and/or International Baccalaureate (IB) programs. In addition, students are exposed to more challenging courses, while having greater flexibility to “attend class” and complete the required assignments. “The
need for a complete and upper-level education is necessary if current students are to be able to compete with their world peers in the job market” (Brenner, 2007, p. 29).

Shepherd indicated that students who take Advanced Placement courses, regardless of the medium, will transition smoother from high school to college. In fact, evidence of AP courses on a high school transcript gives applicants a greater chance of admission to college and increases the likelihood of success in college (Shepherd, 2008). As of 2000, over one-half of all United States high schools offered advanced placement courses; however, they typically offer only 5 of the possible 33 AP available courses (Shepherd, 2008, p. 285). In 2002-2003, Thomas and Bowler (2005) documented 45,300 distance education enrollments in advanced placement or college-level courses (as cited in Brenner, 2007, p. 29). “If K-12 follows the pattern of enrollment growth in higher education, it is quite possible that online learning will emerge as a substantial component in K-12 schools, especially at the secondary level” (Picciano & Seaman, 2007, p. 20). These statistics further support the induction of online AP courses at the high school level.

At-Risk Students and Credit Recovery

To provide access to more advanced courses, the majority of virtual schools opened their doors as a means of promoting greater equality in education. Although this remains a leading factor for virtual school enrollments, there is also a rise in the number of students seeking to retake and restore their credit in a particular class. One of the largest online programs in the United States, the Florida Virtual School (FLVS), educates approximately 20% of students whose primary goal is “grade forgiveness.” FLVS also reported that, during the school year 2006-2007, of those who self-reported taking
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courses for credit recovery, 90.2% passed the course (Watson, Gemin & Ryan, 2008, p. 8).

Oftentimes, at-risk students come from low-income or single-parent homes, and achieve well below their potential academically. Some of these students possess a greater risk for a variety of issues, including dropping out of high school and substance abuse. The North American Council for Online Learning prepared a report entitled *Using Online Learning for At-Risk Students and Credit Recovery*, which supports online learning for its individualized instruction, and attention and support for at-risk students. The report also documented astonishing dropout rates, indicating that nearly one-third of all public high school students – and nearly one-half of all African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans – fail to graduate from public high school with their class. In comparison to high school graduates, dropouts are more likely to have poor health, are more than twice as likely to slip into poverty, and are more than eight times as likely to be in jail or prison (p. 5). It is obvious that educators must make every effort to save these students by promoting and providing an adaptable education.

To prevent dropouts, some Alternative Schools added online components that assist students in career planning, technical training, and basic math. Motivating these students, however, is vital to their success. The flexible course pacing and individualized instruction often serve at-risk students well, but when motivational or behavioral issues arise, the virtual school utilizes its counseling services to keep students on track. Should he or she continue to struggle, the virtual school relies more heavily on the primary school’s guidance counselor to work with the student individually.
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Dropout students jeopardize their own well-being, but they also sacrifice the health of the country. According to the General Accounting Office, “The social costs of the dropout problem include an underskilled labor force, lower productivity, lost taxes, and increased public assistance and crime” (as cited in Watson, Gemin & Evergreen Consulting Associates, 2008, p. 6). To ensure individual success and economic growth, we must emphasize the importance of earning a high school diploma that campaigns for 21st Century Skills.

21st Century Skills

Throughout history, education reform efforts attempted to balance learners’ needs with the needs of society. In 2004, Achieve Inc and the National Governor’s Association published a study that exposed an educational gap between high school course requirements and college and workplace ready skills. To close the expectations gap, Achieve Inc. and the National Governors’ Association hosted the 2005 National Education Summit on High Schools and distributed An Action Agenda for Improving America’s High Schools. The Summit’s action agenda declared that although students successfully meet state graduation requirements, and therefore graduate from high school, not all graduates are adequately prepared for post-high school success. And so, educators must reform education in a way that equips society with a talented and educated workforce that can face the nation’s economic challenges.

“The fact that technology pervades almost every sphere of life – from home to work to play – results in profound implications for learning, both in schools and throughout life” (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009, p. 6). The educational movement to integrate 21st Century Skills promotes rigor and relevance throughout the
Virtual Classes curriculum, so that students are challenged to think more critically. Creativity, innovation, communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills are also emphasized. More specifically, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21) website outlines a framework of core subjects and 21st Century themes, life and career skills, learning and innovation skills, and information, media, and technology skills (2009). As part of the communication and collaboration component, P21 emphasizes students’ abilities to utilize oral and written communication formats, keeping in mind that written text is frequently via technology and interactive media. In addition, the communication piece accentuates communication in diverse environments. P21 further acknowledges applying technology effectively, using it as a tool to research, organize, evaluate, and communicate, as well as to manage the enormous flow of information.

Potential for Curriculum Policy Changes

Published by the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) in 2005, Technology-Based Distance Education Courses for Public Elementary and Secondary School Students (2002-03) pioneered distance education data collection. The report provided national estimates of public school technology-based distance education courses during the school year 2004-2005, and compared it with baseline data collected in a 2002-2003 survey, with the end result being a longitudinal analysis of change in the districts that responded. Specifically, this comprehensive report indicated that approximately 36% of public school districts and 9% of public schools had students enrolled in distance education courses in 2002-03 (as cited in Picciano & Seaman, 2007). The survey also documented 328,000 distance education course enrollments among students regularly enrolled in public school districts, with 68% being in high schools, 29% in combined or
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upgraded schools, 2% in middle or junior high schools, and 1% were in elementary schools (as cited in Picciano & Seaman, 2007). In addition, there were 45,300 enrollments in Advanced Placement or college-level courses offered through distance education in 2002-03, which represented 14% of the total enrollments in distance education (as cited in Picciano and Seaman, 2007). Worth noting, however, is that Picciano and Seaman’s research included various methods of delivering distance education, such as videoconferencing. Although the report did not specifically identify online learning trends, it did acknowledge the predicted growth of online learning, especially at the secondary level, and opened the door for future studies.

In 2007, the Sloan Consortium published a report entitled K-12 Online Learning: A Survey of U.S. School District Administrators. Performed by Picciano and Seaman (2007), the national survey identified the nature and extent of online and blended learning in K-12 schools, and recognized the barriers that may impede its future development. Unlike the United States Department of Education who gathered course enrollment data, the Sloan Consortium gathered data on student participation so as to not double-count students enrolled in more than one course. Upon gathering data from 322 public school districts, the Sloan Report indicated that 57.9% had at least one student who had taken an online course in 2005-2006 (Picciano & Seaman, 2007). Further, nearly two-thirds of those districts currently had students taking either online or blended courses, with another 20.7% planning to introduce them over the next three years (Picciano & Seaman, 2007). Picciano and Seaman (2007) estimated that 600,000 to 700,000 K-12 public school students were enrolled in online learning for 2005-2006 (p.9). Using these estimates, school administrators are forced to consider the trend of integrating online courses, and
therefore must be able to effectively weigh the pros and cons of the virtual school options.

In 2009, the Sloan Consortium enabled Picciano and Seaman to perform a followup study, entitled *K-12 Online Learning: A 2008 Follow-up of the Survey of U.S. School District Administrators*. As with the 2007 report, it is important to recognize that the study’s figures represent only public school students and do not account for the private sector. Nonetheless, 867 out of 16,000 public school districts voluntarily responded to the survey. Replicating the previous study, it assessed the degree of change and determined that three quarters of the districts offered online or blended courses, and another 15% planned to introduce them over the next three years (Picciano & Seaman, 2009). Picciano and Seaman (2009) further stated that approximately 1,030,000 students participated in an online course, which represented a 47% increase since 2005-2006.

“These data clearly reflect that the vast majority of American school districts are providing some form of online learning for their students and more plan to do so within the next three years” (Picciano & Seaman, 2009, p.9). In addition, nearly 64% of the responding school districts expected growth in their fully online course enrollments, and 61% expected growth in their blended courses. They also anticipated that online courses will grow by 22.8% over the next two years, with the expected level of blended enrollments being even greater (Picciano & Seaman, 2009). The survey respondents recognized 42,822 student enrollments in fully online courses, and 23,417 in blended courses, totaling 66,239 students. “An extrapolation of these figures estimates that approximately 1,030,000 students for the entire population of 49,000,000 public school
students were enrolled in either an online or blending learning course during the 2007-2008 school year” (Picciano & Seaman, 2009, p. 11).

In summary, Picciano and Seaman (2009) claimed that online learning is still in its infancy stage, and they project that it may reach between 5 and 6 million K-12 (mostly high school) students by the year 2016 (p. 22). Similarly, Christensen et al, (2008) predicted that in roughly six years, 10% of all courses will be computer-based, and by 2019 about 59% of courses will be delivered online (as cited in iNACOL, n.d.). These statistics support the need for school districts to explore and assess virtual school options, mainly at the high school level.

New Jersey Virtual Trends

Evergreen Consulting Associates and Watson et al. annually review the policy and practice of all 50 states, and generate a report titled Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning. Although New Jersey does not have any state-led or statewide online programs, it is a member of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills initiative and “is committed to increasing student achievement using 21st Century technologies” (Watson, Gemin, & Evergreen Consulting Associates, 2008, p.99). According to the report, 23 New Jersey high schools are members of the Virtual High School Global Consortium (VHS). In addition, New Jersey’s 2007 Educational Technology Plan indicated that “the Department of Education will provide research and policy support for the development and use of online courses and virtual schools” (Watson, Gemin, & Evergreen Consulting Associates, 2008, p. 98). Starting in 2009, the New Jersey Department of Education revised its Core Curriculum Content Standards to reflect stronger integration of
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technology in all core content areas, and is working with the NJEA teachers’ union in developing state policies for online learning (Watson et al., 2008, p. 98).

The Virtual High School

Established in 1996 by the Concord Consortium, the Virtual High School (VHS) is a nonprofit Massachusetts-based education organization whose mission is “to stimulate large-scale, technology-based improvements in teaching and learning” (WestEd, 2007, p. 73). Since its inception, VHS has accumulated over 40,000 total enrollments, and continues to grow as it now offers Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), Honors, Core, and elective courses to students nationally, as well as internationally. Following the 2005-06 year, VHS received feedback from 110 school principals and 95% said they were either “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with the quality of VHS course offerings (WestEd, 2007, p. 30).

VHS utilizes asynchronous communication, such as discussion boards and blogs, which enable access to coursework any time, any place, and from anywhere. Twenty-four hour access to the VHS website provides great scheduling flexibility and adapts coursework around sports and extracurricular activity schedules. Students read lessons, contribute to class discussions, and submit individual and group assignments by a given deadline.

To join the Virtual High School (VHS), districts pay a membership fee, plus an additional amount of $130 per student for one semester (WestEd, 2007). Membership fees range from $1,500 to $8,500 per year, depending on the size of the school, its online enrollment numbers, and whether someone from the school is teaching an online course (WestEd, 2007). School districts offset costs by providing one or more teachers to design
Virtual Classes and/or deliver a course online. In return for 25 free student enrollments per semester, districts typically commit one teacher.

WestEd prepared a report for the United States Department of Education’s Office of Innovation and Improvement, titled *Connecting Students to Advanced Courses Online: Innovations in Education*. The report performed individual case studies of six online models, one of which was the Virtual High School (VHS), and reported that VHS creates course standards based on a combination of the National Education Association (NEA) guidelines and those of its professional development program, which certifies teachers for online instruction (WestEd, 2007). All newly proposed courses are reviewed by VHS’s curriculum coordinators, and then aligned to the state standards associated with the member school (WestEd, 2007).

To remain in alignment with the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, all VHS instructors are certified in the subject area of the online courses they teach, and are therefore highly qualified. In addition, “85% of VHS teachers also hold master’s degrees and 19% of those also hold a doctoral degree or other additional credentials” (WestEd, 2007, p. 31). To cultivate highly qualified teachers, VHS requires completion of a 10-week online professional development program prior to teaching an online course. The professional development program for teachers focuses on improving technology skills, fostering online group activities, and effectively generating online discussions among students (WestEd, 2007). Throughout their first semester of teaching online, VHS provides mentors to guide and assess the teaching quality. After successfully completing the first year, the Community of Virtual Educators (COVE) provides ongoing
professional development and support, and requires the creation of a personalized professional development plan that encourages goal setting (WestEd, 2007).

To further ensure academic success, VHS limits class sizes to 25 students per instructor, so students receive more individualized attention, instruction, and support (WestEd, 2007). VHS also utilizes student-centered discussions and activities that encourage social interactions. For example, all VHS courses start with the same assignment, which is a brief written description of themselves (WestEd, 2007). This assignment enables students to get to know each other, and opens the door for future interactions. To provide additional support for students, VHS instructors post students’ grades every two weeks, as they are confident that two-week monitoring intervals keep students from falling too far behind (WestEd, 2007).

In 2004, VHS became the first online course provider to pilot an online IB economics course (WestEd, 2007). Currently, they offer 185 courses and aim to add an additional 10 courses per year. As of 2007, they reported an 85% completion rate for AP courses, and later partnered with Shekou International School in China to create a Mandarin Chinese course that utilizes native Mandarin-speaking teachers to facilitate the class (WestEd, 2007. p. 45).
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

By describing the participants, instrumentation, and setting, this chapter sketches the research design and methodology. It also outlines the data collection methods, as well as provides insight into the data analysis techniques.

Research Design

This study assessed the implementation of supplemental online courses, offered through the Virtual High School (VHS), at one suburban New Jersey public high school. Therefore, the qualitative research design consisted of a cross-sectional case study of the attitudes and perceptions of those directly involved with the supplemental Virtual High School classes. The use of five focus groups within this study is consistent with Krueger and Casey’s (2000) definition that states, “A focus group study is a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment” (p. 5). Due to the limitations of the research design, the maximum number of eligible participants included 25 students, 2 faculty members, and 2 administrators. Based on the number of signed consent forms received, the actual participants included 10 students, 2 faculty members, and 2 administrators.

Thus, focus group breakdown included three homogeneous student groups, one faculty group, and one administrator group, for a combined total of 14 participants (see Table 1). This multiple-category design assisted the researcher in making comparisons within and among the various groups (Krueger & Casey, 2000).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Possible Participants</th>
<th>Actual Participants</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3 Focus Groups</td>
<td>High school senior students currently enrolled in an online VHS course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 Focus Group</td>
<td>(1) District teacher who is also teaching an online VHS course, and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(2) district guidance counselor that is serving as the VHS site coordinator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrators</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 Focus Group</td>
<td>Director Curriculum &amp; Instruction, High School Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5 Focus Groups</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After verbally explaining the research study’s purpose and design, the Superintendent of Schools forwarded a signed site approval letter via interoffice mail. Then, after receiving approval from Seton Hall University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher mailed solicitation and informed consent letters via interoffice mail to the Director of Curriculum and Instruction, High School Principal, Guidance Counselor / Site Coordinator, and Middle School Technology / VHS Teacher. Next, using the student database management system, the researcher obtained the VHS class rosters. Formal solicitation and informed consent letters were sent via U.S. mail to parents of the 25 eligible seniors, asking permission to approach their child for
participation. After receiving signed parent consent forms, solicitation and informed consent letters were sent via U.S. mail to the appropriate students. Based on the number of students willing to join, students were equally divided into homogenous focus groups. In particular, special attention was given to those students who withdrew from or failed an online course. To protect their privacy and encourage candid responses, the researcher placed these students in a separate focus group from those who passed an online course. Finally, one week prior to the scheduled focus group meeting, the researcher sent a reminder via email to all consenting participants.

To prevent coercion and ensure that the respondents were comfortable sharing honest thoughts and opinions, a proxy researcher facilitated the focus group interviews. During the months of May and June, 2010, each focus group met once with the proxy researcher, lasting approximately one hour. At a predetermined date and time, each focus group met in a high school conference room.

The proxy researcher welcomed everyone and explained the goal of the meeting, which was to obtain insight into the VHS program. To gather reliable data, participants were encouraged to speak honestly and freely, and input and dialogue were encouraged, especially when disagreeing with a comment. Serving as the facilitator, the proxy researcher highlighted the required structure, such as speaking one person at a time. She explained the use of tent cards, which were placed directly in front of each participant, clarifying that the number (not the person’s name) would be used to record responses.

Serving as the sole moderator, the proxy researcher consistently encouraged honest dialogue and ensured an equal opportunity to share ideas. The data collection techniques included the proxy researcher’s handwritten notes, the participants’ written
responses to appropriate questions, and audio tape recordings of each of the three focus group sessions. In addition, the student database management system provided students’ final grades per VHS course. Participants were aware of the tape recordings, which were used to assist with the data analysis phase.

The focus group structure and corresponding interview questions were purposefully designed to obtain opinions regarding the following five research guiding questions: (1) How do the VHS courses compare to those in a traditional setting; (2) What are the advantages and disadvantages of online high school courses, and the VHS program; (3) How effectively does the VHS program meet the needs of the students; (4) Do online courses link to 21st Century Skills and college readiness; and (5) Should this high school, and others nationwide, consider and implement curriculum policy changes that pertain to online high school courses.

Participants

This case study researched one suburban New Jersey public high school, which is located approximately one hour southwest of New York City. As determined by the State Board of Education, the district is labeled as a District Factor Group (DFG) J, which implies that the majority of the families are well educated and affluent. At the time of the study, the high school enrolled approximately 1,700 students in grades 9 through 12. As part of piloting the program during 2009-2010, online enrollments were limited to 25 senior students per semester, whose ages ranged from 16 to 18 years. Some students enrolled in one full-year course, while others enrolled in either one or two semester courses.
The qualitative, multiple-category research design obtained the attitudes and perceptions of those individuals who had taken, directly observed, or implemented a VHS course or program during the academic school year 2009-2010. Consequently, the research design consisted of three separate focus group categories: (1) students, (2) faculty, and (3) administrators. More specifically, only senior students enrolled at the high school under study, and who voluntarily enrolled in an online supplemental course during the 2009-2010 academic school year, were invited to participate in this study. Based on the number of signed consent forms received, ten students actually contributed to this study. The VHS structure and membership contract prompted the selection of the faculty focus group, which included one teacher and one guidance counselor. More specifically, one individual taught an online course and another individual served as the site coordinator. Within this school district, an existing middle-school technology teacher voluntarily agreed to teach an online course via the VHS program, and one high school guidance counselor functioned as the site coordinator, serving as the liaison between the student, the high school, and VHS. Both members held Master’s Degrees in Education, and congruent with standard union procedures, received a stipend for their added responsibilities.

Finally, to remain consistent with the research design, only district administrators directly involved with the decision-making were required to implement and oversee the VHS program, during the academic school year 2009-2010, were invited to join this study. Within the high school under study, the implementation required input from the Director of Curriculum and Instruction and the High School Principal; thus, their attitudes and perceptions of the VHS program were relevant to the study. The Director of
Curriculum and Instruction and High School Principal had each earned a Master’s Degree in Education, and held a tenure position within the district.

**Instrumentation**

The qualitative research design obtained the attitudes and perceptions of those individuals who had taken, directly observed, or implemented a VHS course or program during the academic school year 2009-2010. Consequently, the research design consisted of three separate focus group categories: (1) students, (2) faculty, and (3) administrators.

To enable active participation among all students, the researcher intentionally divided the student participants into three homogeneous focus groups that consisted of approximately 5 to 10 students per group. “Focus group research is scientific research because it is a process of disciplined inquiry that is systematic and verifiable” (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 198). The questioning route design engaged participants and facilitated the focus group discussions so as to identify a range of opinions across each group.

According to Krueger and Casey (2000), good focus group questions sound conversational, use common words, are clear and easy to understand, and are most often open-ended (p. 41). The consistent questioning route enabled the researcher to compare and contrast responses among groups. In addition, the dialogue began with opening questions that elicited quick responses from each of the participants, and gradually transitioned from general to specific, as it approached the key driving questions (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Then, summary questions finalized loose ends and identified areas the participants felt were left out. Regardless of the order, all interview questions correlated to the following research guiding question topics: (1) online versus traditional setting; (2) advantages and disadvantages of online high school courses; (3) meeting student
needs; (4) link to 21st Century Skills and college readiness; and (5) potential for curriculum policy changes (see Appendix A). The justification for these categories derived directly from the Chapter II literature review.

Setting

The researcher established the focus group sessions during a predetermined date and time that did not conflict with other school functions. The ideal environment is familiar and comfortable, thus the groups met in a high school conference room. The proxy researcher created a nontthreatening environment that encouraged participants to share points of view, without necessarily trying to reach consensus. All rooms were quiet and free from distractions, and water was served.

Data Collection

This research design consisted of multiple data collection methods. The first method utilized the student database management system to obtain VHS course names and final grades earned for each student. This data assisted the researcher in determining a numerical level of academic success by student, and calculated an average grade for the 25 students enrolled. The remaining methods occurred during the focus group interviews, and included the proxy researcher’s handwritten notes, the participant’s handwritten responses to appropriate questions, and a primary audio recorder. “The tape-based approach relies on listening to a tape recording of each focus group and then developing an abridged transcript of the relevant and useful portions of the discussion” (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 130). Using the abridged transcripts, the researcher integrated a Microsoft Access database to code responses, and categorize and tally results.
Data Analysis

“Focus group research analysis is systematic, sequential, verifiable, and continuous” (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 128). In other words, the analysis is done concurrently with data collection; it begins with the first focus group meeting and continues to evolve throughout. The homogeneous focus groups enhanced participants’ comfort level, thereby eliciting honest responses and improving the researcher’s ability to accurately analyze the data. The proxy researcher consistently documented the live responses, and upon completion of the interviews, the primary researcher transcribed the audio recordings. Then, the primary and proxy researchers debriefed, so as to gain insight and agreement on the data gathered. This strategy enabled ongoing comparisons from one group to another, and allowed the researcher to triangulate the data so as to identify themes, unique quotes, and outlying information. Furthermore, the reliable trail of evidence can be verified and therefore adds credibility to the research findings.

To ensure validity, the proxy researcher listened attentively to participants and asked clarifying questions, as needed. At the conclusion of the interview, comments were summarized and verified for accuracy. Then, to cover additional topics, the subjects identified relevant topics that may have been left out.

The interview question routes directly correlated to the research guiding questions (see Tables 2-4). For each of the focus groups, the first two general questions developed a rapport with the participants; however, with the multiple-layer design, the remaining focus group questions were adjusted to suit the audience. The question route content was consistent, yet its order varied. Student interview questions 7, 9, and 10 addressed research question 1 by comparing a traditional classroom to one that is online, and
questions 6, 7, 9, 10, and 13 referred to research question 2 that identified online course advantages and disadvantages. Continuing, focus group questions 1 through 5 and 8 through 10 spoke to guiding question 3 that recognized VHS' ability to meet student needs. Finally, questions 5 and 12 addressed 21st Century Skills that are mentioned in research guiding question 4, and interview questions 3 and 10 thru 12 focused on potential policy changes described in guiding question 5.

