Virtual K-12 enrollments in Michigan have surged in the last three years while completion rates have declined slightly. But beyond that, according to a new report, little insight can be gleaned about the effectiveness of virtual schools owing to the poor quality of data reported to the state.

The report, released late last month by the Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute (part of Michigan Virtual University), revealed several trends in online enrollments and completion in Michigan:

- 55,271 students were enrolled in at least one online course in 2013-2013 in Michigan compared with 36,348 in 2010-2011.
- There were 185,053 virtual course enrollments in 2012-2013 compared with 89,921 in 2010-2011.
- Math made up the largest percentage of enrollments (20 percent), followed by English (18 percent), social sciences/history (17 percent) and sciences (15 percent).
- Overall completion rates for virtual courses declined from 66 percent in 2010-2011 to 60 percent in 2012-2013.
- In 2012-2013, completion rates were highest for students in rural areas (72 percent) versus suburbs (61 percent), cities (59 percent) and towns (58 percent).
- Completion rates were also highest among students who took only one or two online courses (68 percent) versus three to four courses (59 percent) or five or more courses (55 percent).
- Completion rates also tended to drop drastically in middle and high school. At 94 percent, second graders had the highest completion rate. At 47 percent, ninth-graders had the lowest.

The report, called "Michigan's K-12 Virtual Learning Effectiveness Report," also looked at institutions offering virtual courses in the state of Michigan. In 2012-2013, there were 906 entities offering a virtual course of some kind (24 percent of all educational entities in the state). That's up from 654 in 2010-2011 (18 percent of all entities).

The researchers cautioned against drawing too many conclusions from the data available, however, owing to "concerns about the accuracy of the data presently being reported to the state for virtual enrollments."

According to the researchers: "While the current state reporting requirements make it possible for schools to mark an enrollment as being delivered virtually, examination of the local course titles makes it clear that thousands of enrollments are likely not reporting proper data for this variable. Focusing awareness and training toward the proper reporting procedures could go a long way toward helping to improve data quality."
Further, they said that current data collection methods fail to allow for "differentiation on other important variables," such as whether a course was taken for credit recovery, who taught the course and which company or organization provided the course content. "Without such data, however, critical information for better understanding the successes and failures of virtual models is missing."

They also cautioned against drawing inferences about the quality or effectiveness of virtual schools based on current data, since the results were mixed. "On the one hand," they argued, "there is evidence within this report that may lead some to claim that K-12 virtual learning simply is not working in Michigan. Detractors could cite lower completion rates for virtual enrollments, or they could focus on the finding that the results for students in poverty are not on par with students who are not. On the other hand, there is evidence that virtual learning is clearly working. Proponents could cite that about 40% of Michigan schools had an 80% or higher completion rate for their virtual enrollments. Or that students who take one or two virtual courses a year have a completion rate of almost 70%. Both statistics seem like even more significant accomplishments given that the data indicate schools tend to limit virtual learning options for students, seeing it more as a credit recovery option than as an initial credit solution."

The complete report, "Michigan's K-12 Virtual Learning Effectiveness Report," is freely available through the Michigan Virtual University site.

About the Author

David Nagel is the executive producer for 1105 Media's online K-12 and higher education publications and electronic newsletters. He can be reached at dnagel@1105media.com. He can now be followed on Twitter at http://twitter.com/THEJournalDave (K-12) or http://twitter.com/CampusTechDave (higher education). You can also connect with him on LinkedIn at http://www.linkedin.com/profile/view?id=10390192.