VIRTUAL SCHOOLS: PARENT CHOICE FOR K-8 ALTERNATIVES

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Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Education of Baker University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education
in
Educational Leadership

April, 2011

Clinical Research Study Committee

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ABSTRACT

Expanded opportunities for school choice continue to grow as an instructional alternative. This study focused on the fairly new option of virtual education for elementary and middle school students. The purpose of this research was to gather data for the following research questions: How do parents perceive the institutional setting of the public school they left in favor of the Lawrence Virtual School (LVS)?, what sources of information do parents who chose LVS rely on in their decision making?, who has influence on parents who chose LVS?, what are the interests of parents who chose LVS?, and what is the ideology about education of parents who chose LVS? The study used a mixed methods approach to examine and evaluate the circumstances of parent decision making in situations involving the transfer of a student from a traditional public school to LVS, a K-8 public virtual school available for students who reside in the state of Kansas. An online survey was administered to 1,000 parent participants and telephone interviews were conducted with six parents. Results suggest that parents who have transferred their child from a traditional public school to LVS value a more active role in their child's education, the flexibility of time, and pace of learning offered at LVS. Parents indicated the importance of school choice in educating their individual children. Results also revealed parents' level of dissatisfaction with the lack of school support in meeting their child's unique needs. Teachers were specifically viewed by parents, as not being able to meet the academic and/or emotional needs of their child. All participants had experienced this lack of support in a traditional public school setting. This study has implications for positive change in virtual education for K -8 students and their families.

DEDICATION

As a public school educator, considering transferring one of my own children from a public school to a virtual school was the last decision I thought I would ever make. However, after coming to the realization that there just had to be a better way to educate my son, like many of the parents represented in this study, I too turned to the search that led to a virtual school being the best fit for my child. Along with all the other virtual school parents, I am thankful for this alternative to educate our children. I would like to dedicate this study to virtual school parents and students everywhere, especially to my own virtual school student, Chance. If not for him this research study would not have been conducted. I also dedicate this study to my very own public school student, Michaela Rae, who always keeps it in perspective for me. My dedication would not be complete without recognizing my husband, Kevin, for helping me to actually make it to graduation and for teaching Chance, so he too may achieve his dreams. In addition, I dedicate this to my parents, Michael Ray and Elizabeth Smith, for supporting me in my educational aspirations. Lastly, I dedicate this study in memory of my son, Blake, and my Granny Ray, who both continue to be my inspiration.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research study would not have been a reality without the support of so many people. I would like to thank my committee members for all of their advice and encouragement they have provided. I am very grateful to my major advisor, Dr. Harold Frye, for his guidance through this journey. Your wisdom and patience were just what I needed. In addition, I also would like to thank Peg Waterman for her expertise. I have learned so much from you and appreciated your insights and help with analyzing the data. During this process, both Dr. Charmaine Henry and Dr. Georgetta May have shared their direction and advice which helped me immensely in my writing and professional growth throughout this study.

I would like to acknowledge my friend and fellow cohort member, the late David Parmenter, for introducing me to the possibilities of virtual education for my son and this study. Lastly I want to acknowledge the Lawrence Public School district, and Mr. Gary Lewis, the principal of the Lawrence Virtual School, for his assistance during this study.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

Change is transforming elementary and secondary education. Technological advances and improved knowledge about how students learn are being embedded into the curriculum and instructional models in schools. One transformation in education is seen through differentiated instruction in the form of online learning for both students and teachers. Students have the opportunity to choose educational resources that previously were unavailable. Education for some students today is very different from their parents' education. This is a positive change for students when they have the chance to use tools that meet their individual needs (Cavanaugh, 2009).

Cavanaugh (2009) explains distance education as an approach to expanding school learning time by utilizing technology. This approach allows for a more flexible individualized education, as students are not bound to the length of a typical school day. Learners are in control in distance education, as they are able to make decisions on when and how much time they spend on an activity. Flexible courses and self pacing allow students to learn the content at an accelerated pace or to spend additional time as needed. Distance education provides an efficient learning environment. It is a learner centered educational process that allows teachers to focus on the specific needs of individual students. Therefore, it is no surprise that millions of K-12 students are using distance learning opportunities for their education (Cavanaugh, 2009).

Also, Cavanaugh (2009) found when she conducted research that the virtual school movement in K-12 education is rapidly increasing. The number of elementary and secondary students taking online courses increased from around 200,000 to nearly 2

million between 2001 and 2007. Student enrollment in virtual education easily could top several million by 2012. By 2008, 44 states had many supplemental programs. Some programs offer additional online courses to students in their traditional schools, while other full time programs are provided for students to take all of their courses online (Cavanaugh, 2009).