Faculty and administrator focus group interview questions 5, 6, and 8 referred to research guiding question 1 that compared traditional and online courses. In alignment with research guiding question 2, interview questions 2 thru 6, and 8 compared the advantages and disadvantages of online courses, and questions 3 and 6 thru 10 focused on meeting student needs that are outlined in guiding question 3. Finally, focus group questions 3, 9, and 11 speak to 21st Century Skills identified in guiding question 4, and potential policy changes that are described in guiding question 5 are answered in focus group questions 1, 6, 7, 10, and 11. See tables 2-4 for more detail.
## Table 2

**Focus Group Questions: Administrator**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group Question</th>
<th>Research Guiding Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Would you like to see the VHS program continue next year?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When texting, people add (smiley) faces to their messages to represent a variety of feelings and emotions. Using the paper in front of you, draw the face that represents your attitude toward the VHS program.</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What prompted you to pilot the VHS program?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using the paper in front of you, develop a list of the advantages and disadvantages of integrating the online VHS courses.</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In comparison to traditional courses, how rigorous is the online curriculum? How effective was the teacher? How did learning and assessments differ (i.e. project-based learning, cooperative activities, and differentiated instruction)?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What type of student is best suited to enroll in an online course? Do you foresee policy changes with regard to who is permitted to enroll?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you received any feedback from students, parents, or teachers regarding the VHS program? Explain.</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How important is the guidance liaison? Parents? Support services?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there a link between online courses, 21st Century Skills and college readiness? Are students better prepared for the college transition?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you were to give VHS a report card grade, what would it be? Explain. Is there room for growth? Should alternative online programs be considered? What is the ideal? What obstacles might stand in the way?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should completion of an online course be a requirement at this high school? In the State of New Jersey? Nationwide?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have we missed anything?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3

Focus Group Questions: Faculty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group Question</th>
<th>Research Guiding Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Traditional versus Online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When texting, people add (smiley) faces to their messages to represent a variety of feelings and emotions. Using the paper in front of you, draw the face that represents your experiences with the VHS program.</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you like your role with the VHS program to continue next year?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What prompted you to become involved with the VHS program this year?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using the paper in front of you, develop a list of the advantages and disadvantages of integrating VHS courses.</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In comparison to traditional courses, how rigorous is the online curriculum? How effective was the teacher? How did learning and assessments differ (i.e. project-based learning, cooperative activities, and differentiated instruction)?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What type of student is best suited to enroll in an online course? Would you suggest policy changes with regard to who is permitted to enroll?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How well did VHS meet the needs of the students? Was student support adequate? Technology? Course availability?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How important is the guidance liaison? Administration? Parents? Other support services?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What impact do online courses have on college readiness? How do online courses impact a student’s high school transcript?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you were to give VHS a report card grade, what would it be? Explain. Would you like to see the VHS program expanded? What is the ideal? What obstacles might prevent future growth?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should completion of an online course be a requirement at this high school? In the State of New Jersey? Nationwide?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have we missed anything?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group Questions: Student</th>
<th>Research Guiding Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Traditional versus Online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are your post-high school plans for next year (college, work, etc.)?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where did you most frequently complete your assignments (school or home)?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When texting, students add (smiley) faces to their messages to represent a variety of feelings and emotions. Using the paper in front of you, draw the face that represents your experiences with the VHS program.</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think back to this time last year when you began selecting your classes for your senior year. Why did you decide to enroll in an online course?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has the completion of an online course better prepared you for the college/work transition?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using the paper in front of you, develop a list of pros and cons of enrolling in a VHS online course. Identify the biggest advantage/disadvantage?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In comparison to traditional courses, how difficult is the online curriculum? How effective was the teacher? How did tests and activities differ (i.e. project-based, cooperative, and differentiated instruction)?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you were to give VHS a report card grade, what would it be? Explain. Was student support adequate? Technology? Course availability?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How well did this high school meet your VHS needs, including technology, guidance, and support services?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you encourage other students to enroll in a VHS course? If so, what advice would you give them?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you encourage the administration to expand the program? If so, how?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should completion of an online course be a requirement at this high school? In the State of New Jersey? Nationwide?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have we missed anything?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER IV

DATA ANALYSIS

This study assessed the implementation of supplemental online courses, offered through the Virtual High School (VHS), at one suburban New Jersey public high school. Specifically, the study served as a qualitative assessment of the attitudes and perceptions of those directly involved with the supplemental Virtual High School classes, which included a select group of students, faculty, and administrators.

This chapter presents the study’s findings. Based on the number of signed consent forms received, this data analysis summarizes responses from 10 students, 2 faculty members, and 2 administrators. More specifically, the information derived from three homogeneous student groups, one faculty group, and one administrator group.

Background Information

The question route for each focus group discussion included introductory questions that gathered background information from the participants and simultaneously created a comfortable environment that encouraged honest responses.

Administrators

The administrator focus group consisted of the Director of Curriculum and Instruction and the High School Principal, both of whom are Caucasian males. At the time of this study, both gentlemen held Master’s Degrees in Educational Administration.

As indicated by the first three introductory questions, both district administrators were pleased with the VHS program and prefer that it continue for the following school year. Their rationale for piloting an online program during the school year 2009-2010 stemmed primarily from budget restrictions that directly resulted from the country’s poor
economic status and the reduction in New Jersey State aid given to school districts. This
high school discussed shifting the structure of the school day from a nine-period day to
an eight-period day, causing some potential conflicts for senior students, as well as those
enrolled in the arts. Although this schedule change was not necessarily the preferred
option, the VHS program, as one administrator said, “might be something that could get
us through at least the beginning years of kids who had pretty much mapped out their
schedule based on a nine period day for four years.”

District administrators indicated choosing VHS as their online provider because it
offered a variety of courses, especially at the Advanced Placement (AP) level, which
appealed to a large portion of the school’s population. A popular selection among many
similar districts within New Jersey, VHS served as a viable option.

Finally, to identify the overall level of satisfaction with the VHS program, the last
introductory question required drawing a face, similar to what is used in modern-day text
messaging. For this question, both administrators drew smiley faces.

Faculty

The faculty focus group consisted of one male and one female, who were both of
the Caucasian race. One individual functioned as a guidance counselor and the VHS site
coordinator, while the other served as a middle school technology teacher and a VHS
online instructor. At the time of this study, both individuals held Master’s Degrees.

The first two faculty questions generated an overall approval of the VHS series, as
well as a desire to continue working with the program next year. Although their initial
involvement derived from their existing job responsibilities and interests, one person
elaborated by claiming, “It sounded like something that would be really great for our students, and I just wanted to be part of it.”

Finally, to identify the overall level of satisfaction with the VHS program, the last introductory question required drawing a face, similar to what is used in modern-day text messaging. One faculty member drew a smiley face while the other drew a straight face.

Students

Of the 10 students that submitted signed consent forms and participated in the focus group discussions, 6 were male and 4 were female. While they were all seniors in high school, seven students were 18 years of age and three students were 17 years of age. The racial composition consisted of seven Caucasians, two Hispanic/Latinos, and one American Indian/Alaska Native. In addition, one participant was classified as a special education student and another received free and reduced lunch. The mean grade point average (GPA), a cumulative weighted GPA that was calculated at the end of the participants’ junior year (2008-2009), equaled a 3.264, with the highest GPA equal to 4.233 and the lowest GPA equal to 2.382.

The first student question related to post-high school plans. According to the responses, nine students planned to attend a four-year university, and one student intended to pursue the military and/or police academy upon completion of a two-year college. Notable college acceptances included Tulane University, Loyola College, University of Michigan, Fairfield University, Concordia University, Elon University, Northeastern University, and the New Jersey Institute of Technology. Potential college majors included Environmental Science, Mechanical Engineering, Criminal Justice, Sports Management, Psychology, Business, and Pre-Medicine.
A second introductory question sought to categorize the rationale for enrolling in a VHS course during the school year 2009-2010. Ninety percent of the students sought the supplemental curriculum and course offerings. Three students also noted that they had exhausted the high school’s elective options and wanted to pursue something of significance, rather than enroll in a course of little interest or challenge. Two students revealed that taking an online course, directly related to their potential college major, and provided them with the opportunity to “see if I like it” before actually heading off to college. Finally, one student enrolled because he/she perceived it as an “easy” elective.

Finally, to identify the overall level of satisfaction with the VHS program, the last introductory question required drawing a face, similar to what is used in modern-day text messaging. Four students drew a smiley face, five students drew a straight face, and one student drew a frown.

**VHS Course Enrollments**

During the pilot year, students were permitted to enroll in an online course not currently offered at the high school. Some courses occurred throughout the entire year, while others were semester based; therefore, some students completed two semester courses during the school year, while others finished only one. The following is a list of the research participants’ course selections:

- Anatomy and Physiology
- Animal Behavior and Zoology
- Biotechnology
- Criminology
- Engineering Principals
Virtual Classes 59

- Horror, Mystery, and Science Fiction Literature
- International Business
- Investing in the Stock Market
- Marketing and the Internet
- Mythology: Stories from Around the World
- Philosophy I
- Sports and American Society
- World Religions

Additional courses taken by those students who opted out of participating in this study included:

- AP Art History
- AP Computer Science A
- Astronomy Basics
- Fundamentals of Music Composition
- Introduction to Computer Science
- Music Composition: Exploration of Style
- Oceanography: A Virtual Semester at Sea
- Pre-Veterinary Medicine
- Screenwriting Fundamentals
- Young Literature

Of the courses completed by participants under study, students earned a passing mark in 10 courses and a failing mark in 2 courses. Notably one individual failed two semester courses. The mean grade earned for all 10 of the VHS participants equaled a
with two students earning an A’, two earning an A, three earning an A-, one earning a B, one earning a B-, one earning a C, and two earning an E (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. Participant VHS grades. This graph depicts a breakdown of the research participants’ Virtual High School course grades that were earned during the academic school year 2009-2010.

Data Findings

The findings for the remaining ten focus group questions are outlined according to the following five research guiding questions:

1. How do the VHS courses compare to those in a traditional setting?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of online high school courses, and the VHS program?
3. How effectively does the VHS program meet the needs of the students?
4. Do online courses link to 21st Century Skills and college readiness?
5. Should this high school and others nationwide consider and implement curriculum policy changes that pertain to online high school courses?
Virtual Classes

Focus groups compared traditional learning to online learning. This guiding question correlated to interview question five of the faculty and administrator groups, and questions two and seven of the student focus groups (See Appendix A).

**Administrators:** In terms of the written course curriculum, the administrator group indicated that the online curriculum “certainly looks good on paper,” and shared similarities with offerings at the high school. In fact, one administrator referred to the online AP Art History course, claiming “that course is as rigorous, if not more rigorous than what we would have, if we had it here.”

The asynchronous method of instruction, in which students attend class at different times of the day, requires a greater need for independent learning. Although this may be perceived as an advantage to some, others struggle to adapt. Regardless, this new experience for most high school students requires an expected learning curve.

With regard to instructional techniques, online courses require threaded discussions in which students post responses to teacher questions. In addition, students constructively critiqued their peers, thereby generating greater dialogue among the class. Although online courses typically integrate individual written assignments and one cooperative project per semester, similar to traditional classes, these courses placed a greater emphasis on the written component. Since writing is the only medium for learners to respond and participate, the Director of Curriculum and Instruction noted, “There really isn’t a chance to exhibit any other strength other than writing.”

**Faculty:** In alignment with district administrators, the participating faculty members highlighted the heavy reliance on threaded discussions. Upon reflection, the
online teacher revealed that students are unfamiliar with this practice, and “they need to be reminded and encouraged in that process often in terms of what is expected.” Also, the teacher serves as the online facilitator, not just to enhance the dialogue and challenge students to think more critically, but also to serve as a presence in the virtual classroom. Without direction, students quickly forget the role of the teacher. When asked about the overall rigor of the classes, participants were a bit unsure. They did acknowledge, however, that AP courses must follow the AP curriculum and are therefore equally as rigorous, regardless of whether they are taught online or in a brick and mortar building.

In terms of teaching online, the VHS teacher felt that more time was dedicated to individual interactions. Even though many would expect just the opposite, he said, “I find myself reaching out when necessary to kids in the VHS class more regularly.” Similarly, he felt that a primary role of the online teacher involved managing questions and responding to student inquiries in a timely manner. The virtual teacher highlighted the fact that students often have to wait for an online response from the instructor before moving forward with a particular assignment, thus a quick response time can positively influence the student’s attitude and level of success. Similarly, assessment feedback is equally important, and for this teacher meant returning graded assignments in a quicker fashion than in a traditional setting.

The guidance counselor integrated a different perspective, as her thoughts derived from serving as the liaison between the student and teacher. She described the virtual teachers as “truly fantastic” to work with and “very accommodating.” It was revealed, however, that one special education student had difficulty receiving her Individualized Education Program (IEP) accommodations. The guidance counselor was unsure, though,
if this was an isolated incident with this particular teacher or if it reflected a larger concern with the online program as a whole.

Regardless of the similarities and differences with virtual learning, both faculty members agreed that student success is absolutely possible. “At no time did our students struggle with the assessments,” but rather “the major problems that I dealt with were students just not doing their work.” Elaborating, the site coordinator identified student motivation and participation as the prevalent challenge, and further clarified, “the volume of work will not be less than in a traditional class, so if anybody is taking it thinking it would be easier, there is a rude awakening.”

Students: Four students reported the overall level of difficulty for an online course as equal to that of a traditional class, three claimed it was easier, and two felt it was harder. One student felt the difficulty depended on the actual course itself, as well as the level of the course (i.e. Honors or AP), and another student argued that some courses were less challenging because they allowed students in grades 9 through 12 to participate, which is similar to traditional elective courses.

Although six students acknowledged that assignments were “different” online, only one student reported that they were more challenging than traditional classroom activities. Fifty percent of the students, however, did articulate the difficulty related to completing group assignments. In fact, one student stated, “It’s really hard to manage a group project online with everyone on different schedules and in different places.” Similarly, another student said, “Nobody is on at the same time, so it’s not immediate.” Consistent with the administrative perspective, the asynchronous environment whereby students participate at different times of the day complicates the coordination of
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cooperative projects. In addition, many students noted that teammates failed to equally contribute to group assignments, with the frustration appearing to be directly connected to communication difficulties. One senior even drew attention to the fact that students were from all over the world, and language barriers also played a role.

Virtual teacher effectiveness shaped another intriguing theme. Although six students indicated an equally effective virtual instructor, several students highlighted communication challenges. One student reported online teachers as less effective with more challenging concepts, and another reported, “There is no teacher to guide you, so either you get it or you don’t.” From their responses, clearly a few students struggled with the lack of a physical teacher presence, but overall they felt their online teachers were knowledgeable of the content, understanding of computer problems, and considerate of school calendar differences and personal issues.

Next, the seniors discussed online peer relationships and social norms. At the beginning of each online course, teachers implemented a welcome activity where students posted a message about themselves to the rest of the class, and therefore getting to know each other better. In Anatomy and Physiology, the teacher required students to define, “What is a sense of community,” thereby encouraging the class to contemplate some intangibles that would assist in making the class more connected. Overall, students noted the differences in terms of peer relationships but acknowledged that social norms were still apparent. For instance, one student reported, “You definitely got that sense of the overachievers and underachievers by the way they posted.”

Finally, to gather more information related to the asynchronous nature of the online structure, the focus group facilitator requested that students identify the location
where they most frequently completed their online assignments. Only one student completed VHS assignments during the designated period of the school day, while four students admitted they participated from home. Three others claimed they worked in the environment that best suited them on any given day, which resulted in working from home some days and from school on other days. Two students withdrew from the VHS program and were therefore unable to respond to this question.

**Advantages and Disadvantages**

Focus groups listed advantages and disadvantages of the online course work. This guiding question related to student interview question six, and interview faculty and administrator question four (See Appendix A).

**Administrators:** Both administrators reported the online program’s flexibility in scheduling students and resolving scheduling conflicts as primary advantages. Equally as important, though, were the vast curriculum opportunities. Other items included its capacity to provide solutions to budget cuts, and its ability to prepare students with 21st Century Skills that relate to college readiness. One administrator explained that program participation would enhance the district’s reputation within the State, thereby benefiting the entire community.

The primary disadvantage mentioned by one administrator, and reiterated by the other, involved tracking student achievement. For instance, accommodating students with disabilities appeared problematic, especially since a student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) may change during the school year. Also, one administrator noted the benefits for independent-working students, yet cautioned its overall potential
for students across the board. Finally, only four students could enroll in the same section of a VHS course, which could potentially cause future scheduling conflicts.

Faculty: Consistent with the administrator group, faculty members agreed that course offerings were the primary incentive for students to enroll in an online course, especially since they could enroll in a course of interest. Advantages also included resolving scheduling conflicts and better preparing students for college, as well as its flexibility in completing assignments during any time of the day and from any location, its ease of meeting new people from a variety of locations throughout the world, and its ability to promote constructivist learning.

Faculty members also listed disadvantages of the VHS program. In fact, the site coordinator mentioned that the high school under study does not weigh courses completed at any out-of-district institution into a student's grade point average. Consequently, little incentive for students to complete an Honors or AP level course online existed, as it would hold the same weight as a standard course. More specifically, it would be more beneficial mathematically for a student to complete traditional Honors or AP level courses, rather than an online one, because it would have a greater influence on the cumulative GPA. Although this is a school policy that has the potential of being changed, it was mentioned as an existing disadvantage.

Finally, the faculty focus group reported that online courses are “not for all students,” and the student must be an independent and self-motivated learner. The student must also be aware that the school calendars may differ, which means that fall semester courses typically begin one week prior to the start of New Jersey high schools but finish earlier. In addition, school vacations may lack consistency.
**Students:** Consistent with both the administrator and faculty focus groups, 70% of students reported the supplemental course selection as a primary online advantage. The second most popular response, which was given by five students, was that it encouraged time management skills and enabled them to work at their own pace. Other popular responses involved the ability to work independently, as well as greater flexibility completing assignments. Less common responses indicated that online courses helped them mature and prepare for college, allowed them to determine whether or not they liked a particular subject, enabled them to meet new people, or required less work. One student even wrote, “Kids who are nervous talking in front of a class don’t have to worry about it.”

The largest negative of the online courses, as reported by four students, resided in the impersonal learning that resulted from a lack of direct communication with the teacher and/or their peers. Some indicated being less motivated minus a teacher’s physical presence and three students missed the teacher relationship that is often involved with traditional classes. Continuing, two students indicated that the online system required a quicker response time from teachers in terms of reducing student questions, and one student commented that, “at times, it was difficult to learn in such an independent learning environment.” Other frustrations included completing group assignments with students that were often in different time zones, and difficulty completing past-due assignments that were a result of being sick or absent from class. Finally, one student acknowledged that there was a greater opportunity to cheat online.
Meeting Student Needs

Focus groups evaluated the program’s ability to address student needs. This guiding question was referenced in administrator interview questions two, five and eight, faculty interview questions seven and eight, and student interview questions eight and nine (See Appendix A).

Administrators: When asked to evaluate the overall success of the VHS program, by virtue of assigning a letter grade, each administrator assessed the program at an A+. Their grades were based upon course offerings, as well as the fact that VHS teachers are certified in the specific content area they are teaching. They also noted, however, its need to better support and monitor all students, especially those with disabilities. It was also briefly mentioned that VHS limits the number of students who can take a particular course, presenting a future obstruction.

The administrator focus group labeled the role of the VHS site coordinator as a “critical” component of student success. The site manager served as the liaison between VHS and the students and parents, and could therefore address technology difficulties, teacher concerns, and academic performance. Without the site coordinator, the administrators had grave concern over monitoring student performance and meeting each child’s needs. From the district perspective, neither administrator possessed knowledge of parent concerns or issues relating to the supplemental classes. In fact, they believed that parents seek to expand course offerings permitted by this high school.

In summary, ensuring adequate support for students with disabilities poses a significant administrative challenge. Although it was reported that technical support was
adequate and there is a 24-hour hotline available, the special education support was "nonexistent."

**Faculty:** When asked to evaluate the overall success of the VHS program, by virtue of assigning a letter grade, both faculty members agreed upon an A. One member reported its accessibility, user friendliness, and support services all as successful indicators. The second member of the group, mentioned the overall level of support for the online teaching staff via classroom observations that consisted of professional development opportunities.

The district teacher, who also taught an online VHS class, reiterated the importance of an effective site coordinator. In fact, it was admitted that VHS prefers that teachers communicate with the site liaison, rather than with the parents. In effect, direct parent communication was somewhat discouraged. This emphasis on the site coordinator role is consistent with the district administrator’s perceptions, too.

Faculty concerns with the implementation of the program that occurred back in September of 2009 persisted. More specifically, faculty members alleged that the program lacked a high priority status.

**Students:** When asked to evaluate the overall success of the VHS program, by virtue of assigning a letter grade, answers varied. The breakdown included one A, one A-, one B', four B's, two C's, and one C (See Figure 2). Specific comments differed, as some disliked the impersonal learning and others referred to the difficulty in communicating with teachers and classmates online. Yet one person claimed that, “If you did the reading you learned.” Perhaps the most forthcoming response may correlate to the student’s level
of motivation, as one person indicated, “It really just depended if you read every little single thing that the teacher gave you.”

Figure 2. VHS program evaluation grades. Students were asked to evaluate the VHS program by virtue of assigning a letter grade. This chart represents a breakdown of the grades given to the Virtual High School, serving as an indication of the student participants’ perceptions of the program’s overall level of success.

Infrequent difficulties with the online system were most often due to technical issues in accessing the VHS network. To further clarify, 6 of the 10 students reported technical difficulties that occurred approximately two times per semester, and were a result of an inability to log into the VHS website. The students confirmed that the issue was on the VHS end, and when it happened, they would just try to log in again later in the day.

Other issues that arose, such as conflicts with the school calendar, were successfully resolved by the site coordinator. In fact, 70% of the students interviewed were appreciative of the site coordinator’s efforts. They felt that the coordinator kept them accountable, as she frequently checked in with them and reminded them of
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upcoming mid-term (grade) reports. One student commented on the coordinator by saying, “She always made sure we knew what we were doing,” while another responded, “It made you more comfortable just to know that someone was watching just to make sure that you were on the right track.”

Finally, it is important to note that two of the ten student participants withdrew from their online course. While one student changed her mind and withdrew prior to the start of the online semester, the reason for the second student’s withdrawal remains unknown, as the data was limited to the amount of knowledge each student volunteered. During question five of the interview, though, this individual did clarify, “There wasn’t really a teacher, so it was difficult to keep up with it, and there was no way to make sure everything was getting done.” Perhaps the lack of a physical teacher presence was not the only reason for withdrawing from the course, but it is unquestionably worth consideration.

21st Century Skills

Focus groups were asked to discuss the possible correlation between online learning and 21st Century Skills. This guiding question was addressed in student interview question five, and interview question nine of the faculty and administrator groups (See Appendix A).

