Virtual Educators Work to Protect Academic Integrity

Concerns arising about parents' role

By Katie Ash

For the Virtual High School program in the Prince William County, Va., district, students complete a majority of the schoolwork for their online classes at home—with one very important exception.

"We make them come in face to face to do their high-stakes exams," said Gina Jones, the administrative coordinator for the online learning program in the 83,500-student district near Washington.

Whether it's a midterm, the final exam, or a state standardized test, she said, online students must go to a brick-and-mortar school with a valid photo ID to be monitored while they take their tests.

Ensuring the authenticity of student work is an area of intense scrutiny for online course providers across the country. And a significant part of that scrutiny centers around whether parents are getting too involved in their children's online coursework.

"[Cheating and plagiarism in online courses] certainly is a valid concern," Ms. Jones said. "But in a lot of ways, we're better equipped to detect it, remedy it, or even to prevent it than a regular classroom," because of the increased amount of one-on-one attention each virtual student receives, she said.

The Virtual High School in Prince William, which offers e-courses to high school students in the district and delivered 1,400 online courses last school year, serves mostly students who are attending regular schools but need to fill in gaps with online courses.

Started in 2000, the virtual school has put measures in place to try to determine if students are cheating or getting too much help from parents.

"Sometimes, it's difficult to prove," Ms. Jones conceded, but teachers may suspect that "parents are maybe doing some of the work. They overtutor sometimes, and so we do have additional safeguards" to protect against that, such as requiring students to come in to a physical school building for routine quizzes or tests in addition to the high-stakes exams if the teacher does have suspicions, she said.

Computer Labs

Parents of students in the virtual high school are also given an "auditor" login—separate from the student's login—for the learning-management system, which allows parents to see everything in the course but does not allow them to turn in work, said Ms. Jones.

Teachers can then see how much time the auditor has spent logged in, and if the parent seems very familiar with the student's online learning but has not logged in as an auditor, it could raise a red flag, she said.
Similar to the safeguards in place at the virtual high school in Prince William County, students in the ACCESS distance learning program in Alabama are required to have a licensed proctor facilitate major assessments for virtual courses, said the program's administrator, Larry Raines.

ACCESS, which stands for Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators, and Students Statewide, served about 27,000 high school students across the state last school year. And while each local district can choose who is eligible to be a proctor for student exams—a parent, teacher, or teacher's aide, for instance—all proctors must go through training before they perform their jobs, Mr. Raines said.

Unlike the virtual high school in Prince William County, the vast majority of the students using ACCESS actually complete their coursework in computer labs during free periods in their school day, essentially taking the parent out of the picture, according to Mr. Raines.

### Boundaries for Parents

Full-time virtual schools are different from programs in which students take some courses online but take most face-to-face in their regular schools.

Full-time virtual schools typically rely heavily on parents as a crucial part of the students' education. Many require a parent, guardian, or other adult to commit to being a student's "learning coach," especially in the elementary grades.

How involved parents should be—and what to do if they overstep those boundaries—is largely determined by each virtual school, said Susan D. Patrick, the president and CEO of the Vienna, Va.-based International Association for K-12 Online Learning, or iNACOL.

"If you look across the range of full-time online learning programs ... there are different parent roles, and some programs involve the learning coach and parent at a much higher level," she said. "Each of those programs is developing their own guide for parents in terms of [their] role."

At the 8,000-student Commonwealth Connections Academy in Pennsylvania, for instance, each family goes through an orientation process that helps acclimate both student and parent to the virtual learning environment, said the school's CEO, Maurice Flurie.

"As the student gets older, based on how well the student is doing, you may have to reel things in [with the parents] or give them extra line," he said.

The school holds learning-coach outreach sessions at the beginning of each semester, in which parents meet face to face with teachers and other staff members from the virtual school to learn how to properly set up their child's work space, use the learning-management system, contact their child's teacher for questions, create a schedule for learning, and generally support their child's learning.

Amy Klosky is a parent of a student at Commonwealth Connections Academy, which serves K-12 students in a full-time virtual environment.