Watson, Gemin, and Ryan (2009) found that some states that do not offer online educational programs for K-12 students are in the planning stages of implementation. In 2009 state virtual schools operated in 27 states. Washington, Oregon, California, Wyoming, Nebraska, and Massachusetts provided state led education online initiatives that supplied resources to school districts in their state, but they did not offer all of the services available through state virtual schools. Over the past year state virtual school enrollments have grown considerably. Montana and Maine have now passed laws to create a new state virtual school. As of the 2008-2009 school year the Florida Virtual School continued to be the largest state virtual school, with more than 150,000 course enrollments. While the overall trend for online learning is to increase opportunities for students, some online options have been limited due to budget constraints or state policy decisions (Watson, Germin, & Ryan, 2009).

In Kansas, virtual schools are operated through local school districts. Virtual schools provided services for less than one percent of the K-12 student population in the 2008-09 school year, in which forty school districts provided virtual schools (Wenger and Dorsey, 2009). Virtual schools in Kansas are defined by State law as any school or educational program that:

- Is offered for credit

- Uses distance learning technologies which predominately use internet based methods to deliver instruction
- Involves instruction that occurs with the teacher and student in separate locations
- Requires the student to make academic progress toward the next school grade level
- Requires the student to demonstrate subject matter competence
- Requires age-appropriate students to complete state assessment tests

(Wenger and Dorsey, 2009)

During the 2008 session, both the Kansas Senate Education Subcommittee on Virtual Schools and the House Education Subcommittee on Virtual Schools proposed legislation concerning virtual schools. The Virtual School Act, created by 2008 SB 669, incorporated most of these recommendations. The Kansas Department of Education was granted general supervision and regulation of all virtual schools. Also, every school year a district has a virtual school, the school district is entitled to Virtual School State Aid. Virtual School Aid is calculated by multiplying the number of full-time equivalent students enrolled in a virtual school times 105.0 percent of the unweighted Base State Aid per pupil (BSAPP). The BSAPP was $4,012 for the 2009-2010 school year. An advanced placement course funding of 8.0 percent of the BSAPP is paid to a virtual school for every student who is enrolled in at least one advanced placement course, if the student is enrolled in a resident school district that does not offer advanced placement courses, has at least 260 students enrolled in the district, or is over 200 square miles. Monies received as Virtual School aid must be deposited in a Virtual School Fund. Virtual school expenses are paid from this fund. The bill also requires school districts to

provide sufficient teacher training for those teaching in virtual programs or schools (Kansas Legislative Research Department, 2009).

Online learning and virtual schools could improve public education. However, a report by the Legislative Division of Post Audit (LPA) indicated the academic performance of virtual schools was lower than results reported by traditional schools. Virtual school policies in Kansas were seen by a Kansas Department of Education audit committee as being adequate, but not properly enforced at the state level. The ultimate form of accountability however comes from families who willingly choose or choose not to use virtual schools. Several advantages of a virtual education were presented in this report. A few advantages include:

- Students may take classes in which local schools lack qualified teachers
- Students have the opportunity to take advanced placement and college level courses
- Flexible Scheduling can help schools retain at-risk students
- Programs can be tailored to match the way a student learns
- One-on-one interaction between the teacher and student is an integral part
- Home school parents who chose to use virtual schools had a support network along with a curriculum that meets state standards
- Small communities benefit as families do not need to move to pursue educational opportunities for their children
- Virtual schools are able to expand without the additional cost of building new schools that become outdated and expensive to maintain

(LaPlante, 2007)

One area of growth in online learning is seen in virtual schools, which do not usually use brick and mortar facilities. The Lawrence Virtual School is one example in Kansas in which a student can take the entire curriculum online. All virtual schools in Kansas are under the legal and fiscal control of a traditional school district; LVS is a part of USD 497. Some virtual schools in Kansas have students enrolled within thirty miles of the district. Over ninety percent of virtual school students in Wichita, Shawnee Mission, Leavenworth, and Cherryvale live within thirty miles of these host districts. Other programs attract students from greater distances. Lawrence and Emporia have forty-five percent of their virtual school students enrolled from more than thirty miles away. Affluent parents are able to choose a district or school by moving to a certain school district. Virtual schools provide all parents with another less expensive way to choose a school (LaPlante, 2007).

Background of the Study

The Lawrence Virtual School was founded in 2003, by Gary Lewis, a principal hired by the Lawrence School District specifically to create a virtual school. Courses are offered to students who may be gifted, home-schooled, home-bound, transitioning from private to public schools, or those not finding success in traditional public schools. Lewis reviewed many options, and after working with a trial program for four weeks, he selected the K(12) Curriculum from a company in Virginia that provides a web-based learning management system for online lessons, schedules, progress monitoring, assessments, and communication ("Leading the way: virtual schools", 2006).
After working with a trial program for four weeks, the decision was made to select the K(12) program.