Administrators: District administrators recognized a link between online courses, 21st Century Skills, and college readiness. “I think it reflects well on a college transcript that you took an online course.” One administrator even referred to discussion within the State of New Jersey, regarding mandating the completion of one online course as a graduation requirement. In its infancy stage, it is still uncertain what will transpire with
the sharp budget cuts facing school districts. When asked if taking an online course gave students a college advantage, one claimed, “There is a big difference between posting every day on a Facebook site, and interacting and responding to questions that peers have posted, and being scored on a set of criteria.”

**Faculty:** In alignment with district administrators, the two participating faculty members concurred that successful completion of an online course is beneficial to the college transition. One person noted that most college courses are hybrids; as such, all college students are forced to work online in what was formerly a traditional classroom setting. Considering the influence on a student’s high school transcript, one faculty member reiterated concerns pertaining to district policy that prohibits out-of-district course grades from factoring into a weighted Grade Point Average (GPA). A district policy change would likely result in a more positive impact on the student’s high school transcript.

**Students:** Five of ten students reported being better prepared for the college transition, but two students asserted no noticeable impact of the online course, and two students failed to respond. Four of the five students who reported a positive connection between the online course and college, agreed that it taught time management skills that would be needed at the college level. Others agreed that the online environment provided greater independence, which they expected to receive at the college level. One student that did not accept a connection between the two stated, “There are other things that can prepare you better than that course. There is a time management issue but you can learn that in other things.”
Focus groups were asked to review the overall success of the online program and make recommendations with regard to policy changes at the district, state, and national levels. This guiding question was referenced in administrator and faculty interview questions 6, 10, and 11 and student interview questions 10 thru 12 (See Appendix A).

**Administrators:** When asked to list characteristics describing the ideal online student, administrators used terms such as “mature” and “organized.” Of those most likely to achieve online success, they emphasized self-starters who do not procrastinate completing assignments. A recent policy change to be implemented for the school year 2010-2011 pertains to student enrollment, and it comes in the form of two adjustments. First, both seniors and juniors in high school may now opt to enroll in an online class. This is a shift from the existing policy, where eligibility involved senior students only. The second adjustment requires students to complete an application, as well as interview with the VHS site coordinator. The administrators elaborated on the rationale for this policy revision, which, as it was explained, was to provide a “gateway” that will ensure the student has clear expectations of the online program. The goal was not to prohibit students from taking an online class, but rather, to better inform them and increase their likelihood of success. One administrator admitted, “We hope that the students will also police themselves and know their abilities, and their capabilities to be that person that could be the self starter and stick with it.”

It is clear that the administrative focus group felt that the decision-making process involved the site coordinator providing sound educational advice, as well as the student knowing his or her abilities and weaknesses.
With respect to instituting a New Jersey online graduation requirement, administrators anticipate its future arrival, but due to unresolved issues, they do not foresee it immediately occurring. From a more global perspective, online programs must first adopt safety nets for non-ideal online learners before mandating virtual courses. One suggested example involved students completing some virtual courses within the brick and mortar building, with the presence of a teacher on site. Although this concept may not be necessary for all kids, it was suggested as an accommodation for students with disabilities. Similarly, one administrator questioned the ability of virtual schools to assist students who, as a result of medical and personal issues, may fall behind. This comment prompted the question of online tutorial services and review classes. Summarizing the discussion, one administrator keenly remarked, "One of the advantages we've seen right now is that we have kids who are very much interested in taking these courses. It's not required, so they are there because they want to be there."

Budget constraints and the teachers' unions present two online obstacles. As per the negotiated teachers' contract with the district, the high school under study permits online enrollment only in a course that is not currently offered at the school. This stance may become more blurred as state and national budget restraints require the consideration of new options. A second potential obstacle to the online growth at this high school pertains to the VHS policy that limits each course section to four students from the same high school. So, if online enrollments increase and any one course becomes popular, this VHS policy could force district administrators to consider other virtual school options.

Faculty: In unison with the administrator focus group, faculty members recognized that VHS supplemental classes are not suited for everyone, and the most
successful students seem to have a certain level of maturity, an interest in the subject matter, self-motivation, and the ability to manage their time wisely. Also prominent was the importance of self-advocating and reaching out to the teacher to discuss situations. Referring to motivation as the best indicator of future online success, one faculty member conceded, “It’s not like that Honors kids will be a definite fit.” Both faculty members agreed the implementation of a student enrollment application would further clarify student expectations and better ensure that the right candidates are applying.

In consideration of revising graduation requirements, both faculty members agreed to the benefits of completing an online course and indicated that, at some point, they would like to see it become a prerequisite. Even though there is an online course to suit everyone, they opposed a fully online high school experience. “I think both types of learning are great, but I would love to see all types of students at some point be required to take an online class.”

The primary high school obstacle involved logistical challenges from not having enough computers, hiring additional site coordinators, and managing a much larger student population. From the national perspective, many schools struggle with poor standardized test scores, and so online learning may not be a priority for districts across the board.

One final comment involved the VHS teacher’s contractual school day, and the possibility of benefiting from an asynchronous environment. Actually, the question arose as to whether an online instructor must be physically present in the school building while teaching an online course. Additional contractual items involved duty assignments and monitoring standardized tests, as they related to unique school calendars.
Students: When prompted to identify whether or not they would recommend that
a friend or peer take an online class, the students gave mixed responses. Four students
said “yes” they would recommend the online program, four other students said “maybe,”
one said “no,” and another said “probably not.” The specific student responses were
intriguing, though, as one replied, “I know I prefer to be in a classroom versus taking a
class online, but I wouldn’t have known that unless I had taken a class online.” Another
student that recommended the program explained, “if you just log in every time and
make sure you get the work done, it’s easy.” A third claimed, “It’s manageable as long
as you’re willing to put forth a good effort.” In contrast, those who opposed the VHS
program highlighted the importance of time management skills as a key component of
success. Of those unsure, enrolling in an interesting course that correlates to a future
college major seemed to be the deciding factor.

When prompted to debate the possibilities of expanding the VHS program within
this high school, all agreed the courses should remain optional and not be a graduation
requirement. Although some recommended that only upperclassmen have the ability to
enroll in an online supplemental class, others were open to permitting all high school
students. Unanimously, though, no one agreed to a graduation prerequisite.
CHAPTER V
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

This study assessed the implementation of supplemental online courses, offered through the Virtual High School (VHS), at one suburban New Jersey public high school. Specifically, the study served as a qualitative assessment of the attitudes and perceptions of those directly involved with the supplemental Virtual High School classes, which included a select group of students, faculty, and administrators.

This chapter assists educational leaders in online course integration, including the decision-making and implementation phases. To accomplish this goal, this chapter summarizes the findings of each focus group category (i.e., students, faculty, and administrators), highlights common themes among the groups, provides conclusions that align with the study’s five guiding questions, and presents recommendations to the high school under study. Finally, this chapter outlines future research topics and contributes to existing data.

Summary of the Findings

The overarching theme behind piloting, supporting, and enrolling in an online supplemental course via the Virtual High School program resides in its breadth of curriculum offerings. This finding is consistent with Clark (2001), as cited in Blaylock & Newman, (2005) who identified that the vast majority of districts select virtual schools to supplement their existing curriculum. Faculty and administrators, alike, viewed the vast supplemental courses as a means of providing students with a greater variety from which to choose, thus offering a course that suits everyone’s needs and desires. In addition, the
range of course levels appeared beneficial, as students selected an advanced placement, honors, or college-prep level to best meet their learning styles and abilities.

The VHS selections supported this notion, as course enrollments ranged from Anatomy and Physiology, to Criminology, Engineering, and International Business. Additional online enrollments by students who opted out of participating in this study included art, music, science, and literature courses. Evidently, the 25 students that enrolled in an online supplemental course were able to select a program of study that was of personal interest, and possibly even related to their future college major and career.

All of the participants involved in this study indicated an initial excitement with the VHS courses, and 10 of the 15 participants gave an overall program approval rating that was at a letter grade of a B or better. In addition, students were successful with the online courses, as 10 of 12 courses, or 8%, were completed with a passing letter grade of a C or better.

In an attempt to identify the overall level of satisfaction with the VHS program, seven participants drew a smiley face, six drew a straight face, and one drew a frown. This symbolic representation indicates that far more people were pleased with the program than were displeased, and is consistent with VHS feedback obtained from 110 school principals following the academic school year 2005-2006, where approximately 95% said they were either 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with the quality of VHS course offerings (WestEd, 2007, p. 30). As a direct result of administrative approval, the district under study planned to continue the VHS supplemental course series during the academic school year 2010-2011; both faculty members agreed to continue their role serving as either the virtual educator or site coordinator.
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Traditional Versus Online

Although there are many similarities among traditional and virtual classrooms, online learning is undoubtedly a new experience for students. From a physical perspective, the online classroom is asynchronous, which means that students may log in from anywhere in the country, at any time of the day. The asynchronous environment creates flexibility for students, since they can participate and complete assignments during or after school. This structure also accommodates students with busy extracurricular agendas, as they can alter their schedules accordingly. This point is confirmed, as only one student reported completing assignments during the designated period of the school day. Four other seniors participated from home, and three claimed they worked from either home or school, depending on their schedule. The disadvantage of an asynchronous environment, however, is that students must be disciplined enough to manage their time and configure their day. Otherwise, assignments will be forgotten and not completed. Shepherd (2008) confirmed this notion, as he identified procrastination as a key disadvantage of the online system, indicating it is quite easy to fall behind. This research project validates that the online program required a greater need for independent learners, and as one student echoed, “There wasn’t really a teacher so it was difficult to keep up with it, and there was no way to make sure everything was getting done.”

Virtual Instructors: During the focus group interviews, an educator pointed out an advantage of the online classroom, which is its ability to “encourage constructivist learning.” This teaching philosophy is consistent with McCombs and Vakili (2005), who emphasized learner-centered principles that require utilizing best teaching practices, while also paying attention to the student’s prior experiences, heredity, interests, abilities,
and needs. Cunningham (1998) also substantiated incorporating learner-centered principals and constructivism within the e-learning environment (as cited in McCombs & Vakili, 2005, p. 1583).

Regardless of the degree to which an instructor incorporates constructivist ideas, communication is unique in the virtual classroom. Since the teacher is not physically present, students must post clarifying assignment questions to either a chat room or a discussion board, and wait for a timely response. Although 6 of 10 seniors claimed the online teacher was equally as effective as the traditional classroom teacher, 20% reported the need for a quicker response time so that they could move forward with a particular assignment. In addition, 40% indicated that the “impersonal learning” style as a program negative. Even though the data generated from the teacher focus group was consistent with Greenway and Vanourek (2006), who communicated that virtual classrooms permit students to receive more individualized instruction, the student focus group responses did not validate this argument. In fact, one student admitted the online courses were not as effective with more challenging concepts, and another reported, “There is no teacher to guide you, so either you get it or you don’t.” So, while most students felt their online teacher was knowledgeable and accommodating, it was clear that a few struggled without the physical teacher presence. The online teacher role requires ongoing assessment and evaluation, especially since Cavanaugh et al. (2009) argued that the interaction between the instructor and learner provides the most critical ingredient to a student’s online success (p. 4).

Teacher qualifications definitely have a direct impact on the overall value of instruction, so it is therefore worth reiterating some relevant facts. As reported by the
U.S. Department of Education, in its study entitled *Connecting Students to Advanced Courses Online*, 85% of VHS teachers hold master’s degrees and 19% of those also hold doctoral degrees or other additional credentials (WestEd, 2007, p. 31). The report also acknowledged that VHS strives to remain in alignment with the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* and requires that their teachers be considered highly qualified by obtaining certification in the subject area of the online course they teach. Cavanaugh et al. (2009), however, argued that online education is only now beginning to define specific credentials and skills for highly qualified online teachers.

**Curriculum:** In terms of rigor, five students reported their online courses as equally as challenging as traditional courses. In the same way, faculty and administrators reported that the online curriculum fared well as compared to the written curriculum utilized at the high school under study. In the report titled *Connecting Students to Advanced Courses Online*, the United States Department of Education performed six individual case studies of online models, one of which was the Virtual High School. Their report confirmed that VHS creates course standards based on a combination of the National Education Association (NEA) guidelines and those of its professional development program, which certifies teachers for online instruction (WestEd, 2007). In addition, the AP curriculum must be in alignment with the College Board requirements, so the expectations and objectives are essentially the same, regardless of where the course is taught. To further clarify, one faculty member claimed, “The volume of work will not be less than in a traditional class, so if anybody is taking it thinking it would be easier, there is a rude awakening.” Furthermore, “good online lessons and modules appeal to
students of all abilities and provide valid, reliable, and authentic assessments” (Oblender & Glass, 2004, p. 2).

Figure 3: Participant GPA versus VHS grade earned. This figure compares the average cumulative GPA earned at the end of students’ junior years to the average VHS final grades earned. The data consists of all students enrolled in a VHS course at the high school under study, independent of their participation in this study.

Note: Figure 3 does not include the four students who withdrew from their VHS course.

Activities and Assessments: The online design required threaded discussions in which students responded to teacher questions and constructively critiqued their classmates’ comments, both of which generated greater dialogue among the class members. Although the online courses typically integrated individual assignments and one cooperative project per semester, it placed a greater emphasis on the written element. This class structure was a new way of life, and as the virtual teacher reported, “they need to be reminded and encouraged in that process often in terms of what is expected.” In alignment with this statement, Cavanaugh et al. (2009) agreed that teachers are still needed to carefully direct instruction.
Although Cavanaugh et al. (2009) reported that "Online learning environments that are designed to use the many available collaborative communication tools can offer a more active, constructive, and cooperative experience than classroom learning," students reported frustrations with working in teams (p. 5). In fact, their primary issue completing cooperative assignments was due to communication failures with their peers, which was often a result of working across different time zones.

In summary, the online environment is unique in that both the communication and assessment output are most often via written format. This structure can prevent more creative learners from demonstrating their knowledge via visual or audio presentations, as well as pose challenges in exchanging ideas. Although some place a negative connotation with the large quantities of writing that is required, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21) emphasizes the need for students to be able to use written communication formats, which are now typically by way of technology and interactive media. The premise is that students should face this challenge in high school, so that they are better prepared for the future.

Guidance: All participants identified the VHS site coordinator as an essential component of the program. Serving as the liaison between the teacher and the student, the coordinator served in a role similar to that of a guidance counselor. An effective coordinator informs students of the program requirements and course objectives, monitors grades, assists with technology issues, and communicates with parents. Seventy percent of the students surveyed reported feeling comfortable going to the site coordinator with problems. In fact, a couple acknowledged that the site coordinator worked cooperatively with their online teacher, while another said, "It made you more
comfortable just to know that someone was watching just to make sure that you were on the right track.” Some students even indicated that the site coordinator made them feel more accountable in completing assignments, which helped reinforce discipline and time management.

**Advantages and Disadvantages**

**Advantages:** The significance of the vast curriculum offerings was validated throughout all focus group interviews. In fact, 70% of students reported course availability as the primary benefit of taking an online course. Similarly, Greenway and Vanourek (2006) clarified that families choose virtual schools for their curriculum quality, individualized instruction, flexible scheduling, and interest in technology. Cavanaugh (2009) also portrayed the virtual experience as providing positive advantages that include being student-centered, self-paced, and preventing boredom that typically occurs in a traditional setting. In addition, student focus groups articulated benefits that derived from enhanced time management skills, self-pacing, and reduced anxiety while participating during class. Although Murphy and Manzanares (2008) recognized that students may not have the same anxiety about raising their hand, they pointed out that the downside is that teachers can no longer rely on visual cues, body language, and facial expressions to check for understanding (p. 1069).

One faculty member pointed out that online education promotes constructivist learning, whereby students build upon their previous life experiences and create new meanings. This viewpoint is seen optimistically, as student learning becomes more individualized and relevant, thus more powerful.
From an administrative perspective, flexibility in scheduling students and resolving scheduling conflicts were also highlights, as was its ability to better prepare students for the college transition. Picciano and Seaman (2009) also found that administrators utilize online programs to meet the needs of specific groups of students, as well as to permit students who failed a course to take it again. These concepts, however, were not validated by this study.

Disadvantages: The chief drawback of the online program is its lack of versatility. It was noted that the “online program is not for all students” and, in fact, the brightest students were not always the most successful online. This notion implies that motivation is more of a key to success than intelligence. Faculty and administrators, alike, agreed the online structure was most appropriate for an independent learner who is motivated and a self-starter. In its report entitled Connecting Students to Advanced Courses Online, the United States Department of Education was in alignment with this theory, and classified successful online students as being self-motivated, having good time management skills, and bringing a taking-care of business attitude toward completing their course work (WestEd, 2007, p. 40). Similarly, Brenner (2007) agreed that, “The isolation of distance learning can mean that a good student will not always find success, and a student who found the distractions of the classroom created an environment in which it was impossible to learn will be able to achieve at a higher level” (p. 32). Student focus groups confirmed this theme, as 100% of the respondents agreed that online courses should remain optional and not be a graduation requirement. Their logic derived from the importance of enrolling in an online course that was directly related to their potential college major, because they felt their interest level had a direct
correlation to their level of motivation. Similarly, two students who reported they would not recommend a VHS online course to a peer also recognized the importance of time management skills as a key component of success. Their thoughts are somewhat congruent with Picciano and Seaman’s (2007) belief that students need more discipline to succeed in an online course than in a face-to-face course.

A second disadvantage concerned supervising student achievement, especially as it pertained to students with disabilities. It was reported by the administrator focus group, and confirmed by the faculty group, that one special education student experienced difficulty with the teacher. With help from the site coordinator, fortunately, the student successfully passed the course. While it is difficult to determine whether this was an isolated incident or if there is a broader problem with the online structure as a whole, it is something that administrators should remain cognizant of. It is also relevant to note that two additional special education students enrolled in an online course, but opted out of participating in this study. One of those students passed their course with a B, while the other, who was also classified as an English as a Second Language (ESL) speaker, withdrew. Like district administrators, Greenway & Vanourek (2006) were also concerned that students with limited English proficiency, visual impairments, severe or multiple disabilities, and motivational problems may experience difficulties with virtual programs. Undoubtedly, one must question whether the online structure can effectively support Special Education and ESL students, as well as differentiate for the regular education population.

Finally, the faculty focus group discussed the weighing of VHS courses within the student’s cumulative grade point average (GPA). As of the time of this study, the high
school’s existing policy stated that courses completed outside of the district would not count toward a student’s GPA. Therefore, an online advanced placement class grade would not influence the GPA, whereas an advanced placement class taken within the physical brick and mortar school would. This existing policy is perceived as a disadvantage for many of the students, and could potentially limit future online enrollments. Supplementary objections, as pointed out by the student focus groups, related to communication difficulties, completing cooperative assessments, and finishing past due assignments. Cheating, as one student noted, was also easier in the virtual setting.

Meeting Student Needs

When asked to evaluate the overall success of the VHS program, by virtue of assigning a letter grade, all research contributors reported a passing mark of a C or better. More specifically, all of the adults rated the program as an A or better, and student responses included two As, five Bs, and three Cs. Many cited curriculum opportunities, accessibility, user friendliness, and support services as key components of their favorable attitudes. The benefits of the site coordinator also tied into many responses, as the liaison was termed by administrators as a “critical” component of student success online, and 70% of the students interviewed were appreciative of the site coordinator’s efforts. In fact, one person noted, “She always made sure we knew what we were doing.” Back in 2003, Zucker and Kozma also found that VHS success was primarily due to the effort of capable and effective teachers and site coordinators (as cited in Cavanaugh, et al., 2009, p. 4).
Unfortunately, there was a recurring apprehension toward the program's ability to
differentiate learning and accommodate students with disabilities. Cavanaugh (2009)
reinforced the notion of differentiated instruction, which encourages adapting learning to
individual student needs and abilities, and claimed it is even more possible via an online
course. Although research suggests that virtual schools are serving more students with
disabilities, the degree of success and support is unknown. As online course enrollments
soar, this is indeed a primary concern for educators.

Independent of special education students, there was an overarching theme that
connected the importance of student motivation and work ethic to the ability to meet
one's needs. It seemed as though participants were implying that if they were motivated
to do the work, their needs were limited. For instance, one senior stated, "If you did the
reading, you learned." Continuing, another individual seemed to draw a connection
between motivation and interest, as it related to the overall level of learning. He said, "It
really just depended if you read every little single thing that the teacher gave you." So,
perhaps one's perception of online learning, as well as the corresponding course grade, is
not related to intelligence. Rather, it seems to correlate to the student's level of
determination, interest, motivation, and ability to work independently. Brenner (2007)
confirmed this idea, as he claimed that a good student will not always find success online.

Lastly, it is critical to note that 5 of the 25 total VHS students failed their online
course. Since only one of the five signed the required consent form to participate in this
study, it is difficult to assess where they may have struggled. The site coordinator did
clearly articulate that "At no time did our students struggle with the assessments." She
suggested, rather, that the major issue was students not doing their work. Even though
the online instructor confirmed that course failures were primarily due to a lack of motivation and production of work, without speaking with these students it would be unfair to assume that motivation is the only contributing factor.

Equally as important to note, four students withdrew from their online course at some point during the school year. The average cumulative GPA for these four students, which was calculated at the end of their junior year 2008-2009, was a 3.6673, with the highest GPA equal to 4.7301 and the lowest GPA equal to 2.3818. Of the two who volunteered to be part of this study, one withdrew before the start of school, which indicated a change of mind rather than a dislike with the program. The factors behind the other three withdrawals were not fully known, although one of the students was also identified as an English as a Second Language (ESL) speaker, which raises the question of possible language barriers.

21st Century Skills

Nine of the 14 participants supported virtual courses as a means of promoting 21st Century Skills. In fact, adults conveyed that the successful completion of an online course reflected positively on a student’s transcript, and in effect, colleges viewed online courses favorably. In addition, 50% of the senior students felt better prepared for the college transition. The rationale explaining this positive connection between an online course and college stemmed from its ability to enforce time management skills and provide greater independence that was anticipated at the college level. One student who did not accept a connection between virtual classes and college readiness stated, "There are other things that can prepare you better than that course. There is a time management issue but you can learn that in other things."
While examining college readiness, the existing transcript policy may have a negative impact on college acceptances. Specifically, the existing policy prevents courses completed at an out-of-district institution from counting toward the student’s GPA, which means that students who excel online may not receive the same rewards as those who excel in a traditional classroom. Should this policy be adjusted, successful completion of an online course would have a greater mathematical impact on the high school transcript and potentially promote more college acceptances. During the academic year 2009-2010, transcripts did not indicate that the actual VHS course was completed. This policy adjustment would also clarify transcripts and provide more beneficial information to college admissions offices.

Potential for Curriculum Policy Changes

All focus group participants were asked whether the completion of an online course should be a graduation requirement. Both administrators felt that online prerequisites would eventually become a reality, although they did not anticipate it occurring in the near future. The faculty members had similar opinions, but also provided some reassurance as to the significance of participation in both traditional and virtual learning experiences. Finally, the majority of students would recommend an online course pertaining to a future college major, and agreed that the completion of an online course should not be a graduation requirement at any high school in the nation.