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**Tips For Ensuring Online Students Do Their Own Work**

1. Clearly state the school's honor code and educate students about it. Parents and other adults who play major roles in supporting the learners should also be informed about and agree to those academic-integrity standards.

2. Encourage communication between parents, teachers, and students to help prevent problems before they start. Making sure students know when it is OK to ask for help and when they need to work independently is key. Similarly, make sure that parents know what their role should be for each assignment and how much help is appropriate, especially for parents of students in the primary grades. It may be appropriate for a parent to help his or her child with a homework assignment, for example, but not with an exam.

3. Urge online teachers to have consistent and frequent communication with individual students and their parents. Scheduled discussions through webcams or over the phone can help the teacher evaluate students’ comprehension and establish a baseline for judging their work later on.

4. Require students to turn in written work often. Knowing what a student's work typically looks like can help raise red flags if the student is getting inappropriate help.

5. Run written assignments through plagiarism-detection software to make sure papers aren't copied and pasted from Internet sources.

6. Require students to travel to secure sites for exams and high-stakes assessments, so they can be monitored during the tests.

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One of her three daughters, Lindsey, enrolled in the school in 5th grade and is now entering 8th grade. When Lindsey started, there was an initial meeting with her teacher in which Ms. Klosky explicitly agreed that she would not allow Lindsey to use her textbooks during tests, for example, and that she would not give Lindsey the answers during tests.

"The teachers really help you with that boundary and teach you how to stay on track and not to overstep," Ms. Klosky said.

Having clear communication between teachers and parents is critical to ensuring academic integrity and authenticity of student work, said Kristin Kipp, a virtual teacher at Jeffco Virtual Academy in Golden, Colo., part of the 84,000-student Jefferson County district.

Ms. Kipp, who was named the National Online Teacher of the Year in 2011, has taught online for four years and taught in a face-to-face classroom for six years before that.

She recently saw firsthand what it was like to be a parent of an online student when her son took kindergarten online.

"There were times when my child did kindergarten that [his assignment said]: 'Please do not help your child on this system, because it's an adaptive system. We want them to choose wrong answers so we can help them understand why it's wrong,' " she said.

That direct communication was helpful for her to know when she should be looking over her son's shoulder and correcting him and when he should be allowed to work through it on his own, Ms. Kipp said.

'Checking on Authenticity'

While technology may make it easier to cheat, it also helps teachers detect plagiarism and forms of cheating. Many virtual schools now regularly run assignments through plagiarism-detection software, such as Turnitin, to catch such wrongdoing.

In addition, many virtual instructors use webconferencing software to hold scheduled sessions with students in which they can see and hear them work, allowing the teachers to better gauge students' levels of understanding.

Banji Judge, a 4th grade teacher for the Arizona Virtual Academy, run by the online learning company K12 Inc., said that is one way for her to verify the progress her students are making.

Students' assessments are also time-stamped, said Ms. Judge, "so if a student goes in and they take an assessment and fail it, and then five minutes later they take it again [and do significantly better], that red flag is in my system."

At the Florida Virtual School, each student is required to go through a discussion-based assessment in real time with his or her teacher at the end of each module to check for understanding. The teacher and the student use a webcam to communicate, ensuring that it is in fact the student who is answering the questions independently, said Robin Winder, the school's director of student learning.

"The teacher is checking on authenticity and asking higher-level questions to make sure [students] comprehend the material," she said.

Indeed, the strongest indicator of authenticity of student work is a teacher's relationship with his or her students, experts say.

"The relationship that the teacher develops is a huge piece of it," Ms. Winder said.

Alexis Swingle, 16, a senior at Battlefield High School in Prince William County, has taken some online courses through the virtual high school program to help her be eligible to graduate after three years in high
school. She does not believe in cheating, but is aware it happens. She thinks whether a student cheats has more to do with the student than the type of class he or she is taking.

"Kids cheat all the time. They could be doing it right in front of a teacher's desk taking a test or in front of their own computer," she said. "It depends on what kind of kid you are."