In a K-8 environment a parent works along with the teacher, serving as a learning coach for the child. The learning coach facilitates progress through daily instruction and lessons, while modifying schedule and pace to meet his or her child's individual needs. Learning coaches are not alone in educating their child, because certified teachers communicate with parents by e-mail, telephone, online web meetings, and in person in many situations. Teachers are constantly ensuring mastery, monitoring progress, as well as developing specific intervention plans for struggling students. All facets of the instructional experience are managed by the teacher (K-8 Program, 2009, Learning Coach and Teacher Roles section, para. 1).

The Lawrence Virtual School began enrolling students for the first school year in July 2004. The building is located on 5.15 acres of land which was formerly the location of Centennial Elementary. LVS expands the definition of public school choice for families residing in Lawrence and across the state of Kansas (LVS website, retrieved, November 15, 2009). Target enrollment for the school's first year was 25 students. However, in three months, 167 students were enrolled by their parents. In 2009 there were 1069 students enrolled in grades K-8 from across the state ("Leading the way: Virtual schools," 2006).

Students begin LVS by taking an online placement test in order to determine their curriculum level. In the next 24 hours accounts are created and all learning materials, such as books, CD's, manipulatives, and art supplies are sent to student homes from K(12). Enrollment management and community outreach are support services offered. The K(12) curriculum includes math, language arts, science, history, art, and music ("Leading the way: Virtual schools", 2006). Furthermore, LVS has a supportive school

community which organizes fun and informative monthly activities where parents, students, and staff share successes (LVS website, retrieved, November 15, 2009).

Lewis believes virtual education is only successful with parental support. He has said, "As long as parents are committed to providing exceptional education for their children, virtual education will work" ("Leading the way: Virtual schools", 2006, para 8). The key to the success of virtual education is teaching both students and parents. As families go through the curriculum process LVS works with parents on interventions and strategies to implement with students. Parents who understand how curriculum is developed are more prepared to teach their children. K(12) supports communication for families through discussion boards, online training, additional resources, and enrichment activities. Lewis believes the K(12) program provides an ideal environment for educating children through a virtual environment, even children with special needs ("Leading the Way: Virtual schools, 2006).

Utilizing the City-Data website enrollment statistics, the following table outlines student enrollment in LVS from the fall of 2005 to the fall of 2009. The trend of increased student enrollment continued to be consistent each school year.

Table 1

2005-2009 Student Enrollment

Year	Enrollment
Fall 2009	1069
Fall 2008	722
Fall 2007	550
Fall 2006	307
Fall 2005	167

Note: From City-Data http://www.citydata.com/school/lawrence-virtual-school-ks.html

Utilizing the City-Data website student enrollment statistics, the following table outlines student enrollment represented in each grade level at LVS during the 2009-2010 school year. Student enrollment was evenly distributed in grades kindergarten through the eighth grade. Kindergarten had the least number of enrolled students with 91 enrollees, while third and fifth grade were tied for the highest enrollment with 137 enrollees.

Table 2

2009-2010 Student Enrollment: 1069

Grade Level	Student Enrollment
Kindergarten	91
First Grade	111
Second Grade	114
Third Grade	137
Fourth Grade	115
Fifth Grade	137
Sixth Grade	120
Seventh Grade	134
Eighth Grade	110
All Grades	1069

Note: From City-Data http://www.city-data.com/school/lawrence-virtual-school-ks.html

Utilizing the City-Data website gender enrollment statistics, the following table outlines enrollment by gender represented in LVS from 2009 to 2010. Both male and female students were comparatively equally distributed during the 2009-2010 school year.

Table 3

2009-2010 Student Enrollment by Gender

Gender	Student Enrollment
Males	559
Females	510

Note: From City-Data http://www.city-data.com/school/lawrence-virtual-school-ks.html

Problem Statement

The use of virtual education continues to rise as an instructional alternative for families across the United States. Understanding parent decision making is necessary to addressing academic and social needs in both virtual and traditional public school settings. There is limited previous research on parent decision making regarding virtual school choice. However, Rebecca Erb addressed parent decision making in her 2004 study, *From Traditional Public School to Cyber Charter: How Parents Decide*. This study was conducted in Pennsylvania more than five years ago. Erb found parents chose virtual education for their children based on class size, school size, school safety, disciplinary issues, teacher quality, and administrative support for their children. What is not known is whether future studies on parent decision making yield the same results as this past study.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to examine and evaluate the circumstances of parent decision making in situations involving the transfer of a student from a traditional public school to the Lawrence Virtual School (LVS), a public virtual school currently providing educational services to K-8 students who reside in Kansas.