District Policy Changes: At the district level, there was an immediate policy change that occurred for the academic school year 2010-2011. The adjustment was intended to provide greater online access, and better monitoring of students at the same time; therefore, the high school under study adopted two policy adjustments. First, they
permitted students in either grade 11 or grade 12 to enroll in an online course, which was contrary to their previous policy that permitted only senior students. Second, all candidates were required to complete an application and meet with the site coordinator. This phase of the policy change was intended to provide a “gateway” that would better ensure that students had clear expectations of the online program. The goal was not to prohibit students from enrolling, but rather, to enlighten them so they could make an informed decision. As per administrator and faculty perceptions, students were told that “the online program is not for everyone” and the ideal student is one that is mature, self-motivated, interested in the subject matter, and has the ability to manage his or her time wisely. This approach is consistent with Picciano and Seaman (2007) who trusted that since students need more discipline to succeed in an online course than in a face-to-face course, guidance counselors should consider and discuss items like course pacing with students and parents (p. 11).

The high school under study also implemented a second change in procedure, and now prints specific online course titles onto the student transcript. This is a change from the preceding method that identified only VHS as the course name. This clarity enhanced the student’s transcript and streamlined the college application process.

Besides financial matters, contractual union obligations and the VHS structure were the strongest barriers facing this school district. Specifically, the district under study had an agreement with the teachers’ union stating that students could enroll in an online course that was not currently taught at the high school. This policy played a role in the virtual courses that were available to students. In addition, the VHS structure permitted only four students from a particular high school to enroll in the same section of
a course. This policy meant that if VHS offered a limited number of sections of a particular course, it would be possible for them to decline student course requests. At the time of this study, this policy was not problematic; however, should the virtual program become more popular, it may become of greater concern. Finally, accepting larger numbers of online learners would pose additional technology and support challenges.

**New Jersey Policy Changes:** The United States Department of Education and the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) support the promotion of 21st Century Skills. In addition to revising its Core Curriculum Content Standards, the New Jersey Department of Education proposed implementing an online graduation course requirement and Watson et al. (2008) indicated that the New Jersey Department of Education was working with the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA) teachers' union in developing state policies for online learning (p. 98). During the difficult economic times facing the country, there was uncertainty as to where the online movement would go. Unquestionably, it is a way to promote equality for all students, regardless of one's socioeconomic status, race, or gender. Yet, the future was unclear. Perhaps the virtual classroom will become more popular as parents continue to search for the best educational opportunities available and school choice programs become more popular.

**National Policy Changes:** National curriculum policy changes are difficult to project, although it seems inevitable that online learning will become more popular, thereby forcing politicians and educators, alike, to reform the virtual school movement. Christensen et al. (2008) predicted that, by 2010 nearly 10% of all courses will be computer-based and, by 2019, about 50% of courses will be delivered online (as cited in
iNACOL, n.d.). From a more global perspective, studies show that students who have
taken AP courses in high school have a greater tendency to complete college and even go
onto graduate studies (Santoli, 2002, as cited in Shepherd, 2008, p. 288). So, if we are
trying to close the Achievement Gap and provide students with greater access to
advanced courses, then national policy changes should occur sooner rather than later.

**Summation**

The school district under study was pleased with the Virtual High School Global
Consortium Program and plans to continue the supplemental course offerings for the
academic year 2010-2011. The curriculum was equally as rigorous as the programs of
studies offered at the brick and mortar school, and the virtual instructors were
accommodating. In comparison to traditional classrooms, the assessments and activities
were unique, as they relied more heavily on written assessments and communication. In
addition, cooperative online projects posed additional challenges for students as they
worked with teammates from all over the world. These proficiencies, although
periodically difficult for students to navigate, are essential 21st Century Skills needed for
college and workplace readiness.

Although the high school under study revised its policy and now permits juniors
and seniors to participate in the VHS program, the VHS site coordinator will clearly
outline course objectives and overall program expectations. More specifically, the ideal
online student will be advertised as a self-motivated student who has the ability to work
independently. This strategy will further ensure the right candidates apply and succeed.
Furthermore, the site coordinator will continue monitoring students with special needs, to
ensure they receive appropriate accommodations.
Finally, the debate regarding the requirement of online courses continues. Even though students do not propose a prerequisite, their knowledge of the college experience and course opportunities is somewhat limited, and perhaps they will change their minds after completing a year or two of college. Regardless, virtual schools are a worthwhile opportunity for students to explore.

Conclusions

An essential component of education now includes virtual schools. Not only do they provide students with an equal opportunity for more challenging course work, they better equip our students with essential 21st Century Skills that promote an integration of technology and communication skills, and enhance creative thinking and problem-solving abilities. Although online courses require discipline and motivation on the part of the student, with the proper support students can achieve success.

Today’s students are technology natives and more adept at incorporating technology into their daily lives. Subsequently, it is up to our educational leaders to encourage students to utilize technology as more than just a socialization tool. Rather, schools should encourage students to maximize the benefits of technology that pertain to working and producing outcomes, similar to what is expected in industry. In fact, providing our students with these skills is a fundamental element of closing the Achievement Gap and increasing the United States’ competitive position in the global market. “If students are to be successfully prepared for the demands of higher education and the increasingly competitive work environment, they must have access to the right course work” (WestEd, 2007, p.3).
Picciano and Seaman (2009) projected that online learning will quite possibly reach between 5 and 6 million K-12 (mostly high school) students by the year 2016 (p. 22). For this reason, educational leaders should promote virtual school opportunities now, rather than wait for the inevitable mandate. Districts are encouraged to be leaders in the virtual school movement and to assist others in overcoming obstacles that might prohibit success.

**Recommendations**

This section seeks to offer recommendations to the high school under study, as well as to contribute to existing literature and beliefs. The following proposals are derived from the findings of this research project:

**Practice Recommendations**

The following list contains best practice suggestions for local school districts:

1. Especially at the high school level, provide online supplemental classes.
2. Especially at the high school level, remain abreast of virtual school opportunities and communicate the criteria for successful participation.
3. Encourage district faculty to become more knowledgeable of virtual school opportunities.
4. Design policies and procedures for the district-based VHS teacher to follow, which outline expectations regarding school calendar differences, contractual duty assignments, and work location.
Policy Recommendations

The following list contains curriculum policy recommendations for local school districts:

1. To generate longitudinal data, school districts should implement exit surveys of the virtual courses, whereby students complete a questionnaire upon withdrawing and/or completing an online course.

2. To generate longitudinal data, school districts should adjust their existing culminating surveys to include questions pertaining to virtual course opportunities at both the secondary and collegiate level.

3. School districts, including the high school under study, should consider permitting Advanced Placement (AP) online course grades to mathematically count toward a student’s cumulative weighted GPA.

4. School districts, including the high school under study, should consider the permission of online honors and regular level course grades to mathematically count toward a student’s cumulative weighted GPA.

5. The high school under study should pursue a virtual course graduation prerequisite, especially for those students seeking to obtain a college degree.

Research Recommendations

Educational researchers are encouraged to pursue the following research topics:

1. A research project comparing high school transcripts and college acceptances, as it pertains to online course completions at the secondary level.

2. A research project further analyzing the Virtual High School’s ability to provide appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities that are in alignment with students’ Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).
3. A research project further comparing the ability of virtual schools to accommodate various segments of the population, including students with disabilities, as well as English as a Second Language (ESL) students.

4. A research project further analyzing the effectiveness of virtual teachers, comparing their credentials and professional development opportunities to their ability to differentiate instruction and provide rigorous and relevant instruction.

5. A research project, similar to this case study, which analyzes the VHS program in other suburban districts throughout the country.

6. A research project, similar to this case study, which analyzes the VHS program in urban and rural districts throughout the country.

7. A replication of this research project within a similar New Jersey District Factor Group (DFG) J, public school district.
References


International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL). (n.d.). *Fast facts about


Appendix A

Focus Group Questions
Focus Group Greeting
(The following was read at the start of each focus group meeting.)

**Introduction**

Good morning and thank you for taking time to meet with me this morning. During the next hour or so, I would like to hear your views of the Virtual High School (VHS) online courses. I am not here to sway you in any way, or pass judgment on you, but rather to truly understand your feelings. Your individual experience, thoughts, and opinions are valuable to this research project, so I urge all of you to be honest, and not worry about offending anyone. There are no consequences for your comments, and hearing the good, as well as the bad, will allow me to better understand the overall program and make recommendations for improvement.

This paragraph was read for students only:

[We do not want anyone to feel embarrassed or afraid to share information, so the student groups have been divided by your overall experience and similarities. For instance, one group contains only students who passed a VHS course with a grade of C- or higher. Similarly, another group contains students who earned either a D or E. And finally, several of you withdrew from your VHS course. So in summary, you have much in common with the others in this room.]

**Structure**

This meeting will include approximately ten questions. The questions will be easier in the beginning, and gradually become more challenging. There is no right or wrong answer, though—only opinions, so be sure to let me know what you think. In addition, the conversation is not necessarily intended to gather consensus, so do not hesitate to disagree and/or offer unique insights.

Each question will be presented to the entire group, and although some questions may ask that everyone give an answer, other questions are optional. You may choose to stop your participation at any time.

I will be recording this session. To prevent your name or identity from being shared, I will refer to you by the number on the tent card in front of you. Please raise your hand to answer a question and participate, so that I can clearly identify who is responding.

For example, I may ask, “What is your favorite hobby?” After seeing several hands raised, I would then say, “number 1, please respond now.” This pattern would continue until all thoughts were shared.

If at any time you do not understand a question, please ask me to repeat or rephrase it.

Do you have any questions before we begin?
Focus Group Questions: Administrator

1. You will write your answers to the first two questions. Would you like to see the VHS program continue next year?

2. When texting, people add (smiley) faces to their messages to represent a variety of feelings and emotions. Using the paper in front of you, draw the face that represents your attitude toward the VHS program.

3. What prompted you to pilot the VHS program?

4. Using paper in front of you, list the advantages and disadvantages of integrating the online VHS courses?

5. In comparison to traditional courses, how rigorous is the online curriculum? How effective was the teacher? How did learning and assessments differ (i.e. project-based learning, cooperative activities, and differentiated instruction)?

6. What type of student is best suited to enroll in an online course? Do you foresee policy changes with regard to who is permitted to enroll?

7. Have you received any feedback from students, parents, or teachers regarding the VHS program? Explain.

8. How important is the guidance liaison? Parents? Support services?

9. Is there a link between online courses, 21st Century Skills and college readiness? Are students better prepared for the college transition?

10. If you were to give VHS a report card grade, what would it be? Explain. Is there room for growth? Should alternative online programs be considered? What is the ideal? What obstacles might stand in the way?

11. Should completion of an online course be a requirement at this high school? In the State of New Jersey? Nationwide?

[Summarize and clarify all participant responses.]

12. Have we missed anything?
Focus Group Questions: Faculty

1. When texting, people add (smiley) faces to their messages to represent a variety of feelings and emotions. Using the paper in front of you, draw the face that represents your experiences with the VHS program.

2. Would you like your role with the VHS program to continue next year? Please write your answer.

3. What prompted you to become involved with the VHS program this year?

4. Using the paper in front of you, list the advantages and disadvantages of integrating VHS courses?

5. In comparison to traditional courses, how rigorous is the online curriculum? How effective was the teacher? How did learning and assessments differ (i.e. project-based learning, cooperative activities, and differentiated instruction)?

6. What type of student is best suited to enroll in an online course? Would you suggest policy changes with regard to who is permitted to enroll?

7. How well did VHS meet the needs of the students? Was student support adequate? Technology? Course availability?

8. How important is the guidance liaison? Administration? Parents? Other support services?

9. What impact do online courses have on college readiness? How do online courses impact a student’s high school transcript?

10. If you were to give VHS a report card grade, what would it be? Explain. Would you like to see the VHS program expanded? What is the ideal? What obstacles might prevent future growth?

11. Should completion of an online course be a requirement at this high school? In the State of New Jersey? Nationwide?

12. Have we missed anything?
Focus Group Questions: Student

1. For questions 1-3, please use the paper in front of you to record your responses. What are your post-high school plans for next year (college, work, etc.)?
2. Where did you most frequently complete your assignments (school or home)? Please write your answer.
3. When texting, students add (smiley) faces to their messages to represent a variety of feelings and emotions. Using the paper in front of you, draw the face that represents your experiences with the VHS program.
4. Think back to this time last year when you began selecting your classes for your senior year. Why did you decide to enroll in an online course?
5. Has the completion of an online course better prepared you for the college/work transition?
6. Using the paper in front of you, develop a list of pros and cons of enrolling in a VHS online course? Identify the biggest advantage/disadvantage?
7. In comparison to traditional courses, how difficult is the online curriculum? How effective was the teacher? How did tests and activities differ (i.e. project-based, cooperative, and differentiated instruction)?
8. If you were to give VHS a report card grade, what would it be? Explain. Was student support adequate? Technology? Course availability?
9. How well did this high school meet your VHS needs, including technology, guidance, and support services?
10. Would you encourage other students to enroll in a VHS course? If so, what advice would you give them?
11. Would you encourage the administration to expand the program? If so, how?
12. Should completion of an online course be a requirement at this high school? In the State of New Jersey? Nationwide?

[Summarize and clarify all participant responses.]

13. Have we missed anything?
Appendix B

Focus Group Transcriptions
Focus Group Responses: Administration

Research Question 1
Facilitator: Would you like to see the VHS program continue next year?
Administrator 1: Yes.
Administrator 2: Yes.

Research Question 2
Facilitator: When texting, people add (smiley) faces to their messages to represent a variety of feelings and emotions. Using the paper in front of you, draw the face that represents your attitude toward the VHS program.
Administrator 1 😊
Administrator 2 😊

Research Question 3
Facilitator: What prompted you to pilot the VHS program?
Administrator 1: Well, I went to a program at Hackettstown High School who had the VHS and I was intrigued as a way to enhance our curriculum and give kids offerings that we would not be able to offer here. At the time, there was a specific course that I was interested in seeing if we could offer through VHS that we weren’t able to offer here, but was becoming more and more popular. And, I was intrigued by the situation and thought that it could be expanded to help our future needs. It turns out that when we looked at going to an eight period day it might be something that could get us through at least the beginning years of kids who had pretty much mapped out their schedule based on a nine period day for four years, and then of course we cut them back a period. And we had some seniors who had left maybe some elective required courses till their senior year and were going to find it difficult to take as a result of an eight period day. We didn’t do that, but it is still something that will be looked into in the future.
Two reasons - One, we had looked at other districts and some of the offerings and one of the things that they were offering their students was a virtual program. There was talk at the state about it being a requirement and so we looked at this. And finally, with the talk of the possible eight period day, we looked at it as a way to possibly allow students to take required courses online. And then, of course, the obvious that more and more students are operating in that web-based world now. I looked at Hunterdon Central and their online program and I spoke to their director and I also spoke to three teachers. And then I spoke with an individual at Hopewell Valley Regional, who doesn’t use the program but they had looked at it. So, I found out why they didn’t go with the program. The folks at Hunterdon Central reported success, although their model is very different from ours. They use the media center - there is a portion of the media center which is very large for just the Virtual High School, so it is actually a classroom and there is a teacher that is assigned to the Virtual High School the entire day. So, it is very different program. We also looked at three virtual programs. The VHS that we went with was the one that we felt was the best, because first of all, the largest number of districts in New Jersey found that it had not just required offerings but it also offered AP courses, as well, which we thought would appeal to our stronger students. And then, the other two programs - there’s the Ocean Monmouth Consortium. It didn’t really have the same offerings. And we looked at one out of Nebraska. I can’t think of the name, but ultimately we went with this one. And also, the cost, too. That was a determining factor for us, as well.
Research Question 4

Facilitator: Using the paper in front of you, please list the advantages and disadvantages of integrating the online VHS courses?

Table 8

Administrator Opinions of VHS Pros and Cons

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<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administrator 1</td>
<td>1. Enhance curriculum</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Resolve scheduling conflicts</td>
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<td>3. Ease transition to a possible change in scheduling practices</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4. Good experience for college</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administrator 2</td>
<td>1. Flexible scheduling and students can use this for required courses</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. 21st Century Skills</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Enhance course catalog</td>
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<td>4. Savings in staff who teach</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5. Enhance reputation in the State</td>
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Facilitator: In comparison to traditional courses, how rigorous is the online curriculum? How effective was the teacher? How did learning and assessments differ?

Administrator 1: I don’t know so much about the content and the delivery of the subject matter at all, but I do know that one of the concerns I have is tracking student achievement and dealing with unsuccessful students. You have a kid who decides to take an elective required VHS course, and the next thing you know they are failing, what do you do? So, it would be easy to fire in a program that’s untested for parents. So, I do become concerned with that. I haven’t heard anything good, bad, or indifferent about the delivery or the subject area.

Administrator 2: Just in the experience in working with the site coordinator, it varies. The qualifications are unquestioned because you’ve got teachers from – we had a professor in Finland. We had a professor out in the Midwest. The qualification issue is in there but the issue that’s there is the amount of independence they allow for their students in the class. We had five students who were really struggling with VHS, where they weren’t completing the work; they weren’t doing the assignments; they weren’t logging in the time they needed to and it just so happened that those professors didn’t follow-up with our site coordinator. So, if it hadn’t been for her going on and checking herself, we never would have known those students were struggling. So, some of them are a bit lax about student performance in the class until the very end, so there is an accountability issue there.

Facilitator: They have more of a sink or swim attitude?

Administrator 2: Correct, and where some were very involved in the fact that they would contact our site coordinator directly about performance in the class, and then she would follow-up with them. That’s an issue where – and that’s something you need to be VHS, where you don’t see that here in a traditional program. I would say that was the biggest challenge with the program, and if we had not had such a diligent site coordinator, those students probably would have, as you said, sunk. Four of the five wound up doing rather well. We had one student this year who failed a course. With regard to the rigor, I only know one course, the AP Art History course because that’s where we had a struggle this year. That course is as rigorous, if not more rigorous, than what we would have if we had it here at Ridge. Partially because they don’t get choice of the...
pieces of art to look at, where in an AP Art History class I looked at, at Montgomery, those students have a choice. So, it's very difficult - that's why our student struggled. He was given this piece and that was it, he had not choice in terms of choosing another piece. So, I don't know about the content of the other courses, all I can tell you is that the syllabi of the courses looked very similar to what we would have offered. For instance, the two Science electives we eliminated, they offer. And so, they looked very similar to the course we offered here.

Administrator 1: In terms of what's on paper, it looks good. It's no more rigorous than what we have here. Is it delivered in that same capacity? I'm not sure. Certainly on paper it looks good.

Facilitator: And how about methods of instruction?

Administrator 2: The very nature differs. It's all threaded discussions and their posts, and it's asynchronous, so for those students it's a whole different way of life, so to speak. Their academic life is very different online. That's why administrator one may have listed this as a weakness, because if you don't have a student who is independent, they'll really struggle in this environment. They are expected to go on and post - most classes there was a requirement. For instance, that students post three to four times per week; to respond to a question that the professor posted; and then there is usually a writing piece. It's very writing heavy. In fact, it's more writing heavy than you would see in a traditional class because that's the only medium. There is no other medium, so that's why the struggles of using a web-based instruction delivery system where there is no verbal component, there is no oral component. There really isn't a chance to exhibit any other strength, other than writing. That's, I would say, a weakness.

Research Question 6

Facilitator: What type of student is best suited to enroll in an online course? Do you foresee policy changes with regard to who is permitted to enroll?

Administrator 1: It's a self starting student, someone who is not going to put things off. They have to stay on top of it, and that's one of the things we deal with. We constantly worry about those kids falling through the cracks that aren't doing what they're supposed to and not having good communication. I think a program, in order to be
successful, administrator number two alluded to this, and that is that you have to have a diligent supervisor. And, we do. We have someone who stays on top of it and looks out for these kids, but yeah, I wouldn’t recommend it for all students. I do put in one of the advantages as it’s a good experience for college because a lot of colleges are moving to more online instruction, certainly in submission of work and stuff like that. We think that it’s a good thing, but I’ll tell you something, I think it takes a student at this level to be a more mature student—someone who stays on top of things, organized, because you can get lost pretty easily.

Facilitator: Are there any policy or procedural things that should be put in place to encourage the right kind of student?

Administrator 1: Definitely! I think that we’re in that process of figuring out what type of student would be best qualified for that.

Administrator 2: You know, one of the things we did in the first year, obviously, which we’re coming to an end. We didn’t have any criteria in place, and we just opened up to any senior who had room in their schedule, essentially. We wanted to see how many people were interested. This coming year we’ve learned that we do now have an application process where the site coordinator, and I don’t know how long or how reasonable this is, but for now the site coordinator is interviewing every single person that applies to the program—filling out an application, and a very brief interview making sure they understand what is expected of them. You have to fill the application out why you want to take the course, and she’s not denying anybody—nobody is being denied from the program—but it’s a gateway. There were a couple people who were strongly encouraged not to take the course because they expressed interest because it seemed like it would be very easy, and it’s not. Obviously, administrator one expressed that you have to be independent. So year one, no, but now year two we have an application process in place.

Administrator 1: And I think as the kids, as the word gets out to the students of the rigor, maybe they’ll start to say ‘ok, that’s not for me.’ So, we hope that the students will also police themselves and know their abilities, and their capabilities to be that person that could be the self starter, and stick with it.
Research Question 7

Facilitator: Have you received any feedback from students, parents, or teachers regarding the VHS program? Explain.

Administrator 2: I have not gotten anything directly. In fact, it’s odd. It’s a brand new program at the district and I have not heard one thing from a parent. The other thing I’ve heard is through the site coordinator, and again, I hate to keep using this one case but the one student who was struggling – the parents were fully supportive of us holding his preverbal feet to the fire, and saying, look you didn’t login once. You would fail this course like you would any other. If you didn’t show to class everyday, what would we do? Right, you know, you wouldn’t pass the class, so I would say there has been support from parents. Not every grade that a student has earned is an A. Some students have gotten – in fact, I looked at the breakdown from the last semester, and it’s pretty much a bell curve. There are some Cs and Bs mixed in. The expectation isn’t that every student gets an ‘A’ in the class, because it is so rigorous. I have not heard any complaints from parents, which I’m surprised about, actually. Especially from those students who got the C or ‘B’ because some of them were Honors students who weren’t getting Cs and Bs here.

Administrator 1: I think the parents are looking to expand some of the offerings, not the VHS, but what we allow. We have, sort of an agreement with the teacher’s association about what courses we will allow kids to take online. Basically, if it’s offered here in a classroom, we won’t allow it. It’s an agreement we have with the BTEA, in order to get their support for the program. But otherwise, no, I haven’t heard really much at all. But I think when we started to talk about altering our scheduling day, then more and more parents were talking about, for instance, ‘could we take an art elective via VHS?’. So, we have to dance around that issue sometimes. I find it can be interesting at times.
Research Question 8

Facilitator: How important is the guidance liaison? Parents? Support services?

