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The purpose of this study was to assess the perceptions of virtual schools held by those who are not enrolled in, or involved with, online classes. To do this, several focus groups were conducted in conjunction with a virtual school consortium in Florida. In order to convey the thematic findings of these focus groups, a summary has been prepared. This synopsis first describes the analysis and methodology used. It then discusses the findings drawn from the study based on the analysis.

### **Research Purpose, Design, and Analysis**

The NEFEC focus group comprised five students, five parents, and four teachers. These participants were recruited from traditional, local area brick and mortar schools a rural county in Florida. This study was designed to assess perceptions of online learning from those who were enrolled in traditional learning environments. Participants were selected from volunteers, with at least two participants per grade-level group (i.e., elementary, middle, and high school) being chosen for each participant group (i.e., student, parent, or teacher) Staff from the Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities (COLSD) met with each participant group separately and facilitated a discussion surrounding the expected roles, process, and enrollment of online schooling.

Teacher transcripts were excluded from analysis because they had difficulty discussing education within the context of online learning and focused instead on talking about their experiences in the traditional classroom. Transcripts from the other two focus groups were reviewed and independently coded by three separate reviewers. Codes for the focus groups were created during each reviewer's initial transcript analyses. These codes were created with the goal of summarizing key areas discussed by the participants. The three transcript reviewers then came together to check on first-round coding and recode transcript areas that were not met with universal agreement. Using these conceptual codes agreed on by the reviewers, a master list of conceptual codes was made and checked to ensure that conceptual definitions across the transcript codes had not shifted.

### **Research Findings and Implications**

Based upon the concept groups found during analyses, summations of key findings from the NEFEC focus group were derived. These findings were seen as the conceptual themes underlying either the individual participant groups or as a broad occurrence that was seen across both participant groups. A brief summary of findings that were distinct across individual participant groups (i.e., teachers, students) will be presented and then followed by a summary of overall themes seen across participant groups.

The parents reasoned that because they would need to provide greater assistance to their children in an online school, the amount of work required of them would be greater in the online setting than in the traditional setting. Noting that this additional burden would be further increased by work in their professional lives, the parents expressed doubt that they would be capable of providing their children the necessary support to succeed in online education. As one parent said, “So, if you have more than one child then you would really have to not have another job. I could not work the 60 hours a week I do and do school.” Likewise, students saw the parent as a vital part of the online classroom that is responsible for motivating and keeping them on task. One child stated that parents, “are supposed to do the teacher’s role.” Students saw the parent as having a more demanding job when their child is enrolled in the online classroom as compared to the traditional, brick and mortar school.

Particular sets of traits were identified by parents that they believe would exemplify the type of student who would benefit the most from enrollment in online schools. They saw children who were self-motivated and organized as the ones who would be able to perform the most successfully. Students also saw self-motivation as a characteristic of successful students in virtual programs. Parents also saw virtual schooling as something that was more appropriate for older, high school age students. Parents also saw students with a wide range of disabilities as being not well suited to learning in the online classroom. Contrasted to parents, students saw a wide range of ages and disability types as being appropriate for online schools from “kindergarten to college.”

When it comes to what constitutes the online learning environment, most perceptions held by both parents and students and parents were factually accurate. Online classrooms were said to involve a variety of interaction modalities including video chat, text-based chatrooms, and other collaborative workspaces where teachers and students are able to interact. Teachers are also perceived to be readily available by phone. One child stated that, “[online classrooms] are just like a regular classroom except you’re not there, so you can do anything you can do in an online classroom that you can do in a regular classroom except touch things.” Students were able to identify that those courses with lab components (e.g., science courses) would require greater independence to gather the required components to conduct the experiments.

A lack of access to computers was seen as a potential limiting factor for all children being able to enroll in online learning. Parents and students both identified that there are many homes where a computer, an internet connection, or the funds to acquire those resources are not available. However, parents were able to identify some programs designed to assist with ensuring that technology is accessible for families that do not have the necessary technological resources. Despite this, finances were seen as a potential hindrance for enrollment in virtual schools for some families.

Parents see a lack of supervision as a weakness for online schools. They report concerns over the ability of the teacher to ensure that the child is able to stay focused on the learning material and that the child is not cheating. Although they believe teachers are easily accessible and highly involved, parents see the lack of immediate, physical oversight by the teacher as a potential barrier to their child's success. This contrasts their belief in oversight in the traditional classroom where, "if the teacher is in front of the room then their focus is there."

Parents were also concerned about the opportunity for students to be engaged in extra-curricular activities. These extra-curricular activities were seen as the primary place for the child to socialize and build friendships. Parents believe that online classrooms produce limited opportunities for kids to build personal friendships with their classmates. School dances, for instance, were brought up several times as something they believed were important and were missing from virtual schools. Socialization skills were seen as the biggest aspect of learning that would be difficult to develop for a child they, "may not get [them] if they are at home [in an online school]."

Parents see students enrolling in online environments for a wide variety of reasons. Health-based needs, safety from bullying, and enrichment of standard curriculum were all identified as likely reasons for enrollment. High school students in Florida are also required to take a course online at some point in their K-12 education.

Students saw the ability to adapt their pace of learning so that they could go at their own pace and the ability to schedule learning based on personal needs to be strengths of online learning. However, they do note that pacing can also lead to problems of falling behind.

### **Summative Findings**

The purpose of this study was to assess the perceptions of virtual schools held by those who are not enrolled in, or involved with, online classes. Based upon nationwide research conducted by COLSD using surveys and case studies, the perceptions of online schools reported here are consistent with the practices and concerns reported with students, parents, and teachers in online environments. Parents and students appear to have few misconceptions about what occurs in an online school. While parents and students may be aware of legitimate concerns mirrored by those enrolled full-time in a virtual school (e.g., socialization, etc.), they do not appear aware of the way online schools can be structured in an attempt to address those concerns.

Sincerely,



Diana Greer  
Project Director