Significance

The findings from this study should help local and state leadership understand the underlying factors behind the parent decision making process in removing students from traditional public schools in favor of enrolling them in virtual schools. This mixed method study was designed to accomplish the following: 1) inform policy makers and school officials in their decision making process, 2) provide districts already implementing virtual schools with data to improve their current practices, 3) assist districts that plan to begin a virtual school or program, and 4) add data and evidence to the limited research base regarding parent choice of K-8 virtual education.

Research Questions

Five research questions guided the study:

1. How do parents perceive the institutional setting of the public school they left in favor of the Lawrence Virtual School?
2. What sources of information do parents who chose the Lawrence Virtual School rely on in their decision making?
3. Who has an influence on parents who chose the Lawrence Virtual School?
4. What are the interests of parents who chose the Lawrence Virtual School?

5. What is the ideology about education of parents who chose the Lawrence Virtual School?

Delimitations

1. The study was limited to parents who were from a single Kansas virtual school, whose school population was approximately 1,000.
2. The study was limited to parents who had at least one child enrolled in kindergarten through the eighth grade in the Lawrence Virtual School.

Assumptions

For the purpose of this study, the following assumptions were presumed.

1. All parents that participated in this study were honest in answering the survey questions.
2. All parents that participated in this study were honest in answering the interview questions.
3. The Lawrence Virtual School System provided a comprehensive list of parents who have at least one K - 8 child enrolled at LVS.

Definition of Terms

To avoid confusion, the researcher provided definitions for several specific terms, in order to improve the clarity in which information is presented. The following terms are defined for the purpose of this study.

Distance Learning. This refers to the transmission of educational or instructional programming to geographically dispersed individuals and groups via telecommunications (Title IX U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

K(12). This is one of the most researched and effective learning programs in the nation in which students learn through instruction, texts, hands on experiences, and an easy to learn online learning system, supported by supplemental materials (LVS website).

Lawrence Virtual School (LVS). LVS is a state licensed public online school for K-8 students residing in the state of Kansas (LVS website).

Learning Coach. This refers to a parent or other responsible adult that works in conjunction with a certified virtual school teacher, by facilitating daily lessons, schedules, pace, and progress with the student (K(12) website).

Overview Methodology

This study used a mixed methods research design. The method of data collection was both quantitative and qualitative in design. An online survey instrument and interview questions were developed for this study. The intended outcome was to identify the factors that cause parents to transfer their children from a traditional public school to a virtual school. The sample for this study included approximately 1,000 parents of children who were attending the Lawrence Virtual School during the 2009-2010 school year. Research respondents were asked to complete a survey and participate in an interview regarding factors contributing to enrolling their children at the Lawrence Virtual School.

Organization of the Study

This study is divided into five chapters. Chapter one includes the introduction, background of the study, problem statement, significance of the study, purpose of the study, delimitations, assumptions, research questions, definition of key terms, methodology overview, and summary. Chapter two is a review of current literature

related to this study and addresses previous research studies in the area of virtual education. Chapter three describes the methodology of the study which includes the research design, population and sample, sampling procedures, instrumentation, measurement, validity and reliability, data collection procedures, data analysis, and limitations. Chapter four describes the data analysis using narrative, graphs, and tables. Chapter five provides the conclusions based on the study. Chapter five includes findings related to the literature, implications for action, recommendations for future research, and concluding remarks.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter presents a specific review of literature examining factors contributing to parents choosing to leave traditional public schools in favor of virtual school in regards to educating their children. This literature review includes a historical overview of the growing trend of virtual education, school choice particularly for the state of Kansas, and factors influencing parent decision to choose virtual schools for educating their K-8 children. The purpose of this research was to study and analyze the dynamics of parent decision making in situations involving the transfer of a student from a traditional public school to the Lawrence Virtual School, a public virtual school.

Historical Perspective of Public School Education

Before public schools were available education was provided by parents and family members. Then more specialized levels of learning were introduced through religious beliefs and craftsmen. Societies were often rigid in deciding which children would have an education and what that educational content would entail. Children were taught both skills and values they would need to contribute in society that was mainly determined by their socioeconomic status. Colonial America followed this trend; however a few towns did have public schools. Basic literacy was not seen as a necessity during this time, other than for being able to read the Bible. However, by the 1840s economic development changed the way society viewed education. The foundation of public schools, common schools, began to form. These schools relied on local property taxes for support rather than tuition. Public school for the masses evolved during this time as an integral part of America (Resnick, 2004).

School reformers modeled school changes on English standard which included voluntary enrollments, religious instruction, fee-based education, and local control. Over time education was shifted away from the family and community toward a centrally regulated system ran by educational professionals. In the mid-nineteenth century, Horace Mann used the government to impose a compulsory, secular public school system on immigrant students in hopes of shaping their values. Their goal did not go as planned as immigrants had quite a bit of control of local school boards. In 1870 the United States Office of Education started to keep statistics on the nation's schools and normal schools began to train women and some men in how and what to teach. Also the states decided that most of school costs should be paid by local districts instead of by parents. By 1918 every state had a compulsory education law. Popular among native born Americans and immigrants locally controlled elementary schools became widespread by the late nineteenth century (Peterson, 2010).