Administrator 1: Extremely important. I think, without that you lose all monitoring of the program. Every school that I’ve talked to about VHS has a very strong person in place that monitors the kids—goes on and takes a look at the administrative side of it. How are the kids doing? What’s their achievement? And I think that if you lost that—if there wasn’t someone who was able to look at this kid who struggled at their progress, and I understand they jumped on it early, so we were able to avoid a whole bunch of problems. You don’t want a senior who is walking in May and you find out that they just failed a required course online and now they’re not graduating. That person is very, very—plus, the technical aspect of it. Making sure that computers are up and running, and the logon sites are current and that kids can get on, and we have the ability to do that. And I haven’t heard anything about not being able to do that, so the technical part of it has worked out very well. There have been some issues in some districts with that, but I think VHS has worked with those districts and has kind of kept things together. We’re good.

Administrator 2: They require us to have a site coordinator. We couldn’t have the program without it, so I can’t imagine not having someone who is going in and checking the grades and communicating with teachers because we do have reaching out to the teachers, at times—especially when there’s a question about a grade. Yeah, I think it’s critical. Without it, you have no oversight at all. It would be the equivalent of not having a supervisor or administrator and working with staff.

Facilitator: How about the support services from VHS itself?

Administrator 2: When I think of support, I think of special ed support. There is no special ed support at all. Now, as a district we can’t even make any modification based on an IEP because it is another teacher teaching the program. So, that’s a bit rough. Now this year, we didn’t have any special ed students taking the classes but that would be something going in that they would have to be aware of. In terms of technical support, there is a tremendous level of technical support. Administrator one said that we haven’t had any technical issues this year, but Mr. Clark, Warren Clark who is the Director of VHS, has reached out to me twice this year just to check on how things are going, which I thought was great. And
we reported success and he asked about our enrollments and our plan for the future, but there is a tremendous level in terms of technical support. In fact, there is a 24-hour number once the program is up and running. I don’t know who is calling at two in the morning, but there is a support number.

Administrator 1: And I think the site supervisor, as far as support for the kids – if the kids have a question – I think they feel very free to go and visit with our supervisor and explain their problem, and I think she is able to help them see through what they need to do. I think the support, in general outside of accommodating learning disability support, is great. As far as that goes, special needs students – I don’t know that that’s been addressed and is really nonexistent at this point. We wouldn’t even know what form that would take. It would be an interesting thing to come up with in the conclusion, if someone was doing a doctoral thesis or something.

Research Question 9

Facilitator: Is there a link between online courses, 21st Century Skills and college readiness? Are students better prepared for the college transition?

Administrator 1: One of the advantages I have is that it’s a good experience for college. I know with certain students that I’m associated with, they did a great deal of learning online – reading and doing a lot of research, a lot of submitting papers or even to the point where they’re taking tests online. So, it’s interesting. Yeah, I think this is something that colleges are looking for – kids that have this experience. I think it reflects well on a college transcript that you took an online course.

Administrator 2: It does link to 21st Century Skills. In fact, I wrote that as an advantage down the road, the State, I think I mentioned this earlier, is still looking at requiring districts to graduate their students with one online course. And so, that grew out of the movement – the 21st century skill movement – which is something that, in fact, was a guiding force in all the core content standard revisions. So, it does align nicely with that. Of course, the problem is that we have a small sample size right now. So, it’s hard for us to say that we’re addressing 21st Century Skills. Does the program address it? Sure, because online instruction is being delivered, but it’s for such a small sample size that I wouldn’t say we’re necessarily a success.
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there in meeting 21st Century Skills because of the sample size. Now, we meet it in other areas. We integrate it in other courses, but for this particular concept...

Facilitator: Do you think it gives them an advantage?

Administrator 2: I do, because it is such a different medium. And I think a lot of students go in thinking, I’m on Facebook - I’m on this forum - it will be easy for me to transition. It’s not. We keep stressing, it’s rigorous. There is a big difference between posting everyday on a Facebook site and interacting and responding to questions that peers have posted, and being scored on a set of criteria. I think that it gives them a huge leg up, especially if they are going to a competitive school.

Administrator 1: I also feel that it’s a great advantage. I think that anything that you can put into your repertoire is an advantage, whether you use it or not. But like I said, I think the colleges are moving more toward those types of skills, too, and I’m hoping that there is some type of program that could allow these kids to take courses -- or require them to take courses. That would solve a lot of problems for us. There may be a time where a good part of our curriculum was delivered online.

Facilitator: What kinds of problems do you think it might solve?

Administrator 1: Scheduling problems -- conflicts -- kids wanting to do more beyond what high school offers. I think that more and more with budget restraints we’re going to see high schools become less and less comprehensive, hurting areas of art and electives in all areas. And I think that possibly it could help us pick up and fill some gaps that we’re going to see along those lines. It’s one thing to have 25 students involved in a program, but it will be another one to have 1800-1900 kids involved. It’s going to take on a different face, I’m sure, and we might all be gray or hairless but you know, like anything else, it’s going to be painful to make the transition. I hope it doesn’t go the way of the metric system, but we’ll see what happens.
Facilitator: If you were to give VHS a report card grade, what would it be? Explain. Is there room for growth? Should alternative online programs be considered? What is the ideal? What obstacles might stand in the way?

Administrator 1: I don’t know that I’m in the best position after one year, and where we are now, and my participation in this isn’t as great as administrator number two or the supervisor, but I think that would be a better question for the site supervisor. My feedback from everyone has been that I think I would give it an A only because of the issue of tracking kids and making sure that they’re all on board. Administrator number two mentioned about a student who may not have tracked as well as we should if the supervisor wasn’t a bit more assertive than the professor teaching the course. I think that’s the only reason, but otherwise I think we’re doing well.

Administrator 2: Well, we brought them in for an online program that’s taught by certified staff – certified in the area that they’re teaching – they offer a tremendous level of support… I would say that I give them an A. The only reason I wouldn’t give them the A is I think they haven’t resolved that support issue for students that may have some disabilities – how they would make some accommodations. There is that sink or swim mentality there and they are very up front about it – that students need to be independent. The other reason I wouldn’t give it an A is because they limit the number of students who can take a particular course – that’s a big problem for us. We could never get to an 1800 because right now they limit us to the number of students that can take the program. We only get 50 seats. That’s a big problem. That’s based on how many teachers we offer up to teach a section. We have a teacher at the middle school teaching one section through their program. That bought us 25 seats, so that’s how we get more seats in a class. So, it’s actually not a cost savings, when you look at it in the long run, unless we start to grow and they start to discount seats. That’s another problem. But the program now – A – because I’m a stickler.

Facilitator: Would you consider other programs or are you satisfied with this one?

Administrator 2: I think if the budget leads us to a point where we need to start offering required classes, then yes, because right now there are too many constraints on the number of seats. We’re very happy with it now, and as long as it stays to about 50 to even 100 students, but if
we start to grow – unless they change the parameters of the program – we’re going to have to look at other programs.

Administrator 1: Another policy that VHS has is that they will not allow more than four students from the high school into any one section of a course. So, if we have 16 students who want to take a specific course, we have to hope that there are at least four sections being run through VHS which means that they’re able to get enough teachers to teach those courses and kids to sign-up to make that possible. But if we’re the only ones taking it, then we would have a problem. That would be something that we may ask VHS to change, or they may have to change because there is such an overwhelming demand. I imagine there will be competition in the future, if this continues to grow. Capitalism will take over and those who think that this is something that will be profitable for them will offer it. I’m not too worried about that part – that part will probably take care of itself as more and more high schools start to offer more and more opportunities online. I don’t know how far down that road it’s going to go, but I don’t see in the future teachers teaching from home because I don’t think we want to lose the whole social aspect of the high school experience. I can see that happening more and we have seen it happen more at the post-secondary level. It’s something that I guess I would have to get used to, but I’m not sure if that’s what we would see.

Research Question I1

Facilitator: Should completion of an online course be a requirement at this high school? In the State of New Jersey? Nationwide?

Administrator 1: I think it should be – eventually – yes. I don’t think that we’re ready for it, quite yet. I think to transition to it and get the kids used to it, but I think the kids coming to us now have the computer skills to be able to do it. You’re still looking at a big motivation factor – you’re looking at the human part of it – and will work. But I think as far as the technology and the framework of online courses, it’s there and can be very productive. It would be very difficult for some students. I think, to learn in this manner - and for some, maybe impossible. We will have to take a look at that, too. I hesitate to say too much of it being required, and have to be required with training wheels – we would have to have some built-in safety nets for kids - that may have to be done in the classroom situation, and oversaw by a classroom teacher, but still interactive.
Administrator 2: Yes, I do think it should be required and I echo Administrator one’s sentiments. We need to work out how it becomes the least restrictive environment, you know, if we want to include the special ed population and students who (somehow) may not be prepared for an online course – we’ve got to develop a plan, if that’s at all possible. It may be that some students just can’t function in this environment, so thereby you can’t make it a least restrictive. So, it may never be something that’s a graduation requirement for every student. There may be an alternate means of meeting that requirement down the road. We tend to be on the leading edge a little bit, unlike 8-10 schools in the state, and so we would be ready, I suppose, but I still don’t know how we would work out the special ed and the students who would struggle in this environment.

Administrator 1: I also think that the favorable look that colleges give a transcript with this on it is going to help our district, with students who are very much college oriented, to look toward doing that. I think that if we can convince the kids, and the colleges of course through their practice will convince them, that this is something really good, to show - that you can be successful in an online course – it will enhance your ability to get into a top tier college - it may catch on a little bit. I think that when we get below that average line, we could struggle.

Facilitator: Have you had any feedback from colleges that they look at this a certain way when it’s on a college transcript?

Administrator 1: I think informally we’ve been told that they look at it as a positive thing.

Administrator 2: The transcripts now list the Virtual High School and it lists the title of the class, but we note with an asterisk that the course wasn’t taken onsite – that it’s an online course.

Administrator 1: Most high schools do that same thing, and the colleges recognize that. We had a program here a couple weeks ago, with college admissions officers, and they say that they all look at it favorably – that a kid has taken an online course. And, more importantly, was successful at it. If you take it and you’re not so successful - it’s like anything else – they’re not so happy about it. I think they look at it generally very favorable.

Facilitator: Do you see the blended courses as being a bridge or a middle ground?
Administrator 2: Yes, but it was touched on earlier – you still don’t resolve the issue. If we’re moving to offer more courses online, are they taught by folks working in the district, district staff, or are they taught by professors contracted through Virtual High School. And that becomes an association issue – that’s another big barrier – a big obstacle to figure out because if that is the bridge, which it may be. I don’t think it is, I think having a Moodle as a small component of a class is not making the leap – you still have an instructor with traditional assessments. So, I think that’s a big leap to make. I don’t think it’s. But then it does bring up, it brings the question, well if it is are we saying that teachers will now stay home and teach courses and students will not even come in for part of the day? So, that’s another issue there that has to be resolved and that’s probably not the direction of this particular questionnaire.

Research Question 12

Facilitator: Have we missed anything?

Administrator 1: It’s at such an infancy stage at this point for us. We’ll see at the end of the year and I imagine that as we go through – when we starting bring more and more kids into it – we’ll probably discover more and more issues. For instance, if we have a regular student who falls behind for whatever reason, what are the opportunities for that kid to make up or how could we provide tutorial services for kids who are struggling in that particular class, as we get into the more complicated issues. But otherwise, we’ve been pretty basil with the courses we’ve allowed the kids to take. If we started getting into the advanced math or sciences, it could get complicated, so we have to be careful about that. Baby steps - I think that if we go too fast with this, it will turn too many off. We have to really take baby steps. We’ll see.

Administrator 2: The only thing I would include with this - the program is the same as it was this year in terms of enrollments. Our enrollments are identical for next year. The only thing I would say is that the students in the program next year probably belong there more than some of the students did this year. So, it will be interesting to track grades in those classes from before. And a couple more advanced classes from before. We have a student taking Veterinary Science, for instance, which is what I would think is a more advanced class but their only requirement was a biology class. But, it will be interesting to see the combination of student and the courses being
taken as people become more confident. And there will be juniors now taking it, too.

Administrator 1: And I think one of the advantages we’ve seen right now is that we have kids who are very much interested in taking these courses. It’s not required, so they are there because they want to be there. I think some students that even thought they wanted to be there in the past might have wanted to be there for the wrong reason – thinking it was an easy out for a course. I think once they realize this is serious stuff – this isn’t just voodoo out there – we will start to weed out kids that were there for the wrong reason. But if we make it required, we’ll be opening up a whole different can of worms.
Focus Group Responses: Faculty

Research Question 1

Facilitator: When texting, people add (smiley) faces to their messages to represent a variety of feelings and emotions. Using the paper in front of you, draw the face that represents your experiences with the VHS program.

Faculty 1 😊

Faculty 2 😊

Research Question 2

Facilitator: Would you like your role with the VHS program to continue next year?

Faculty 1: Absolutely! I love what I’ve been doing with the Virtual High School. I love the format of instruction; I like having everything central on the computer and being able to interact with the kids and evaluate everything in one place is great from an organizational standpoint. It seems (to me) to be fairly easy for the kids to follow and for me to keep up-to-date with them. This time I had a rather large class and it has still been pretty easy to keep up with interaction with them when necessary. I just really enjoyed the format of online learning.

Faculty 2: I would definitely like my role to continue. If you would have asked me this in October or November, I probably would have said something different. I think the reason for that is because in the beginning of the year, I felt unprepared for what VHS was going to look like at [this] high school. And I’ve done a lot of work this year to make myself more prepared for next year, and the criteria for student involvement and making sure we have the right students. So, I really have enjoyed it and I see a lot of benefit for our students; they really do like the courses they are taking; it’s not for everybody and I think that was something that was not communicated effectively last year when we were enrolling students into this program. So, I really have liked my work a lot and I definitely think it’s something that is going to be more in the future because it is online learning and has great benefits. So, I would definitely like to continue it for next year.
Research Question 3

Facilitator: What prompted you to become involved with the VHS program this year?

Faculty 2: It just sounded like a really exciting opportunity. I really like to try anything that is new and exciting, and the technology aspect of it really appealed to me. I just thought it sounded like something that would really be great for our students, and I just wanted to be part of it. And then I took that summer program and learned a lot about it, and that's kind of what drew me to it originally.

Facilitator: And how was it communicated to you? Where did you see it? Was it a posting?

Faculty 2: I had learned about it through department meetings, saying that this would be offered to our students next year in terms of scheduling. I didn't really think much of it, except that this was something that I could possibly introduce to my students and encourage them to sign-up for it, if it was appropriate for them. And then, I had spoken to my supervisor about it who had told me more about the program; I went on the website and learned more about it, and then it was posted that this position was available.

Faculty 1: I initially remember seeing the job posting and it was right up my alley. I just received a degree in online teaching and learning, and was looking for opportunities to actually pursue that on a grander scale. I was thrilled to see the poster come across and I just jumped at it.

Facilitator: And what is it that you're teaching, exactly?

Faculty 1: I teach a technology and multi-media course, so it's a lot of research and multi-media production. The kids end up putting together a full presentation with video, sound, text. It's high school but there are actually some eighth grade students. I would say 8 thru 12. I have a number of seniors, but this semester in particular, I have a few eighth graders that are in (I think) GNT programs. Some of the courses are open to eighth graders.

Facilitator: And how many students do you have?

Faculty 1: This year, I must have about—must be about 22. And the first semester, by the end, I had four. It started out small and was only four—it's actually more work with more students, obviously, but much richer in terms of interaction.
Research Question 4

Facilitator: Using paper in front of you, list the advantages and disadvantages of integrating VHS courses.

Table 7

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<tr>
<th>Faculty Opinions of VHS Pros and Cons</th>
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<td><strong>Pros</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty 1</td>
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<td>1. offer courses not otherwise available</td>
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<td>2. flexibility</td>
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<td>3. scheduling (take a course that might not fit in schedule)</td>
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<td>4. addresses different learning styles</td>
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<td>5. teaches/encourages 21st Century Skills</td>
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<td>6. students interact with students outside of their demographic</td>
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<td>7. unique learning opportunity</td>
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<td>8. encourages constructivist learning</td>
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<td>Faculty 2</td>
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<td>1. exposure to courses outside of Ridge</td>
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<td>2. exciting material</td>
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<td>3. promotes greater independence</td>
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<td>4. opportunities to meet other students around the world</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. not for all students</td>
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<td>2. courses not weighted in GPA (Honors or AP)</td>
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Research Question 5

Facilitator: In comparison to traditional courses, how rigorous is the online curriculum? How effective was the teacher? How did learning and assessments differ?

Faculty 1: In terms of teaching, a lot more time can be dedicated to facilitating the process and actually interacting with students on an individual basis. It just seems for some reason, even though I’m with kids all the time in school, I find myself reaching out when necessary to kids in the VHS class more regularly. Maybe it has something to do with the way that I’m managing or seeing their work come in, and when I know where they need a little bit of encouragement. And also, the class discussions— I spend a lot of time encouraging that process. The online learning relies heavily on class discussion, which what I’m finding with the high kids right now is that they need a lot of— I don’t think they are used to participation in that way - they need to be reminded and encouraged in that process often in terms of what’s expected. In that regard, it’s a lot of managing questions as they come in - trying to be very timely in responding to student inquiries because I know that they’re asking a question and waiting to hear from me before they might go on. So, I spend a good deal of the day popping into the course to check what’s going on and just encouraging the time management aspect because the kids— especially with the discussions — I want them to start their participation early so they have time to interact with their peers which I believe is a very important part of the process, as opposed to just thinking they are going to hand everything in at the end of each week because most everything is assigned by the week. So, I would say that covers a lot of the management.

Facilitator: Did you find that they expected you to be accessible and available to them all the time?

Faculty 1: You know, it’s interesting. I get a lot of questions— there is a private discussion area where the kids will contact me directly. I do get a lot of questions there. I think I’ve spent so much time in that area and that’s always the first thing that I look for that I’m sure they’re hoping for a quick response, but I think they’re probably pleasantly surprised. You know, the way they work too, I think a lot of times they might work during a period of time in school, and I don’t know that they necessarily then go home and keep checking for this response. I’m sure it’s always there for them when they look for it. But I think they’re finding that if they post it, the next time they do manage to look, there is a response. So, to answer your question, yeah, I believe they are hoping and relying on that. It’s important to them in that they sometimes feel that they can’t move on, but they seem to get the reply quick enough to move forward.
Facilitator: And how did the assessments or the structure of the course differ from what you might teach in school?

Faculty 1: Well, it's interesting because the course that I teach was actually developed previously. A lot of the courses - the curriculum and the assignments - everything is in place. I might enhance it a bit, so most of the assignments and things were there. To answer the differences, I probably really try to evaluate work quicker to get responses to kids because at that point they are hanging on. Their grades are essentially - current grade averages are due every two weeks - so as far as the grading aspect, I think it's pretty ongoing. The discussion part - I'm constantly aware of what the discussion is to either monitor or provide feedback, because the presence as an instructor is very important that they see that I'm continually there. But as far as the assignments go, I've added certain things. The kids are doing multi-media presentations. I think when the course started they submitted, essentially, their final PowerPoint and I've encouraged them to submit it in a way that it was a presentation to their peers in their peers could all see their final products. So, it all involved them recording more voice narration and things like that, and possibly taking a screen cast of their whole final presentation. So by the time they submitted it, they felt that they were presenting to their peers even though it was online and not - ok, we start presentations today in class, I have to encourage the kids interact and provide feedback to each other in that case, so that they know their presentations don't seem...

Facilitator: So, do you feel that you've built a sense of community or class presence?

Faculty 1: And that was one of the things that was much easier in this class of 22, then the first semester when there were 4; that was like pulling teeth. And that group, I think, felt more like they were just handing in the assignments. This group, because there were more kids, definitely feel they are going through something together. Even things like the off topic area, like the social area in the course, got a lot of activity in this class where when there were only four kids, it was much more contrived.

Facilitator: In comparison to traditional courses, how does it compare in terms of rigor?

Faculty 2: Well, I think it depends because there are some VHS courses that are categorized as Honors courses and there are some that are categorized as AP courses, so I think that some students - in fact, one of my students this year had signed-up for a course and he was unaware that it's considered through VHS to be an Honors course. Perhaps he didn't really look into it when he signed-up. So when I met with a couple of students, one student said that his coursework was pretty manageable and not too rigorous. And
the other one said that mine is much different from yours – it's way more intensive because I'm in an Honors class and I didn't realize that. Unfortunately, students who are taking Honors or AP courses – their course level can be indicated on their transcript, but they don't receive any weight for that. Where here, if a student takes an Honors or AP class, that grade is weighted. But for VHS purposes, the decision was made that for students who are taking an AP course, that grade does not get factored into their GPA under a weighted grade. So, I believe that – that is a discussion that we've also had with the Director of Curriculum of Instruction because that might deter some students from signing-up to take AP Computer Science. Why would they take the AP course if they're not going to get the AP weight?

Facilitator: And that determination was made at the district level?

Faculty 2: Correct. I think it's been considered, possibly to change that policy. But as for next year it has not been changed. But, I do see that some students will take it regardless of the weight; they want to take the class and learn about it, but there are some students that say that will actually hurt me because I could have taken a different course that would have been weighted. So, why would I take a VHS course when I can take AP Euro at Ridge and have it weighted? So, that in terms of the curriculum has been a big difference that some students were maybe not as familiar with what the requirements were going to be in the course syllabus – what they were going to be asked to do. I don't think they did enough research – the group that went through this year – about what their classes would require and the level of the curriculum either.

Facilitator: In terms of the courses themselves, do you feel that an Honors course offered through Virtual High School would be equivalent to an Honors course offered on campus?

Faculty 2: I don't know if I could fully say that without – because I'm not 100 percent sure because some of the students were taking - you know, we don't really have any Honors half year courses, with the exception of Sociology which is new this year, too. So, it's like a half year elective, so would I say that Honors Sociology would match up to their Honors Marine Bio? I don't know but I do think that, at least for the AP courses, they are following the AP curriculum. So, clearly they should be matching up.

Facilitator: And you saw a clear distinction between the regular level and the Honors level online?

Faculty 2: Simply from the one student’s feedback, but this was just an isolated situation. I would have to do more research and talk to more students.
Facilitator: Do you have any sense as to how effective the teachers were?

Faculty 2: The teachers that I have ever reached out to, or that have reached out to me, have been fantastic – truly fantastic. They have been wonderful to work with; very accommodating. And reaching out to me if there is ever a concern or if the student hasn’t logged-in, or if the student seems to have some issues with this, can you follow-up with the student. So, they’ve been great. I have had just once, and it was just this semester, a student who has an IEP who has been having – she did not have this problem in the fall – has been having difficulty with having her accommodations met with this specific teacher. So her case manager, myself, VHS, the curriculum manager at VHS…to really try and help this student as much as we can. That was something that we had to deal with.

Facilitator: And do you have any sense of how the learning or assessment differed from on campus?