Secondary education began to grow rapidly in the early decades of the twentieth century. Schools became signs of progress in small communities and they were seen as a symbol of prosperity, therefore initiating competition among cities for status (Peterson, 2010). High school graduation rates were extremely high during this period. Millions of immigrant children were educated and students were prepared for an industrial society. Public schools had the ability to educate more students for a different life than their parents (Resnick, 2004). In the early twentieth century John Dewey used state governments to reduce the amount of school boards by shifting the power from politicians to educational professionals, while introducing a new child centered approach (Peterson, 2010). Every year more children found success in the nation's public school

system. In 1930, thirty percent of students graduated on time and by 1950 more than fifty percent had graduated (Resnick, 2004).

The goal of public schools shifted to preparing students for higher education from the 1950's to the 2000's, as demands for American jobs became more technical and driven by information. Also more attention was placed on providing equal access to minorities, students with disabilities, and students with limited English language. Many African American students and other minorities had been receiving an inadequate education through unequal funding between wealthy and poor communities and segregation in school systems. In 1954, in the landmark case Brown vs. the Board of Education the U.S. Supreme Court reversed the policy of separate but equal education ruling. By 1972, 90 percent of African American students in the south were enrolled in integrated schools (Resnick, 2004). Hardly any further desegregation occurred after 1972. In 2000, more than seventy percent of African American students attended schools in which they were the majority population. Almost 40 percent attended schools with 90 percent or more of the student population was nonwhite, which was around the same percentage as in the early seventies (Peterson, 2010).

Twenty years after Brown vs. the Board of Education, public schools addressed providing equal educational opportunity to students whose primary language was not English in Lau vs. Nichols, to students with disabilities as mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and for girls through the Title IX of the Elementary and Secondary School Act. Congress established these universal rights because too many school districts did not do it on their own. Public schools continue to

meet these challenges by providing a range of both educational and social services to support students (Resnick, 2004).

Public schools have been criticized throughout history due to average standards and curriculum. For example, in the 1920s education placed a greater emphasis on vocational training which was great for the business community, but some were concerned over the loss of high school courses such as Latin and Greek. By the 1940s many felt that core academic subjects were not the focus with the increased emphasis on socialization and of the teaching of life skills. Then in 1957, public school criticism reached a high when the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, the first satellite. The public school system took the blame for this especially in the areas of math and science. 1983 brought the Nation at Risk report, once again public schools were criticized (Resnick, 2004).

Class size has also been an area of criticism in public schools. The benefits of smaller classes seem clear to both educators and parents. Many studies show little if any benefit to whether or not students actually learn more in a smaller class. However in a high quality experimental study of reducing class size in Tennessee, it showed substantial benefits for students in grades kindergarten through third grade. Even with limited research on the benefits of reducing class size some states are making this a requirement. In 1996 teacher unions were able to persuade the California Legislature to hold funds from school districts that did not limit class size to twenty students in grades kindergarten through third, and later a similar law was passed for high school classes. Class size reduction in Florida was mandated through a state constitutional amendment, which said the maximum number of students in a core subject class assigned to a teacher in 2011

could not exceed eighteen students from kindergarten to the third grade, 22 students in fourth to eighth grade, and 25 students in ninth to twelfth grade. Nationally the number of students to teacher ratio decreased from 26 in 1960 to about fifteen in 2005 (Peterson, 2010).

Historical Perspectives on Students Who Don't Fit the Mold

There have always been students who do not fit the mold of the public education system. The differences between schools and these students can be seen as not fitting in with the structure of the school and the social, cultural, or economic backgrounds of students identified as problem students. Deschenes, Cuban, and Tyack (2001) examined the history of these types of students and how educators have labeled them in different time periods. Also these researchers provided historical explanations for why students fail in school and they explored the implications history has for current students of the standards based reform movement.

Reformers in the standards based movement argue that all students can learn at a high level of performance. However, there have always been students labeled in schools as incapable of learning. These students have been retained, placed in special education programs, and expelled. This educational movement as well as educational movements throughout history have something in common; students who continue to be unsuccessful ultimately fail in school. Understanding what has happened with these students in the past will assist educators in the present to deal with students who are unsuccessful in a traditional public school system. For example, in 1909 Helen Todd, a Chicago child laborer inspector surveyed 500 children between the ages of fourteen to sixteen. She asked each of them, if they didn't have to work, would they go to school or continue to

work in a factory. More than 80 percent said they would rather work in the factory. Todd concluded that education did not fit their tradition or environment. The students she interviewed were viewed as misfits by their teachers and were expected to drop out, which many of them did. In the 1900's the concern of students failing in school centered on immigrant children. Most of them stayed in the lower grades because they continued to fail yearly tests to be promoted to the next grade and they did not meet the expectations for success in school (Deschenes, et al., 2001).

Early reformers did not see the need to fit education to the student. Instead they attempted to make the child fit the school mode. For example Horace Mann did not try to adapt schools to the needs of immigrants, instead school was intended to mold students into rational civilized adults required for a modern society. School reformers later developed a tracking system for students which included academic, vocational, and general life courses. In this way students were given an education that educators thought they could profit (Peterson, 2010).

Labels given by educators demonstrated their beliefs of success, social diversity, and individual achievement. In the first half of the nineteenth century, educators referred to low achieving students as a loafer, dunce, or stupid. Words like these displayed how educators felt low achievement was the lack of intellect or some character flaw. By the end of the nineteenth century schools were emphasizing that students should be taught the same subjects, in the same way, and at the same pace. At the end of the year students were given a test to see if they would be promoted to the next year or retained. Instead of noticing problems with these tests, many educators felt academic standards were maintained. Terms labeling students during this time included sleepy-minded, immature,

and slow. Teachers during this time did not view academic failure as a reflection of their inability as an instructor. The successful student was seen as one who proceeded at the regular pace of school. This affected schools greatly. For instance, in 1906 in Tennessee around 150,000 students entered the first grade, while 10,000 students entered the eighth grade, but only 575 students graduated from high school (Deschenes, et al., 2001).

Educators of the early twentieth century began to question if all students should have the same education. Differentiation became the way to promote equal opportunity for all students. During this time students were tracked by ability and different class offerings were introduced, such as vocational classes and specific programs for handicapped students. Labels educators used from 1900 to 1950 included pupils of low I.Q., limited slow learner, and mental deviates. These labels indicated that some students did not have the intellect to learn and the best way to teach them would be in a different way in a different place (Deschenes, et al., 2001). The science of I.Q. testing which was developed during the progressive era created a practice to be practical and not inhumane. However children with severe mental deficiencies were labeled as cretins or idiots and these students were viewed as being beyond educational remediation. Children receiving a label of being less retarded were referred to as feeble-minded and sent to custodial institutions (Peterson, 2010). Testing was not used to diagnose specific learning problems or to develop appropriate learning strategies. Testing was generally used to separate the slow learners from the normal students (Deschenes, et al., 2001).

Education reformers began to view educating students in a different way. For instance in Mills vs. the Board of Education in 1972 the court ruled that all children were entitled to an appropriate education, and this could not be denied based on inadequate

resources. Students represented in the court case included children identified as being mentally retarded, autistic, or disabled. All were denied access to a public school because they were seen as behavior problems and therefore providing them with an education was inappropriate. The judge based his ruling on the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment (Peterson, 2010). Labels given to students between 1950 and 1980 included, educationally handicapped, rejected, and culturally different. These labels suggested that educators began to blame the school rather than the students when they failed. Pull-out remedial help through Title I funds began to support the need to teach differently to different children, but these children were still labeled and segregated (Deschenes, et al., 2001).

Deschenes et al. (2001) identified the following four ways that educators and reformers have assigned blame for unsuccessful students in public education.

- Students who are unsuccessful in school have character defects and are responsible for their own performance.
- Families of certain cultural backgrounds do an inadequate job of preparing their children for school and provide little support for achievement as their children go through elementary and secondary grades.
- School system structures are inadequate in differentiating instruction to accommodate the intellectual abilities of the student body.
- Students continue to fail academically because school culture is so different from the cultural background of the communities they serve.

American public schools have always included many students who do not meet the schools' expectations for success. It seems there will always be students who do not

fit the mold of the educational system, as labels for unsuccessful students changed; educators were more concerned with partial solutions to fix the problem rather than rethinking schools for these types of students in a comprehensive way. The focus has been more on the low performance of the student, rather than attempting to make the school fit the student. Of course for the majority of students the standard form of schools has been effective. According to the Deschenes et al. (2001) study the following would help reformers of the standards movement to learn from students not fitting in the traditional school mold throughout history. First, even though it may be difficult to change a school to meet the needs of the student, it is a more promising strategy than continuing to try and fit the student to the school. Second, to acknowledge and address social inequality found in the high stakes sections of the reform movement. For example, inner city neighborhoods have fewer resources than suburban neighborhoods; so they may have a harder time meeting standards. Third, would be to make comprehensive changes in current school systems, since people created the educational structures then they can change them too. The challenge is to develop a comprehensive vision of effective schools and then transform schools over time into a reality (Deschenes, et al., 2001).