Faculty 2: Obviously they are expected to participate in a way that they are not pretty comfortable participating, which is responding to discussions online, giving feedback to other students, and those types of things. I think it’s really out of the box for a lot of our students, but at no time did our students struggle with the assessments. At no time was I dealing with students that ‘I just don’t know how to do this.’ The major problems that I dealt with were students that were just not doing their work. It was never that the students couldn’t figure out how to navigate through the course – it’s very user friendly. If any student had a problem uploading – I did talk to one student and I reached out to their teacher, and we figured it out. And that was one situation. The only times I had problems were the students who were just not doing anything. That was the biggest challenge.

Research Question 6

Facilitator: What type of student is best suited to enroll in an online course? Would you suggest policy changes with regard to who is permitted to enroll?

Faculty 2: Well, here’s the thing. You know, a lot of times I think beforehand we hand this discussion last year when it was just starting as far as who would
be a good fit for this. And it’s really not – I guess maybe we thought it was the student that was in Honors and AP classes would be a good fit. You know, pretty motivated – dealing with the high level of curriculum, and that’s actually not the case. I have a couple of students who are in Honors and AP classes who are doing nothing in VHS, so I don’t think that there is actually one kind of student that would best fit. I think the student has to be self-motivated and really have an interest in the material. I actually have a student who has taken four classes through VHS and who has never taken an Honors or AP class, and has done fantastic! He just loves this and loves what he’s learning about. He’s taking classes that are – just something that we don’t offer here. So I think that you have to have a true interest in the material. You have to be motivated. I think you also have to – if you’re struggling, you have to be an advocate for yourself. You have to be comfortable telling your teachers that my school is closed this week when VHS is not, and you have to be aware. It’s a mature student and it’s not for everybody. That was our biggest mistake for this year.

Faculty 1: I’m very similar. I think occasionally what you find is that a school will have a kid who is having a hard time with traditional education so they think, well we’ll just try this, but that student – you know, you explained one student where that was brilliant and it worked great, but I’ve seen some where you could have determined before you started that it would have been setting him up for failure, had you thought about it a little more. Each semester I have had at least one kid that did just about nothing, and I’m not used to that in my face-to-face class, even though I know it happens. I would reach out to the site coordinator and some have been wonderful. The most recent situation – I have a kid who has done nothing – I reached out and am not hearing back from the site coordinator. That’s another story. Time management is huge. Learning and understanding the flow of the week and the format, and I agree with you that it’s a type of mature student. It’s amazing. The kids who get that part of it excel. Maybe at the beginning of the course I’ll set the idea of what I expect with discussion and then they get it, and they are the ones reading early in the week – discussing early in the week – submitting their work on time or early - that kind of thing. So, it’s a different kind of learning environment. I think some kids probably love it. I think the volume of work will not be less than in a traditional class, so if anybody is taking it thinking it would be easier, there is a rude awakening. But I think the kids that take to that process – one of the kids – there was a survey – we just finished the semester so there are questions about what you liked about this and what you didn’t. You get some responses that I like that I was responsible for what I did and I didn’t have a teacher breathing down my neck, and of course that was a kid that was getting everything done. It’s hard to say because sometimes you have to try. It’s not like that Honors kid will be a definite fit, and it’s not like some students that you might see as not
motivated might actually take to it quite well. But then some that are going to continue to be not motivated. I have a strong feeling that in time it will be really valuable to have all students participate in an online class at some point, because I think they’ll see it more in college or beyond. I think the dynamic will change a little if everybody was starting to be exposed to it as a format for learning, and at least some of them kind of enter and have no idea of what they’re getting into wouldn’t have these potential issues, and then some kids would by trying it come to realize that, “wow” this is really for me. To sum up, I would say that the perfect student is going to be a self starter – the person who at the first day of the week comes out and is anxious to see what comes in, so they log right in – they can organize their time well. Another issue you sometimes have is the expectation for a lot of them is that they should use – a lot of them are given a period during the school day where they are working somewhere – and that’s where they have the best access to people to help them. And kids with poor time management – you’re not in the classroom where the teacher is telling you what to do for those 45 minutes, so you really have to use that time. I think a lot of kids think that they can goof-off during the time they have in school and then they don’t end up doing it at home. You know, that kind of thing. It’s hard to pinpoint a type of kid that is going to achieve success but, again, I don’t think the answer is when you take a kid where nothing else has worked and lets try this – and that didn’t necessarily work.

Facilitator: Did you have any kids fail or withdraw?

Faculty 1: Both semesters I’ve had a kid who really was struggling to submit work, but by working with them and really supporting them through the process, we’ve gotten them to be able to pass. A lot of late work and things like that, but really encouraging. There have been some kids that have done that, but then this semester there has been one kid who I have no idea where he is right now. He has not logged in - not done anything for six to eight weeks – he’s just going to fail. But I have a few that by working with the site coordinator, working with the student, working with the parent - I think some of the kids do need just to know that you’re out there supporting them through the process and that you’ll work with them. I think some of that has to do with the policy. I have a policy where there is a penalty when work is late. I stopped that penalty at 50 percent, so in other words, the worst anybody could ever get is a 50 percent penalty even if they hand it in on the last day of the semester. That keeps the kid realizing that there is value in handing it in super late, like I can still pass. So, any kid that is willing to do what it takes at that point doesn’t have to fail. But I have had just really one kid that will end up getting a failing grade.

Facilitator: Some kids that have failed or withdrawn - do you have any sense of some of the factors behind that?
Faculty 1: When you also say withdrawn – the withdrawn part I really don’t even consider because the first two weeks of those VHS classes there is a lot of movement. So, I think that of it more like - once I get through those first few weeks - that’s my class. There must be a reasonable rate of attrition in terms of that.

Faculty 2: In the beginning of the year we had one student who – we had a few students who withdrew over the summer after their schedule had changed they decided they wouldn’t do a VHS, so they had never even taken a course. We had one student who withdrew within the first two weeks, simply because he was a classified student and the class just was not for him. There was too much independence, so he withdrew. But we have had some students struggle and fail their courses for the semester, simply because they do not log-in at all. I can’t tell you the amount of times that I have met with these students and contacted their parents, and they tell me “I’m gonna try – I’m gonna log-in – I’m gonna do it” – and then they don’t do it. I even met with one or two students who at the end of the first term said, “It was not for me, so I’m going to accept my failing grade. I’m cool with it.” I said, “Ok, that’s your choice.” I guess they were just tired of meeting with me, and tired of me sending home emails, because I get grades every two weeks and I post them on Access. Our policy here is that grades are posted online – we don’t want parents to be blindsided with failing grades, so I emailed all of the parents for failing grades to let them know that the marking period ends on this date and that their student is failing, and to try and make an effort for them to be successful in the class. Parents were pretty appreciative to hear my feedback, but some students just didn’t do anything. They just could not thrive in an environment where there was no teacher saying, “Ok, log-in to VHS,” and that is something for next year – I have met with all of the incoming VHS students who have signed up, and I’ve met with them individually to say this is what it’s going to be like. Nobody is going to be checking in with you every day to say it’s VHS time. It’s really up to you. They actually had to fill out an application, not because they wouldn’t have been able to sign-up for the course, but I just felt like it was another step to make sure we had a student who is really motivated to take this course, rather than just saying, “Oh, VHS. I’ll sign-up for that.” I really wanted to make it go through one more step to take this course, so you had to fill out an application and meet with me, and then I gave them an overview of the course.

Facilitator: Are there any policy changes?

Faculty 2: They had to fill out this application which was really an application and an information packet. So, when school is not in session, VHS is still going on and the calendars do not match up. This year, VHS started a week before this high school started. So, our students were playing catch-up,
and yeah, it was only the first week and it was like an orientation, but it was added work. So, all of the students I met with were taking two classes, so I said, “Are you interested in starting over the summer? I’ll email you over the summer.” And they said, “Absolutely,” so this will help really prepare for the fall and make sure that everyone gets off to a good start. The other problem was, and I don’t know if you’re going to ask me this, is that we stepped into this at the end of August and it was completely a state of chaos. There was no organization about what VHS – where is was going to be – what it was going to look like – and it was so stressful, and I think that it still needs to be ironed out for next year because it has not been discussed as to where are those kids going when their schedule says VHS. We, last minute, decided that wonderful you would allow them to go into the media center. But, every day it was like they can go into the guidance conference room. Yeah, but there’s no computers. Well, I’m going to get tablets (computers). Ok, well when are we getting tablets? So that just set the tone for what is this going to be like. I felt so unsupported and I felt like, you just go deal with VHS – it’s the beginning of the year and I have so many things to worry about. It was nobody else’s priority, I felt. I just felt completely unsupported and left to figure this out, so hopefully that policy will change for next year. We’ll see.

Research Question 7

Facilitator: How well did VHS meet the needs of the students? Was student support adequate? Technology? Course availability?

Faculty 2: What VHS offered to them, in terms of helping them – there were no students who struggled because of the material; it was really their own fault they did not do well. So I felt that we did the best we could in terms of [this] high school providing opportunities for them to get their work done in school. They had a period in their day; they were able to go to an environment where there were computers that they could get work on. We did get them Tablets to work on, so I do think that we helped support that here as best as we can. And I do think that VHS – all of my students got the courses they wanted. They were wait-listed over the summer, but because there is so much movement over the summer and the first two weeks, they all got the classes that they wanted. Nobody had to go to their alternate choice, so in terms of VHS accommodating that way – it worked out well.

Faculty 1: From VHS – tremendous support! There were a few bumps in the road in my first semester. They assign sort of like a mentor which or a supervisor, for you. I had a few changes in who that was early. They were pretty
good about communicating that but where I was just kind of new. But
beyond that, I felt like the people at Virtual High School were very
supportive. There was always somebody I felt that if I was
communicating with – a parent or a site coordinator – or somebody else
that kind of new what was going on. The very first semester, they do
actually pop into the course quite a bit to monitor how you’re doing and
provide feedback, which is helpful. So, that was great. I guess once it all
started – I struggled at the beginning figuring out what course I could
teach for them and things like that, and ultimately they worked with me
until we got that figured out. In terms of the district, I was thrilled to be
selected and supported through that process. I haven’t had any need
throughout the year to lean on anybody in district, which I guess speaks to
Virtual High School, because I felt like whatever I needed, there were
to assist. So, very supportive.

Faculty 2: Just to say one more thing, in terms of VHS, I thought VHS supported
myself and the students very well. In terms of the district supporting
VHS, I felt completely unsupported. Again, after the year started, I didn’t
need a tremendous amount of support from anybody in district that I felt
that they weren’t there for me. But I also felt that it was almost like
nobody really followed up on, “Hey, how is VHS going?” It was always
me saying, “Hey, here’s an update on VHS” if anybody remembers or
cares. It really felt like – does anybody even care. This is the update for
next year - I created this application and I think this would be better for
next year. It was never like, “Can we meet and brainstorm about how did
VHS go all year and this is our new program.” Other than doing this, this
isn’t even really for the district to say, “What can we do for next year.”
You know nobody has come to me and interviewed me about what I think
would be better for next year, or the stresses. I just find that, still – it’s up
to me. And I talk to my supervisor to ask if we can talk about VHS,
because I just feel like they forgot about it.

Faculty 1: If I could piggy back that a little, too. I struggled early on – I brushed
over it – but because I was having a difficult time figuring out what class
to teach – there were points where it became very questionable whether
we would have a teacher for VHS or whether we wouldn’t. So, I was
1000 percent on board but I think I really made that happen myself. I
pushed through until there was a point where I figured out what I
absolutely needed for certification so that I could teach the class that was
appropriate. And there were points where it was almost taken away, I felt
like, and I really wanted to see it happen. So, I question that a little bit,
too. To me, the potential for this on the district level is so incredible that I
would like to see it be supported that way. And luckily once I got started,
I wasn’t looking for any support at that point. But as far as the overall
program – and I’ve done the same thing – because there have been times
when I’ve been poking around to see what’s going on for next year
because I really want to know and I’m very invested in the program and want to see it grow. So, I’m very curious to know where it is on that level. It would be nice to think that maybe as it grows it will gain that.

Research Question 8

Facilitator: How important is the guidance liaison? Administration? Parents? Other support services?

Faculty 2: Typically the site coordinators are always someone who is in guidance, so it just happens that I also happen to be a counselor in the guidance department and the site also coordinator. So, it’s very easy for me to reach out to the counselors to see how many kids are showing an interest for next year – can you send me a list of their names. So, I can know where we stand and how many students I’m going to meet with. Here is the application – I gave them all to the counselors to say that we’re going to an application policy for next year, so please read the packet and make sure all the students know that they must fill this out and submit it to me. So, it makes it very easy for the guidance counselors to know about VHS because I work with them on a day-to-day basis. And also for me, I’ll email the counselors to say, “These are the grades for your students and I’ve been meeting with the students and parents, just so you know, and can send the same message that they’re doing a great job or maybe they need to work a little harder.” So, it’s been very easy to communicate with the department because I also serve in that role.

Facilitator: How about parents?

Faculty 1: It’s funny, you more than me. VHS is very interesting – and I like this – they really want the teachers to interact with the site coordinator and then the site coordinator to be the liaison with the parents. I’ve had maybe two interactions with parents. They were both perfectly positive and it was fine to work with the parents, but they almost discourage the teachers from directly interacting with the parents. I guess that’s what they see as the site coordinator role because you’re on site. I had one silly thing with a parent. Ya know, one of these that we see here, as well. The semester had already ended and then I get an email from a parent asking, “So what does my child have to do to finish?” It was beyond the eleventh hour and I was supportive – that was one of the kids that I want to help make it through, but it was just funny – too little, too late kind of thing. One time I was actually surprised to hear from a parent, so I talked to my supervisor at VHS to see what was appropriate. He said that it seemed innocuous and to feel free to talk with the parent. Generally, it’s very rare.
every single course. Can it be done? Sure. That’s the only way it can really be fixed.

Faculty 1: My feeling is that it’s a great opportunity in terms of preparing kids for college. I think even in undergraduate college these days, students have the opportunity to take online courses. So many of their courses are hybrids, at this point, where a lot of it is connected online. I’ve heard of a lot of college kids who almost have an option whether to go to class or not, because everything they need is available online. So, for kids with different learning styles, some kids may actually go to a lecture, but that’s not necessarily always the case. Regardless, I think just having that experience—time management is an issue. When they get to college they don’t have anyone telling them to do their work, so even a traditional college class requires kids to get to a new level of understanding of being responsible on their own. So, I think it’s great. I would not advocate for kids taking all their classes online. I think both types of learning are great, but I would love to see all types of students at some point be required to take an online class. I think everyone will encounter it at some level once they leave school, so why not have that be a skill that we’re encouraging.

Research Question 10

Facilitator: If you were to give VHS a report card grade, what would it be? Explain. Would you like to see the VHS program expanded? What is the ideal? What obstacles might prevent future growth?

Faculty 2: I would give VHS an A. The A would be based on its accessibility—it’s very user friendly and if you have a question, you get a response quickly—there is a ton of information and a ton of support. They have documents already created so if you wanted to put something in the student’s file for colleges, they have a letter that details VHS for colleges that might not be familiar with it. So, you don’t have to reinvent the wheel. There is just a lot of support and you can meet so many people. One thing I would wish for VHS, and I kind of even mentioned it, would be to have statewide VHS teachers or site coordinators get together to brainstorm. Because we do it in the site coordinator training, but it’s summer time, and you’re not sure how many people want to spend a lot of their time talking about how they’re doing it at their school because over the summer, when I took that course, I learned a lot about how other schools do it. But, it would be nice to even meet them or get together in person, or just more professional development. I took this intensive summer program that required a great deal of time and energy for me, but after that, nothing else. I didn’t have to do one other professional development through them. If I had a question, I would just ask them. So, I give them an A. I don’t give them
an A'. I do think that they know what they're doing. They have a very good system there. The classes seem very interesting and the teachers are wonderful, so I would give them an A. I would give [our] high school and our use of VHS probably a C or a B because I think that there is a lot of work ahead to make this run as smoothly. It run ok, but not what I had hoped it would run like. There were so many challenges in terms of the students in the course and me trying to create all these things. I guess I wasn't prepared as well as I thought I was. I just decided to email parents. There was no follow-thru from any administrators about how things were going or anything they could do to help. I would email, "Do you think it's a good idea for me to..." This is a new program and I just really felt that we put so much time and money into this program. It was just like, "You figure it out" and we want really nothing to do with it. And like I said, at the beginning of the year, there was no thought about where these kids would go and that was really frustrating for a lot of people - not just me. I just felt like they quickly forgot about that. There was no follow-up or checking in with everybody that was inconvenienced. It was hard.

Faculty 1: I also give VHS an "A" and over the summer, I am taking their new instructor methodology course. It was phenomenal. Like I said, I have a degree in online teaching and learning, but there were a lot of teachers who really did not know so much about online learning, and by the end of that course - myself included - we were prepared to teach an online course. And they put a lot of effort into that course - there was a lot to it - it was a graduate level course. That level of training with that much thought going into it is necessary, but it doesn't always happen that way. And I think that none of the teachers quite knew how involved that course would be, but by the end, appreciated everything they got out of it and how important it was. Another nice thing is that most new teachers - you're teaching a course that is already established, so it's not like you're developing - and they do this on purpose, too. They want you to spend your time facilitating the course, evaluating the students, interacting with the students - not spending time throughout the semester developing the content. I could see if it were different where with lesson plans where I would be putting information up the week before the kids were supposed to get at it, and then also doing all those other things. To not have to do that made it manageable. It would have been unmanageable otherwise. And the selection of courses - they are open to offering a wide variety of additional courses. I've been in contact with them about possibly adding a course. They've been very supportive. I've ended up doing other things with them, teaching some other courses, and even offering independent learning opportunities for students in a school where lets say they end early and there is still time left in school - they have these three week modules. They supported me in creating one of those, and that's something that they do to follow-up with schools so that there is not a gap, so it accommodates the scheduling piece. In other words, what do we do
with the kids for the next six weeks? So, some schools require that they continue to do some of those. So, I think they account for everything. And they are very supportive. There is a weekly newsletter that comes out to us. There are always reminders about grades and when things are due, so it just seems like they're on top of their game in terms of leaving no stone unturned. I just found it to be a very nice environment to work – nice people – nice support. You don’t feel like you’re just out on your own, by any means. So, I’m with you on the “A.”

Facilitator: What obstacles do you see?

Faculty 1: Every student is not going to be geared for being successful, but at the same time, as much as this is a perfect learning environment and it reaches certain learning styles, sometimes I think the kids that it is not necessarily for - with the right support - would still benefit but it's going out of their comfort zone a little. So lets say there is a certain percentage of students that would not be a natural fit, I think as more students were taking these courses and more people knew about them and about what it was really like, and heard from their friends what was involved. I think we have these pioneer kids who just jumped in, and it was all a surprise. As more people get involved, that would be reduced and they'll start hearing and understanding what will be involved. But other obstacles, on one hand an obstacle would be certainly the management within the district and allocating resources appropriately. So, if there become more teachers involved and add more site coordinators, I guess I see a lot of the positives that go with that. Then it creates a team more so, but with growing anything, the logistics of where a kid will work on this. Supervision - on one hand it’s great that we fill kids in these classes, but they would still need to be supervised at school so you would have to account for that with some type of staffing. Again, it might be able to be figured out in a way that supports the process without incurring a financial burden. I would like to think it would be cost effective in the long run.

Research Question 11

Facilitator: Should completion of an online course be a requirement at this high school? In the State of New Jersey? Nationwide?

Faculty 1: I would love to see it nationwide. I would love to see a graduation requirement at some point be to take one online class. To me, there is great value. It’s a very different approach to learning, so what we notice with some of the students in their first class, there is a little bit of an adjustment, but they get it, and then they’ll be so much better equipped for what might be ahead.
Faculty 2: I didn’t really think about it until you started talking about it. I agree. I think there are great benefits to taking an online course. I think that because we have so many students at so many different levels, I think there are courses that everybody can take that would fit their learning style. I think it’s a great way to try something new because there are so many courses that are outside our curriculum that might really appeal to a lot of our students, and it might open their minds to something new. So, I’m always open to chase kinds of ideas and I don’t think it’s a bad thing to make it a requirement. There is always something to be learned from every experience.

Facilitator: A requirement for this school or for statewide, or for the nation?

Faculty 2: I don’t see why it could not be statewide or nationwide, but I do see the logistical troubles and challenges where you have other schools who have many other great priorities in terms of just getting passing scores on tests. To add this into the mix might be a major challenge, but at least here, just to see what it might be like to encourage all of our students to take at least one course. We would have to come-up with how logistically – we can’t logistically manage 200 kids in it.

Facilitator: What obstacles would you see to growing it, if it were expanded?

Faculty 2: You would have to have more site coordinators, obviously, and maybe every single counselor would have to become a site coordinator to become familiar with the course and how the structure of the program works. And the space to have computers for students to use - we didn’t even have that.

Faculty 1: One thought I have along those lines, too, is that on some level – especially for juniors or seniors - lets say that was their first period or ninth period, it also alleviates a little traffic in the building if a kid agreed to and was motivated to do it at home then that helps as well. But I guess it would look different around here.

Faculty 2: And I think that they would have to make some adjustments. If you’re going to make online courses required, then you’re going to have to weight that differently. And if a student is going to have to take an online course and they want to take it in AP science, then they should get the weight for it.
Research Question 12

Facilitator: Have we missed anything?

Faculty 1: Just one question I continue to have as a teacher of a VHS course— I'm given a period in school to teach the course, but one thing that's a little bit strange about it is that if we're on vacation I perfectly accept that I'm teaching my VHS course. But then there are things in school — there's a part of me that wants to get over this hump of understanding — I don't see where, especially if I start teaching more online courses where I would have to sit in my classroom to teach my online course. There are weird scheduling logistics, like when we have state testing, it sometimes gets forgotten that I'm still teaching this class. So, I'm proctoring and teaching these other classes and this is still part of my work load. So, I would just love to (at some point) flush that out. What's the real expectation there? If there are days when I have a meeting, I know that I have to teach my VHS course at some point in the day but do I need to physically come back to the school? There are just weird things like that for me because there have been times when I've had to leave school early for something but I'm still going teach my class, so am I taking a half day because I'm not physically in the school building, but I'm still teaching. So those have been the little things that I would like to have somewhere outlined. What I would love is to think that you're teaching this online and we have this trust in you that you can teach it from where ever you need to and you don't have to be sitting in the school building to do that. For a while I was having difficulty with Internet access in our building because we have this horrible issue at times, so I would be so much better equipped using WiFi somewhere that wasn't in that bottle neck.

Faculty 2: I can't think of anything.
Focus Group Responses: Student Group 1

Research Question 1
Facilitator: Using the paper in front of you, please write down your post-high school plans for next year?
Student 1 Tulane University, majoring in Environmental Science
Student 2 New Jersey Institute of Technology, pursuing Mechanical Engineering
Student 3 A two-year college and become an officer in the military. Then, after four years of that, join the state police.