Historical Development of Virtual Education

Understanding the historical background of distance education from its text based, correspondence course start to its current foundation in technology is important. Formal correspondence courses were developed in the late nineteenth century. However, the first distance learner to earn full university credit probably happened in the eighteenth century, when a homebound student on an isolated estate made informal arrangements to

receive course notes and textbooks through the mail from a university professor. University officials probably never knew the student on the roster never actually attended classes (Jones, 2002).

Originally, telecourses proved to be the most promising of the technology based distance learning choices. In the mid 1970s, community colleges started producing original telecourse series and supplemental materials to attract a broader audience, while extending their campus. Advances in cable television, wireless telecommunication systems, satellites, and the internet allowed telecourse design and delivery to become very effective. With the rapid adaptation of the internet and its graphical and interactive World Wide Web in the mid 1990s, a distance learning model was immediately used in distance learning institutions. Jones (2002) believes, "Technology holds the potential to turn every living room on the globe into a real-time, interactive classroom."

Education systems in sparsely populated countries including Canada and Australia have used distance learning in the form of mail correspondence courses for over 100 years. Distance learning has been effectively used in Australian higher education, as seven universities had about 15,000 students using distance learning services, which was about 10 percent of their total enrollment. Also in more than 20 countries there have been distance only learning institutions, and many have had large student enrollments (Jones, 2002).

Alternative instructional delivery systems for public elementary, secondary, and higher education in the United States began in the 1980s. Major research during that time was promoted by the former Ambassador to Great Britain, Walter Annenberg's establishment of the Annenberg CPB Project which began in 1981 at the University of

Pennsylvania. The goal of the project was to expand the opportunity for people to obtain an affordable college education. A collection of telecourses were developed and offered to students at more convenient times and places than traditional class hours allowed. Funding of demonstrations of new telecommunication technologies in higher education was shared. The purpose was to explore advances in technologies and the implications for improving education (Jones, 2002).

Next the federal government became more interested in examining and funding distance learning. Through the Omnibus Trade Bill and Competitive Act of 1988, the Star Schools Program was created to meet domestic and international challenges by addressing needs in the rebuilding of the educational system. Some priorities of the Star Schools Program included creating diverse partnerships to write curriculum and to provide opportunities for at risk students to obtain remote instruction. The bill encouraged innovative ways for nations remotely located and at risk students to have access to quality education. Distance education has been the number one path in achieving this objective (Jones, 2002).

A true paradigm shift needed to take place in the way higher education educators interpret and design the education environment, because the days when the overhead projector was the highest teaching tool of technology is over. One idea is to deliver education to people. The word virtual is used in computer science to mean something whose existence is replicated through software, instead of actually existing in a physical form. A virtual university is an education given through an electronic platform, rather than in a lecture hall. Implementing virtual classes at the university level has taken place since the 1980s. Some advantages of a virtual university would be that all students don't

have to be in the same place at the same time, plus it is available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. This provides an opportunity for adult learners with jobs and families to complete the work on their own time. This may be the difference in successfully finishing a degree or dropping out of school for many adults (Jones, 2002).

According to Allen and Seaman (2007) the amount of students enrolled in at least one online course has continued to grow at a higher rate than the overall enrollments in higher education. An estimate in the fall of 2006 has the number of online students at 3.38 million, which was an increase of 9.7 percent since the fall of 2005. Students taking at least one online course in 2006 represented almost twenty percent of total higher education enrollments. Also more than two-thirds of all higher education institutions offered some type of online courses, with the majority offering programs that were all online.

Even with evidence, some argue that virtual classrooms lack the synergism of a traditional classroom, and therefore students will learn less; however, in a virtual classroom it is difficult to be a passive learner. Students usually have to react or provide appropriate input in order to meet course requirements. Also, virtual courses are often designed through collaborative student activities than traditional lecture hall courses. All types of communication have advantages and disadvantages, however research shows there is no significant difference in a student's capability to learn through educational technology tools (Jones, 2002).

Both elementary and secondary students have learned through distance learning. Many benefits have been reported for K-12 distance education with increased access for students with a wide range of needs, flexibility in speed and scheduling learning

opportunities, as well as a greater influence on education by parents. Some research shows the effectiveness of a distance education program largely depends on context and the research on effects of distance education have been contradictory. However, in a meta-analysis of fourteen web based distance education programs studied between 1999 and 2004, Cavanaugh, Gillan, Kromrey, Hess, and Blomeyer (2004) found that distance education can have the same effect on student academic achievement as compared to traditional instruction.