Research Question 2
Facilitator: Where did you most frequently complete your assignments?
Student 1 Withdrew before beginning course.
Student 2 At home / school
Student 3 Usually in school during study hall.

Research Question 3
Facilitator: When texting, students add (smiley) faces to their messages to represent a variety of feeling and emotions. Please draw the face that represents your experiences with the VHS program.
Student 1 😊
Student 2 😊
Student 3 😊

Research Question 4
Facilitator: Think back to this time last year when you began selecting your classes for senior year. Why did you decide to enroll in an online course?
Student 2: I thought it would be easy, breezy, non-stressful course to take for senior year. I didn’t think there would be a challenge to it. I took Engineering Principals and Mythology.

Student 3: I did it because it offered courses that I really couldn’t find anywhere else. I was in the criminology course.

Student 1: That’s the same reason – I was looking to have more specific science courses that I thought would be interesting to take. Originally I was going to take the online course but I changed my mind and decided to take AP Environmental Science instead. The more I thought about it, I thought it would be easier to have someone there who could talk to you about the course material and have other insights to add then just a regular course, even though it might be more specific online (more specialized topic) than it would be in class.

Research Question 5

Facilitator: Has the completion of an online course better prepared you for the college/work transition?

Student 2: I think the design of the course teaches you a lot about time management and initiative, just because there really isn’t any discipline and I guess that would teach you more about how college would work. It’s independent.

Facilitator: How did you find the managing time aspect of the course yourself?

Student 2: It was hard because I didn’t think of it at the level of my regular classes, so I always put it second before the regular classes I take. So, it didn’t really work out for the best.

Facilitator: What made you look at your other courses and think, “I have to do them now” and look at this course and think, “I can do this later.”

Student 2: I guess because there is an actual teacher that I had a relationship with, as opposed to a teacher that I never saw or will never meet.

Student 3: I didn’t actually complete the course, but I feel that there are other things that can prepare you better than that course. Yeah, there is a time management issue but you can also learn that in other things. I’m quite involved. I play sports. I have a job and I’m involved in other things outside of school, and that teaches time management, as well.

Facilitator: You said you didn’t complete the course. What led to that decision?
Student 3: There wasn’t really a teacher so it was difficult to keep up with it, and there was no way to make sure everything was getting done. So, I decided to not take that and switch to a different course.

Student 1: I actually had a friend that took a Virtual High School class and she would be in the orchestra room on the computer doing it while I was in the room, and she never really took it seriously or she just kind of blew it off and never did the homework. I don’t know if she actually finished the course, but it didn’t sound like that big of a deal or anything that was that serious or crucial for her to complete it, or would seriously impact her college experience.

Research Question 6:
Facilitator: Using the paper in front of you, please develop a list of pros and cons of enrolling in a VHS online course. Identify the biggest advantage/disadvantage.

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Opinions of VHS Pros and Cons</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pros</strong></td>
<td><strong>Cons</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Student 1 | 1. Work at your own pace  
2. Not a lot of distraction from others  
3. Ability to take a class that might not be available otherwise* | 1. No teacher – less motivated to do work  
2. Impersonal learning from a computer* |
| Student 2 | 1. Time Management  
2. Future reference for future design of classes* | 1. No discipline  
2. Deadlines are usually earlier  
3. No teacher to communicate with if there is a misunderstanding concerning topic/lesson* |
| Student 3 | 1. More topics  
2. More Classes*  
3. Can do the work whenever | 1. No immediate teacher  
2. No immediate answers  
3. Too easy to forget  
4. Needs faster response times*  
5. No teacher relationship |

*Denotes biggest advantage/disadvantage.
Research Question 7

Facilitator: In comparison to traditional courses, how difficult is the online curriculum? How effective was the teacher? How did tests and activities differ?

Student 2: I found it pretty hard just because the lessons are equal to a regular class, but again, there was no teacher to actually communicate or be there for you. So, if you did have a problem, it was harder to understand through communicating through email, as opposed to a one-on-one basis or seeking extra help.

Facilitator: Was the teacher effective in explaining things? How would you rate the effectiveness of the teacher?

Student 2: At times, if the lesson wasn’t really that hard and it was just a little misunderstanding it would come in handy, but when it was difficult or when it came to physics, or what not, I would prefer the teacher in front of me showing me step-by-step on paper as I’m there. There is a limit to what email and the online thing can do, as opposed to a person actually in front of you, interacting with you.

Student 3: I would say it was more difficult than a regular class, but not necessarily more of a work load. Like student number two said, there is no teacher to guide you so it’s either you get it or you don’t. And if you don’t, you have to wait for a response, and sometimes the response isn’t what you were looking for.

Facilitator: Would you say the teacher, him or herself, was effective or the whole concept of Virtual High School that you’re having an issue with?

Student 3: I would say that the teacher was pretty effective but it’s sometimes better to have somebody in front of you, because if you ask a question and they see it a different way then you asked it, you’re getting a different answer and have to wait the next day to send another message. And that could be up to a week before you get the right answer, and then you have to finish the assignment that day.

Facilitator: Was there much interaction among members of the class, like in discussion groups?

Student 3: In ours, there was. In the criminology course everybody had to be involved and had to post at least two messages to somebody else.

Facilitator: Did you get a sense of who your classmates were, and a sense of belonging to a class like you do when you’re sitting in a real room?
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Student 3: Not the same, because you don’t really know the people that you’re talking to. You don’t see them.

Facilitator: And student number two, what was your issue experience with interacting with the students?

Student 2: It didn’t feel the same. They just felt like they were there but you didn’t really know who they were. They would have profiles of themselves with basic information, such as their hobbies, their name, age, and what school they go to, etc. But it was not the same as actually engaging with another student in the classroom, which I prefer.

Facilitator: Was there a big difference in terms of the activities that you had to do compared to a regular class, or the way the instruction was delivered?

Student 2: You would do the regular things you would do in class. You would do the group projects, which I found were hard because you had to communicate through email. I don’t check my email on a daily basis, or an hourly basis, and communicating to them was hard. And the tests were online, as well. It was the same. I really didn’t find the format of the tests difficult, but it was still new and I wasn’t really used to it.

Student 3: It is sort of the same way, but obviously it’s all done on the computer so you’re not creating a poster of something and kind of creating an abundance of knowledge on one topic. It’s more of a very broad topic that you are trying to put together on the computer. With the group projects, it is difficult to keep in touch, especially when everybody has the course at a different time. Nobody is on at the same time, so it’s not immediate. You’re not talking back and forth – you’re waiting until the next day you’re on.

Research Question 8

Facilitator: If you were to give VHS a report card grade, what would it be? Explain. Was student support adequate? Technology? Course availability?

Student 1: I don’t know how much I can comment because I never took the course, so I can’t give you a definite answer. It would be maybe different if I had gone through with it, but the whole concept of taking a Virtual High School class and the kind of impersonal way of learning, I give it a B for effort but it’s hard to say it’s perfect because obviously there are flaws with that message system, or the group projects, or the teachers. And
there are gaps where things may be missed because you didn’t have that experience. So, I give it a B.

Student 3: I would probably give it a lower C. I didn’t feel it was that effective, and anything that I did learn, it didn’t really stick in my mind as well as if a teacher would have said it, or learning it from them personally. So, I give it a low C.

Student 2: I really didn’t find it that effective either. I think I would learn more in a regular class, so I give it a low C as well.

Facilitator: How was the course availability? Would you say that the types of courses available to pick from were decent or not decent?

Student 2: I thought they were good. I thought they had a large choice of availability. There are some very detailed classes. I remember one being on a certain book, or on the study of a certain book. I’ve never seen a class that’s based on one certain book and not based on a broad aspect. So, I thought the choice of classes was good.

Student 3: I would say the same. The class selection was very good and that’s part of the reason why I chose to take it in the first place.

Student 1: I agree.

Facilitator: Any technical difficulties with the setup figure into the grade you gave? Did any of you have issues with technology or technical support?

Student 2: There were times but not a lot. There were times – maybe once or twice – when the site would be down and it would leave us with nothing to do, but not a big deal.

Student 3: I would say the same thing. The one I was taking, there was one time when the site was down and you couldn’t get on for at least three days, but that was really the only time.

Research Question 9

Facilitator: How well did this high school meet your VHS needs, including technology, guidance, and support services?

Student 3: I would say a lot. They kind of encouraged it. It was kind of encouraged because it was a new thing and they wanted to see how it would work out,
Facilitator: And if you had a problem, who would you turn to?

Student 3: The guidance counselor — the site coordinator.

Student 2: Yes, I came to the site coordinator if I ran into difficulties.

Facilitator: Did either of you have any occasions when the site coordinator had to intervene with the instructor of your course for any reason?

Student 3: What I was taking my class, it actually started a week before our school started. So, I think she talked to the teacher. I didn’t have to start early but I had to do make-up work.

Research Question 10

Facilitator: Would you encourage other students to enroll in a VHS course? If so, what advice would you give them?

Student 2: Probably not. It could be a good future reference — I think you mentioned colleges are starting to use it. So, it could train them to get used to the format of virtual learning, but I’m not a big fan.

Student 3: I wouldn’t recommend it.

Student 1: Maybe if they had a specific thing that they were looking for and couldn’t find it anywhere else, I would say, “Yeah, do it. Why not,” but I would warn them that there will be difficulties and it’s not going to be perfect, but if they’re prepared for that and know what they want to take, then why not.

Facilitator: Do you think there are students for whom this would work better than others, or do you think there is particular kind of student or type of personality that this works better or worse with?

Student 2: I can’t say.

Student 1: I think it would be harder for someone like my little brother — he has terrible time management. He spends a lot of time on the computer but if there is no one there prodding him and saying, “Do your work,” then he won’t do it. So, I don’t think he would do well in this environment.
**Research Question 11**

**Facilitator:** Would you encourage the administration to expand the program? If so, how?

**Student 2:** No, I probably wouldn’t.

**Student 3:** [Nodded head in agreement with Student 2.]

**Research Question 12**

**Facilitator:** Should completion of an online course be a requirement at this high school? In the State of New Jersey? Nationwide?

**Student 2:** No.

**Student 3:** Probably not, because the way they are doing it now, I would agree with. Because if somebody does find something interesting that they want to study, they may want to pursue it if they can’t find it anywhere else. So, it would make sense to have it as an elective and not as a full-fledged course.

**Research Question 13**

**Facilitator:** Have we missed anything?

**Student 1:** No.

**Student 2:** No.

**Student 3:** No.
Focus Group Responses: Student Group 2

Research Question 1
Facilitator: Using the paper in front of you, please write down your post-high school plans for next year?
Student 4 Loyola College in Maryland and hope to find an interesting major
Student 5 University of Michigan as a Sport Management major
Student 6 Fairfield University, majoring in psychology on a pre-med track
Student 7 Concordia University, Montreal, studying business

Research Question 2
Facilitator: Where did you most frequently complete your assignments?
Student 4 I completed most of my VHS assignments at home.
Student 5 I completed most of my VHS work in school.
Student 6 Home
Student 7 In the media center at school and at home.

Research Question 3
Facilitator: When texting, students add (smiley) faces to their messages to represent a variety of feeling and emotions. Please draw the face that represents your experiences with the VHS program.
Student 4 😊
Student 5 😊
Student 6 😊
Student 7 😊
**Research Question 4**

Facilitator: Think back to this time last year when you began selecting your classes for senior year. Why did you decide to enroll in an online course?

Student 4: In college, I had an interest in majoring in business, so in Virtual High School I took classes in business and marketing. I wanted to see if I would be interested in majoring in that in college.

Facilitator: So, it was the course offering that was interesting to you?

Student 4: Yeah.

Student 5: For me it was probably the same thing, because next year I am going to be a Sports Management major and I did the Sports and American Society for my class. And also, I was running out of electives that I wanted to do. Once you’ve been here for three years you kind of run out of classes that you’re interested in, so it seemed like something new and something I could do on my own, too. It would give me more freedom, as opposed to just regular class where there is busy work every day. You just kind of work on your own and do your own thing.

Student 7: I did World Religion and it just interested me – the topic – and there isn’t really a course like that offered in school.

Student 6: I actually wanted to do an independent study for psych and they told me I would want to do it as a senior, and that it would be a lot of work. So, I wanted to do something toward psychology so I wanted to do philosophy, because I had taken all the ones offered here. And then I had to pick another one, so I picked zoology.

Facilitator: So, it was the course offering that tipped it for you?

Student 6: Yeah.

**Research Question 5**

Facilitator: Has the completion of an online course better prepared you for the college/work transition?
Student 4: I think it has. I think the fact that you have to do it on your own time, and you have a week to do it. I assumed that most people didn’t do it and within the first couple of days it gives you more responsibility as a student to complete your work on time.

Facilitator: Can you go back. When you said you didn’t complete it within the first couple of days.

Student 4: I had a week to do one whole lesson, which was four assignments. So the first day I didn’t do the assignment and I would wait until the last three days to start it, which probably is not a good idea. But, it helps you learn from your mistakes for college.

Facilitator: Did your pattern alter as you went through the semester, or did you pretty much keep that pattern?

Student 4: I kept that pattern.

Student 5: I definitely agree with that. In college there is not as much busy work in daily classes, because you only go to classes a certain amount times a week. It’s more that you have to do the work on your own, and if you don’t do it, it’s tough luck and you kind of screwed yourself over. It was the same way with this class. If you didn’t do your work you got the zero and there is no teacher really sitting there checking up on, “Oh you haven’t been doing your homework,” or anything. If you do it, you get the grade. If you don’t, you don’t. It just makes you more independent, and makes you keep yourself in check and watch what you’re doing. Like he was saying, to make sure you get all your stuff done by the deadline.

Student 7: Pretty much what they said I agree with. Just the time management - there is not a teacher saying this is what you have to do every night.

Student 6: I really didn’t learn anything about time management, because to be honest, I did most of my work the last day. I wouldn’t do anything here and I would just do it all the last day. And I thought it was fairly easy to complete it within a day’s amount of time, but I think college work will be a lot heavier, and I won’t be able to do that.

Facilitator: Do you know any people who are taking online courses in college this semester? Any of your friends?

Student 6: I think they’re actually in their graduate, but they did.

Facilitator: I’m just curious what you heard and if anything paralleled?
Student 6: I don’t know what everyone else’s class was, but I didn’t have a midterm or anything and I didn’t have time limits on anything. I know they had to take exams and had time limits on them. I thought that was weird.

Research Question 6

Facilitator: Using the paper in front of you, please develop a list of pros and cons of enrolling in a VHS online course. Identify the biggest advantage/disadvantage.

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<tr>
<th>Table 6</th>
<th>Student Opinions of VHS Pros and Cons</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Pros</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 4</td>
<td>1. Grow better as an individual</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. More responsibility</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Teachers are nice and lenient</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4. Meet people from around the world</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5. Prepared me for college as it</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>helped me gain more individualness*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 5</td>
<td>1. Makes you more independent*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Promotes time management</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Allows you to study a topic of</td>
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<td></td>
<td>interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 6</td>
<td>1. Less work</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Flexible*</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Course not traditionally offered</td>
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<td>Student 7</td>
<td>1. Independence and freedom to</td>
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<td></td>
<td>study on your own, without a teacher*</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Time management skills</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Interesting subjects</td>
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* Denotes biggest advantage/disadvantage.
Research Question 7

Facilitator: In comparison to traditional courses, how difficult is the online curriculum? How effective was the teacher? How did tests and activities differ?

Student 7: Mine was much easier than my classes in school.

Facilitator: Is that honors level classes or regular level classes?

Student 7: I guess I take more honors, but it’s probably a little easier than regular classes.

Student 6: Yeah. My classes were a lot easier than normal classes. I think it’s also because they have ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders I think it’s open to in other places.

Facilitator: And here it was only seniors that participated here this year?

Student 6: Yeah and they said you would have a certain amount of hours of work, and I would never have even half that.

Student 4: I take regular classes. I would say this is the same level.

Student 5: I thought this was a lot easier. I take mostly AP classes, but even the regular classes that I’m in – this was a lot easier. The grading was a lot lower than the level that we’re used to at school. I guess most of it was just because you are teaching different people. There were kinds in my class from different countries who English wasn’t their first language, so obviously you can’t really have the assignments at that high of a level if they’re not as comfortable with the language.

Facilitator: When you said the grading was lower – did you mean that it took less work to get a better grade?

Student 5: I guess their standards weren’t as high as what we’re used to here.

Facilitator: How effective would you say the teachers were?

Student 4: I thought my teachers were really nice and lenient, because since it’s not like you’re going to school, like when Ridge got vacations or when I was absent, my teacher would accept the absences from school and let me hand in the work a little later than that. They were also very lenient with computer problems for me, and I would go to the course administrator (site coordinator) and they would talk to the teacher for me if anything was going wrong. So, that was fine.
Student 5: I thought my teacher was nice, too. He got the material across well and I didn’t have any problems or anything.

Student 4: I think it’s less important – the teacher – because a lot of it is just reading on your own but my teacher was really good about explaining the technology, that sometimes it was hard to understand.

Facilitator: You mean how the course functioned and how you worked your way through?

Student 4: Yeah. We had a group project and it wasn’t what I was used to because you have to do it all online. He was good about explaining how to do it and stuff.

Student 5: Same

Facilitator: Do you feel that they knew their material – that they understood what they were teaching you?

Students: (Students sigh in agreement.)

Facilitator: How were they about presenting it in different ways? If you didn’t get something the first time, were they able to explain it or did you have any difficulty at any point understanding any of the content that they had to help you with?

Student 4: I didn’t really have any difficulty. Learning was good, but if I had any problems I would ask my teacher, and she would explain it to me. It wasn’t where you just read a paragraph and learn from it. Sometimes I would get links to other articles or videos that help explain it for you, so that made it a lot easier sometimes if it was hard to understand.

Student 5: He tried mixing it up by giving us the articles, movies also, and YouTube clips. And he would always explain the assignments and what he was looking for beforehand so there wasn’t any room to misinterpret anything or get confused, so I didn’t have any problems.

Facilitator: How about getting a sense of a class? Did you get a sense that you were in class with other people or did it feel more independent to you?

Student 7: We had a lot of discussions. A lot of our assignments would be to post to other people’s comments, and we had a group project. I know the first week I think all we did was get to know each other.

Student 6: Ours was basically – I had philosophy – so that probably explains a lot to you. Ours was basically all discussions. We probably didn’t have more
than 10 assignments that were handed in. It was all blogs, discussions, and group work.

Facilitator: And did you feel a sense of community or classness, or group identity at all with the other people taking the course?

Student 6: I didn’t actually like working in groups for this kind of environment but I guess that you recognize that you are in a group.

Student 4: I thought mine was more individual because all of the final projects were by yourself and the work groups – those projects – they were pretty hard. It was hard to talk with other people from your class because they wouldn’t answer until the next day and some of the assignments that I had for a work group, we just didn’t get any of the projects done because no one would work on it. And it was hard to split the work up because people wouldn’t look until the last day. And all the assignments were pretty much by yourself and you just type a paragraph or an article up, and that’s really it.

Facilitator: So that first group project kind of fell through because no one was working on it? Did your teacher step in and adjust something then?

Student 4: Not really. They just let us handle it by ourselves. One person would say, “Who wants to do this?” and one person would answer the next day, and then no one would see those responses until the day they actually do it which is the last day pretty much.

Facilitator: So then, what happened?

Student 4: It was me and someone else that ended up doing most of it. It was just like you post assignments, like the work for accounting pretty much, and you just post the data sheet on the assignment. So, me and that person pretty much just split it up by ourselves and the other people really didn’t do anything.

Facilitator: Any do you have any idea how their grade reflected that?

Student 4: I have no idea.

Facilitator: Did the tests or other activities differ a lot from a normal or face-to-face class?

Student 6: Yeah. I thought it was a lot different. The first class I took, you could literally – it’s kind of bad to say – you could literally type the questions on google and they would come up to you, so you didn’t have to do any of the reading, or any of that. You would never actually feel any pressure to
do the work, so I didn’t study for any of the tests. You just find the answers as it came or just go through. But for my second class, it was all discussion so that was opinion, too. So, you couldn’t really go wrong much there. So, it was a lot different.

Student 7: I only had a couple formal quizzes but they were really simple, too, because it’s online so they can’t see when you have your notes out. And one was vocabulary, so that was pretty simple.

Facilitator: And the assignments - were they pretty similar or different?

Student 7: The regular assignments – a lot of it was reading stuff and then commenting on it, or there were a couple creative writing pieces.

Student 5: With my tests, they were pretty much just checking to see if you did the reading. If you were reading or even if you just used the find tool in Explorer and just typed in what you were looking for and the question, you could find what you needed to answer the test. It was pretty simple. Most of grading is actually based off of discussions or – we had something called journal entries where we had to find an article about the class or something we were talking about in class and write our opinion on it. So, most of it was just opinion, so if you explained yourself and backed it up, you couldn’t really go wrong because you can’t get deducted points for having an opinion.

Facilitator: If you were to give VHS a report card grade, what would it be? Explain. Was student support adequate? Technology? Course availability?

Student 6: I would go with a C to be completely honest. I didn’t really learn much from my classes. I thought my first one might have been partially because I took zoology. I’ve taken AP Psych, AP Bio, and AP Environment so literally everything was covered already. So, I guess it wasn’t a class that I should have taken. And I thought communicating was really hard and I didn’t think it was setup well to motivate you to do work.

Student 7: I think an A. I didn’t have any problems with it. I feel like, in my class at least, if you did the reading you learned.

Student 5: I would probably give my class a B. I liked the class but I didn’t really learn anything from it. Most of the stuff I would learn on my own from watching Sports Center. It wasn’t anything groundbreaking or that
interesting, or new. It was just, “What’s your opinion on this, or why do you think that” and then post it in the blog and talk about it with other people. I mean, I can talk sports with my friends. I didn’t really need to do a class about it. It was fun but it didn’t really teach me anything.

Facilitator: So it was interesting, but not much new?

Student 5: Yeah. I didn’t really learn anything from it new. It was just kind of reflecting on stuff that I would have already just read or looked-up on my own because that’s something that I’m interested in. It didn’t really talk about anything groundbreaking or something that I never really thought of before. It was all stuff that anyone could just read by scrolling over the newspaper or sports section.

Facilitator: You just mentioned something about reflecting on stuff you already knew. As a result of that reflection, do you think you came to any new insights or looked at things in a new way?

Student 5: Not really. I guess I probably just explain myself more naturally, because I had to write it out and do it for a grade. I don’t think it really brought me into anything new or better. It just kind of made me sit down and think about it more, which is never a bad thing, but it wasn’t really productive.

Student 4: I would give it a B probably, because I learned some things but not that much. I learned some more about topics that I already knew about, but again, not really that much. It really just depended on if you read every single little thing that the teacher gave you, but sometimes it was easy to get away with it without reading it, so they can’t really force you to read the articles they give you.

Facilitator: How did you feel about that support that you got through VHS? Did you feel that you were supported if you had trouble?

Student 4: I thought I was supported, just because whenever I had problems, I could usually get assistance from my teacher or from the Virtual High School coordinator.

Student 5: I thought for the most part it was good, but there were a couple of days where I would try logging on and it said that VHS was not working – it just gave me that message and a picture, and didn’t do anything. So, obviously that was not as helpful because you couldn’t access it on that day. But for the most part it was fine.

Facilitator: And about how many times did that happen?

Student 5: It was three or four over the course of the semester.
Facilitator: **How well did this high school meet your VHS needs, including technology, guidance, and support services?**

Student 6: I thought the site coordinator was pretty helpful. I knew she would email us when the courses were coming to an end, or when the mid report was coming so that you didn’t miss any assignments. And I had a couple of problems and she emailed my teacher for me or stuff like that.

Student 7: I didn’t really need any help. I mean, she helped in the beginning just telling us how to sign-in and stuff, and then at the end — where do you go now. But I didn’t have any problems during the course.

Student 5: Like she said, she explained to us what was going on at the beginning and gave us updates, but I didn’t really have any problems that I needed to talk to her about. I’m sure that if I needed something, I could have gone to talk to her. There wasn’t anything that I really needed, so I didn’t have to talk to her.

Facilitator: **Any technology problems on the school side or home side that interfered?**

Student 7: Just where he was saying, where he walked in and some days it would be off service. That was it.

Facilitator: **Would you encourage other students to enroll in a VHS course? If so, what advice would you give them?**

Student 4: I would only encourage them if they were interested in one of the electives, and that they were interested in majoring in, in college. But other than that, I wouldn’t really encourage it.

Facilitator: **What advice would you give to a student signing-up for one of these courses?**

Student 4: I would just say to do all your work on time, and don’t wait until the last minute. And it’s good to do that because if you ever have questions that you wanted to ask the teacher about assignments, because I had to do that many times and I never got an answer back until the next day because I would always ask at seven or eight o’clock at night. So, that was not a
Facilitator: **Student five – would you encourage someone to take a course?**

Student 5: Yeah. I liked doing it. But like he said, unless you like what you’re studying it’s not going to be fun and you’re not going to want to do the work. And it’s something that you could easily just blow off and not sign-in – not look at it – but then you come the end of the marking period and you got a zero for the class. And then you’re in trouble. So, unless it is a subject that you like, I wouldn’t do it. If it’s a subject that you like, I would go out and do it because it’s not as challenging as a regular class but you can still have fun with it. I don’t know if you necessarily learn but you at least get to talk about and do things with a subject that you like, which is always (I guess) more fun doing a class that you don’t like.

Student 6: I don’t know. It would probably depend on the class. I think some of my classes would have been good, had I not taken stuff that was similar. So, if you weren’t familiar with the class, I would say take it and could you actually learn something. But I guess if it was a class that you already had a good amount of knowledge on then I wouldn’t.

Student 7: Pretty much what student six said. If you’re interested in the subject, and you don’t mind working independently, then I would go for it.

Facilitator: **Do you think there are any traits in students that would say don’t take this course?**

Student 6: Students with bad time management definitely should not take the course. It’s possible to do all your work in one night, but it’s really annoying when you’re sitting there doing four hours of work on the last day. That would be the only trait, I think.

Student 7: I definitely agree with that. I had a friend that was in the same class as me, and he pretty much put off the entire work for the marking period. Within the last two weeks, he was spending every night trying to do make-up assignments. The teacher was nice enough to give him credit, even though most of the assignments were late. Even that, he wasn’t able to get as good of a grade, even though the assignments weren’t that hard, he still only ended up with (I think) a C in the class.

Student 4: I might say that you also need patience, because there were times where I just really wanted to get it over with because it was taking too much time. And I just rushed through all of my assignments, because I saved them until the last minute. And sometimes, if the computer freezes on you or
the Virtual High School, like respondent number five said before, where it doesn’t work.

Research Question 11

Facilitator: **Would you encourage the administration to expand the program? If so, how?**

Student 7: I would say keep it available, maybe for juniors as well. I don’t think every student would like this type of environment but I don’t know if it needs to be expanded greatly.

Student 4: I would just say to give an option to every grade, but not to force it. Because as a senior, I wasn’t really looking to do that much work and sometimes I just felt bombarded with some of the assignments.

Student 5: I think opening it up to a lot of people would lead to some kids abusing it. I know, for me, if I didn’t do my math homework the night before I would use it as a study hall, as opposed to getting the Virtual High School stuff done that period. So, I could see some kids just using it as a study hall and not really doing the class. So, I think opening it up too much would make it that kids just kind of abuse it and kind of almost ruin the program. So, I think leaving it to just upperclassmen is better off and making sure that they have a good track record – that they do their work in different classes and that they’re not constantly just putting stuff off or not doing their homework.

Facilitator: **So you think people need a pretty good work ethic in order to succeed?**

Student 5: In order to do the class properly – yeah.

Facilitator: **And it sounds, too, that their expectations need to be on track? They need to know ahead of time what the demands of the class will be?**

Student 5: They need to know that no one will be sitting there looking over their shoulder, making sure they are doing the work. Like I said before, you could literally walk in the first day and do the whatever the welcoming class assignment is and not look at it again until the end of the marking period, and just have a zero and there is nothing you can do about it.

Facilitator: **Did that aspect of it come as a surprise to any of you? You knew you were taking an online course, but how independent it turned out to be – did that turn out to be a surprise?**
Student 6: I was actually surprised because I thought they – they don’t even care if you’re actually in the media center or not, or if you’re doing other homework. I thought they were going to make you stay in a certain section and actually do your work, but I know when the Honors Incentive program came around we were told we could just leave. It’s more like a study hall. So, I thought that was surprising – that they trust you so much to do it at home and aren’t pressuring you to sit down and do it.

Student 7: I don’t know. I kind of expected it – that you had that freedom.

Research Question 12

Facilitator: Should completion of an online course be a requirement at this high school? In the State of New Jersey? Nationwide?

Student 5: I think it would be tough to require somebody to do it. I could see maybe make an entire class take an online course, like a more simple subject like word processing where you just have to type. You don’t necessarily need a teacher there. You can have someone online kind of showing you what to do, and doing tutorials that way. I think requiring everyone to do almost an independent study online class probably isn’t a good idea.

Research Question 13

Facilitator: Have we missed anything?

[All students shook their heads, indicating no.]
Focus Group Responses: Student Group 3

Research Question 1
Facilitator: What are your post-high school plans for next year?
Student 8: College to study pre-med and science
Student 9: Elon University
Student 10: Northeastern University and going to Greece the first semester

Research Question 2
Facilitator: Where did you most frequently complete your assignments?
Student 8: At home or during VHS period at school
Student 9: At home
Student 10: At home

Research Question 3
Facilitator: When texting, students add (smiley) faces to their messages to represent a variety of feeling and emotions. Using the paper in front of you, draw the face that represents your experiences with the VHS program.
Student 8: 😊
Student 9: 😊
Student 10: 😊
Think back to this time last year when you began selecting your classes for senior year. Why did you decide to enroll in an online course?

It's something different. I felt like I completed all courses here that were offered at [our] high school that I really wanted to take, and I looked at the sheet for online courses, and it opened up some new possibilities that were interesting.

What course did you wind up taking?

Sports in American Society.

For me, I'm really interested in business and I had taken all the business courses at Ridge, so I ended up taking International Business just to see a different perspective for when I go to college if I want to just stick with business in the U.S. or go overseas and learn international business.

With me, some of the AP Bio and stuff that they had there, my Bio grade from freshmen year they didn't think probably was adequate enough to get into AP Bio, so I just took science courses that we didn't have here that would be useful. And I took Biotechnology and Anatomy and Physiology.

Did the courses meet your expectations?

I don't know. With mine, I didn't think that we would have to do virtual labs, but we actually had to do labs. For me, that wasn't as exciting because it was looking at pictures and expecting to analyze the stuff that we were seeing on the slides. I would have enjoyed being able to actually do the physical lab itself.

I would say that my expectations were met, but early on - I was more interested early on in doing the project and all the work, but eventually you had to start doing group projects and that's when it was hard because you had to rely on people. And you had a message board where you could contact them, but it was still always hit or miss. So in that sense, my expectations weren't met with the group project.

Yeah. I had the same problem. I had a group project where it was four people and we were all supposed to contribute something to the project and it only ended up being me and one other person contributing, which kind of disappointed me. I guess I didn't really know what to expect going into it because I had never taken a class like this. I didn't know...
what the content would be like, so I actually was very impressed with what they fit in the course and I thought it was very interesting.

Research Question 5

Facilitator: Has the completion of an online course better prepared you for the college/work transition?

Student 10: I think it did in the sense that it taught me that you have to work and be more independent. You were independent doing the work and you had to reach out to the teacher if you didn’t understand something, so I guess in college that will translate you into reaching out to the teacher more and being able to complete assignments on your own.

Student 9: I would say that and meeting new kids, I guess, and having to work with people you weren’t familiar with. And I guess what student ten said, about the attendance factor of it and not having someone standing over you looking at what you’re doing. It would probably transfer to college.

Student 8: Yeah, I would agree, just because you’re given responsibilities to complete your individual assignments and turn them in, and if you don’t do it, you just don’t get the grade. So, essentially it’s kind of like college.
Research Question 6

Facilitator: Using the paper in front of you, please develop a list of pros and cons of enrolling in a VHS online course. Identify the biggest advantage/disadvantage.

Table 7
Student Opinions of VHS Pros and Cons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student 8</td>
<td>1. Have a lot of time 2. Work at your own pace 3. Taking classes not offered at school*</td>
<td>1. Relationship aspect - no face-to-face contact* 2. No hands-on activities 3. No immediate questions answered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 9</td>
<td>1. Kids who are nervous talking in front of a class don’t have to worry about it 2. More flexible schedule because it could be completed at home or at school*</td>
<td>1. Don’t have any direct communication with teacher or classmates* 2. It is much easier to cheat with nobody supervising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 10</td>
<td>1. Get to take a course not offered at school 2. Learn whether or not you like a particular subject* 3. Be more independent</td>
<td>1. If you fall behind, it’s hard to catch up*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Denotes biggest advantage/disadvantage.
Research Question 7

Facilitator: In comparison to traditional courses, how difficult is the online curriculum? How effective was the teacher? How did tests and activities differ?

Student 9: I think it was probably right about the same level as an elective course at [our] high school. It definitely was not tougher, but it wasn’t easy where I could just fly through. I actually had to put some thought into it. It was probably right on par with elective courses taken here.

Student 10: Yeah. I’ll agree with that. As long as you did the work and you didn’t really slack that much, you were ok, just like the elective courses here. As long as you do the work, you’re fine. No harder, no less than an elective course here.

Student 8: I had both. I had an elective and then I had an honors level, and I didn’t know it was an honors level until I ended up in the class. So, the honors class was – they did give us a lot of work. It was like a normal honors class. We didn’t have a deadline. It’s just that we had to have all the stuff done by the end of the week, so it was lacking a little structure. But the elective that I had – the Biotechnology – that one I could fly through. It was really easy, but the Anatomy and Physiology – that one took more work.

Facilitator: How effective do you think the teacher was?

Student 8: My Biotechnology teacher in the first semester – he was pretty good. He would respond and he would post notes all the time at the top of new pages and tell us what we had to type and stuff. My honors teacher was less communicative. She would leave us notes, but she was expecting us to do a lot of work by ourselves.

Student 9: I found my teacher was very helpful. He always took the extra step to make sure that we knew what we were supposed to do. Whenever I tried to send him an email about something, he responded pretty quickly. So it wasn’t really too much different to having that teacher in the room.

Student 10: My teacher, for the most part, was helpful. There were a couple of times when a project or an assignment would be due, and I would send an email and I wouldn’t get an email until the next day. They were ok and more lenient with the grading because of that because it was their fault and they admitted it, but the communication there was definitely a little – it wasn’t instant. It would take a couple days to get a response from a teacher.
Facilitator: Were you ever in a situation where you felt that you needed something explained differently, or better, or had difficulty understanding the material where a teacher had to help you work through that?

Student 8: With our science labs, she would type up instructions for us to follow in the lab, like having a lab printout. But some of the time -- we were using this online lab program -- and some of the time to try and do some of the stuff was really confusing, so sometimes she would map-out ideas for us to solve the problems that she would think would come up. I thought that part of having to manage the lab part itself was kind of difficult. The labs, in general, tended to be difficult because it was online.

Facilitator: It was more the technology angle and not the content so much?

Student 8: Yeah.

Student 10: I think at the beginning, some things were difficult to understand just with the course and the requirements of it. But, generally from week to week, the assignments -- the requirements -- were the same, so once you got into the flow of things the first couple of week and then after that it started to get easier.

Facilitator: Were the assignments similar to ones that you've had in traditional courses?

Student 10: They were a little different, obviously, because they were online. They used the Internet a lot more. You had to read articles and watch videos on YouTube and online, and it wasn't like reading out of a book or doing textbook questions. It was more communicating with classmates online, doing discussions, and stuff like that, so it was definitely different.

Student 9: Yeah. I would say mine was kind of similar because I guess my teacher was big on case studies, so we did multiple case studies just about different companies and how you could either market them better or manage them better. And this year we did case studies in science, so it was very similar to that. And the other work in general was similar to book work where we would have an article online to read and we just answered questions, so it's kind of similar where we read a book and answer the questions.

Facilitator: Did any of you have group projects to work on in your courses? How did that go?

Student 8: I did. I had one per semester. The first one went ok. We were all able to communicate with one another and the project ended up coming out really well. I ended up putting all together in PowerPoint and uploading it. The
one I did for Anatomy and Physiology — we had to put together a five-week project. We had to research this disorder and there were two group members in our group that gave us information, and then they would disappear and we wouldn’t hear from them the rest of the week. And I went on vacation because it was our Spring Break, and so I had to drag my computer with me on vacation and I didn’t want to. I wanted to leave it at home and I had to email my teacher—we didn’t have Internet — so I had to find a place where I could get Internet so that I could tell them that I would not be able to help. And the project only ended up coming together with me and another student, so that part of it was kind of difficult. It’s really hard to manage a group project online with everyone on different schedules and in different places, and stuff like that.

Student 9: I would agree with that. We had one group project and it was pretty much us just pulling together our responses to questions in an essay form, and so each member of the group had a part — a question — to do for part of the essay, and it ended up being only me and one other kid out of four people ended up doing the essay, like the entire thing. We only heard from the other kids once and they didn’t really send us anything. And there was a way of us contacting them, but they never responded, so it was definitely difficult to communicate with other kids who are off doing other things. It’s easy to blame them, but you don’t know what they were doing.

Student 10: Mine was similar, too. It was a group of four and we all had to answer a question, and then one person was designated to put it all together and post the final. It was a one-page paper. It was only me and one other student who actually communicated and got everything together. And then we ended up finishing the project not even hearing from our other two group members at all. So, we thought it was pretty funny but they didn’t respond to anything. We sent them emails. We even told our teacher. We said, “Are they still in the class?” and she said they were. Clearly they didn’t care too much. The hard part is definitely is just connecting with other people. If you have other people who are willing to do the work then I guess all for the better, minus the two group members.

Facilitator: Did you get much of a sense of the other students and you being part of a class — of a class identify?

Student 9: I definitely do because in a normal class you always have the kids who are the first to raise their hands when there are questions asked, and you have the kids who write the most for an answer. You could tell during discussions the kids who were responding first, and who were writing long paragraphs for a couple sentence questions. And we were able to talk to one another, and that was one of the assignments — to get to know some of your classmates, so I definitely felt part of the class.
Student 10: Yeah. When responding to people on the message boards, because a lot of your assignments you would post your answers on the message boards and you would have to respond to them – you definitely got that sense of the overachievers and the underachievers by the way they posted. Some people would post more than necessary and others would post a sentence or two, so it definitely felt like you were in class when posting. But doing work, in general, when you had to hand in an assignment – it wasn’t so much like in a classroom. I just felt like I’m going to do an assignment and hand it in. It was kind of like two different worlds.

Student 8: I would agree. I know in the beginning we had to do a welcome assignment where we had to put-up a picture and say who we are and what we were doing, and all that stuff. So, getting to know them through that aspect made it feel kind of like a classroom. And in Anatomy and Physiology, our teacher had us define “What is a sense of community,” and so we actually had to post what we feel would help us all draw from the class, and what would make it seem more like a classroom. And we did in the discussions. It was really interesting to see the different viewpoints of the different kids. So, in one sense it did feel like it was a classroom but with the assignments, like he said, it was just working and putting in an assignment, and just doing work.

Research Question 8

Facilitator: If you were to give VHS a report card grade, what would it be? Explain. Was student support adequate? Technology? Course availability?

Student 9: I would give it a B’ because I thought it was a great class. It was definitely something I would do again, but it wasn’t like, “Oh everybody should do this – it was fantastic. We should completely eliminate school and classes, and just have everyone take classes online.” It wasn’t something outstanding like that but it was something I would definitely do and I would definitely recommend it to other people.

Student 8: I would agree. I would probably give it an A’ or a B’, or in between, because they do really have a lot of classes that you can choose from. The list is never ending, it seemed, when I looked through it. They do try and cover what is not covered in school, or what additional stuff that you would like to take. So, I think that they do a good job in that aspect. I think that overall I would probably give them an A’ because it varies with each kid and how the felt about the teacher and stuff.
Student 10: Probably between a B and a B', mainly because what they offer – they offer so many courses that it’s hard not to find a course that you wouldn’t want to be able to take. And the fact that they offer so many courses allows you to recommend it to really anybody. I would recommend it to anybody, definitely at least to try one course.

Facilitator: **Did any of you run into technological difficulties from their end, or things that you can remember when you had to turn to them for support?**

Student 9: There were a couple of times where I wasn’t able to login or the site wasn’t working, but it wasn’t ever for an extended period of time where it would stop you from working. I would just go on in a couple of hours.

Facilitator: **Any you are nodding your heads in agreement, student number 10 and student number 8?**

Student 8: Yeah

Student 10: Yes. I would agree with that.

Research Question 9

Facilitator: **How well did this high school meet your VHS needs, including technology, guidance, and support services?**

Student 9: I didn’t really need anybody here, other than getting started. The site coordinator did help us in that she called us in and would check up on us every now and then to see how we were doing, and how we were adjusting to the class. She always made sure we knew what we were doing.

Student 10: Yeah. It was nice that the site coordinator would call us in because it kind of kept you on track, too. She would check in, just to see how you were doing. She would pull up your grade real quick and as long as you were doing alright. Obviously if you had a bad grade, she would ask what was going on and maybe try and contact the teacher. Overall, it was good that she was willing to check in with us because if she didn’t check in – it made you more comfortable just to know that someone was watching just to make sure that you were on the right track.

Student 8: Yeah, I would agree. Having the site coordinator there just to introduce you, and any questions that you had, and checking up on you kept you accountable, I guess, because every so often she would look at your
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Facilitator: Were any of you in situations where the site coordinator had to conference with the instructor?

Student 9: Actually, I did. With that project where we only had two out of the four people in the group submit something, we got not a great grade on it obviously because only the half the people did it. I felt like I shouldn’t have gotten that grade because it wasn’t a reflection of the work I put in, because there was no way of me contacting those kids. There was no way for me to get them to do their work, and so, the site coordinator contacted my teacher and just explained the situation.

Facilitator: To a happier result?

Student 9: Yes.

Research Question 10

Facilitator: Would you encourage other students to enroll in a VHS course? If so, what advice would you give them?

Student 9: I definitely recommend them taking something different – something unique. Advice I would give them is just to do the work, and just make sure you login and do it. It’s not hard. It’s not difficult. It’s not like you won’t have time for it and if you just login every time and make sure you get the work done, it’s easy.

Student 10: Yeah. I would definitely encourage anybody to take it. Like I said earlier, just at least once, just to see how it is and working at how you have to work independently. But also to do the work, because I was sick for a couple of weeks and didn’t feel like doing any work, and it was kind of hard to catch up. I explained it to the teacher, and she understood that, but still the amount of work just from missing a week or two was piled on, and it was pretty hard to catch up. It’s manageable as long as you’re willing to put forth a good effort.

Facilitator: Was it harder to catch up in this course than it was in your face-to-face classes?

Student 10: Probably because my course didn’t really have any tests, whereas if you miss a week of school, it’s kind of hard to learn stuff and then take a test. Or if you miss a test, to make it up is sometimes hard. Whereas in this, it

grades, so if you didn’t feel like doing something. But overall, it was good on our end.
was just a lot of little assignments so in that sense it was different, but probably easier online. It's too different. At school, you miss a test or you miss work that leads up to a test for a week, and to relearn that and then have the teacher say you have to take a test, that's harder, I think, then learning the stuff. Because you're not really learning; you're more just doing the assignments and learning at the same time, so I guess it's easier online.

Facilitator: Because you're still going through the sequence of the topics?

Student 10: Yes.

Student 8: I would recommend it. With me, it gave me a perspective of whether or not I would do online courses after college or in college, or whatever, just because I'm graduating. I think it gave me a good perspective. I would recommend it. I would say try at least one, and if it doesn't work out, it doesn't work. Maybe you're just not an online course person. I know I prefer to be in a classroom versus taking a class online but I wouldn't have known that unless I had taken a class online.

Facilitator: So what do you think makes somebody be a not online course person?

Student 8: I don't know. I am a very relational person, so I like having a teacher so that I know who I am turning work into and if I need help—if they'll be there to help me. At least with my perspective, teachers really are an essential help to me when I go through school because I function off of relational stuff like that.

Facilitator: And that component wasn't as big online?

Student 8: Yeah, especially with Science. Having a teacher there to be like, "This is what you should see, and this is what results you should be getting" and stuff like that. That's the part of science that I like because you're comparing your results, and it was really difficult to compare results online, but that's alright.

Research Question 11

Facilitator: Would you encourage the administration to expand the program? If so, how?

Student 9: I don't think that it's something that should be forced on anybody. I do know there were definitely kids who were not aware of it and I'm pretty sure could have taken it, I guess. So, making it more known to juniors or
who ever has the option of taking it next year and get more people to take it. Because I know when I told people what class I have, they asked me, "What is that?"

Facilitator: And you found out about it, how?

Student 9: Last year, when we were picking our classes, they gave us a sheet about it. I don't think they really talked about it that much. So, some kids may have gotten the sheet and not looked at it and just thrown it away. But I looked at it and looked at the courses because I was interested. I guess just making the guidance counselors talk about it more.

Research Question 12

Facilitator: (Continuing from question 11 dialogue.) So, I'm guessing from what I'm hearing that nobody wants to make the statement that it should be required of all students in this school?

Student 10: Yeah, I wouldn't require it.

Research Question 13

Facilitator: Have we missed anything?

Student 8: I don't know. I definitely can say that I've taken stuff away from my classes. I remember a couple of months ago about how I took the class, and I started telling them about genetically modified organisms and they actually ended up being really interested about it. So it made me really excited that I was able to tell someone what I learned and that it genuinely interested them. So, it's not like you're taking the class cold turkey and you're not going to learn anything. You'll definitely learn something.