According to Tucker (2007) online learning is not new, with over 90 percent of public colleges offering online courses and virtual learning has been offered at the high school level for more than a decade. While virtual education in some circles is still seen as controversial, the research shows that learning can be just as effective as in a traditional classroom. The rather small body of research that focuses on the effectiveness of learning with a K-12 virtual school program supports the findings of comparable studies in higher education virtual courses. Research has confirmed there is no significant difference in student performance whether the learning takes place in a traditional classroom or in a virtual setting (Tucker, 2007). According to a review of research on the effectiveness of distance learning in higher education, by the Web-Based Commission (2000) it was determined that distance learning courses compare well with traditional classroom instruction. These findings were based on a limited amount of studies regarding student grades, test scores, and satisfaction. Students in distance learning courses had similar grades, test scores, and attitude as students receiving instruction in a traditional classroom environment. Although, research is limited, benchmarks for evaluating effective distance learning programs have been developed.

Benchmark examples consist of the following topics: institutional support, course development and structure, student and faculty support, and evaluation and assessment (Web-Based Commission, 2000).

Yet, the Massachusetts State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, considered setting limits on virtual public schools in 2010, when a new state law allowed public schools to go to a virtual platform. Proposed limits included limiting enrollment of virtual schools to 500 students with at least 25 percent of the student body required to be residents in the school district operating the virtual school. Several members of the state board were apprehensive about meeting the demands of school growth and they were not comfortable with students completing all of their education on a computer without ever attending class in a traditional school. Virtual school advocates believed the proposed regulations would not allow most districts across Massachusetts to be able to open new schools. Virtual schools appeal to a small portion of the student population in a district or a state, so financially districts would need to open enrollment to all students across the state. Susan Patrick, the president of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, has said limiting student enrollment and setting geographic restrictions were two things not to do, and if the proposed regulations passed, they would be some of the most restrictive limits in the nation (Vaznis, 2010).

The Greenfield School District, in northwestern Massachusetts had been working on opening a virtual school, but faced a challenge when the state required that 25 percent of students had to live in the district operating the virtual school and ten percent if serving a targeted student population. The Greenfield District plans to target students across Massachusetts who have medical or social concerns that prevent them from attending

traditional public schools, including students with cancer, autism, and anxiety disorders. They also plan to enroll students who have been bullied, athletes who travel, children from military families, and students who do not feel challenged by traditional school programs. On August 13, 2010 the state granted the district an exemption by requiring only two percent of students had to live in the school district. The Massachusetts Virtual Academy is funded just like any other public school in the state. The school districts that have students attending the school will be required to pay the Greenfield School District up to $5,000 per student (Moran, 2010).

The Massachusetts Academy is the state's first public virtual school and it is the first virtual school in New England to serve students in kindergarten through high school. Greenfield Superintendent, Susan Hollins reported that a small number of students find the size and structure of traditional public schools unmanageable, and she is glad to spearhead this alternative form of education that provides another opportunity for families. Greenfield School District officials believe 10,000 to 20, 000 Massachusetts students could benefit with a virtual education. At the moment the school is limited to serving 500 students. School officials estimate enrollment for the first school year to reach 250 students. Students attending the Massachusetts Virtual Academy are expected to spend the same amount of time on class work as traditional public school students and they are required to pass the statewide assessment. K(12), a Virginia based, for profit online education company will provide curriculum and resources to the virtual school, so along with online assignments students will receive traditional textbooks and materials (Moran, 2010).

One solution in improving the nation's public schools is the growing trend of public education going virtual. In the 2005-2006 school year, generally at the high school level, virtual schools served 700,000 students (Picciano & Seaman, as cited in Tucker, 2007). Even though this number is only a fraction of the nation's 48 million elementary and secondary students, the estimated number of students taking online courses has doubled since the 2003 estimate. Also it is predicted that this number will continue to grow quickly. Missouri, North Carolina, South Carolina, and South Dakota, joined two dozen other states in establishing a state run virtual high school program in the 2006-2007 school year. In Michigan it is mandated that all students are required to take an online course to graduate from high school. Virtual schools are able to personalize learning to meet the individual student's needs while extending it beyond a traditional school day (Tucker, 2007).

There are a variety of online instruction models currently used to supplement learning found in a traditional classroom. For example, nonprofit Virtual High School (VHS) is one of the oldest and most recognized virtual school programs. VHS offers online courses for 457 traditional high schools in 28 states as well as in 23 countries. Member schools must have one classroom teacher to teach an online class along with providing a site coordinator to manage student participation at that school. Then the participating schools' students can take online courses through VHS, with fees ranging from $1,500 to $6,500 depending on the number of students taking a specific course. An average class consists of twenty students. The courses through VHS are similar to a college online course, with a posted syllabus and assignments. Classes are interactive and students communicate online with both teachers and other students. Another model

is the state run Florida Virtual School (FVS), which began in 1997. Personalized learning is emphasized in the school motto, "Any time, any place, any path, any pace" (FVS Website, 2009). Virtual schools demonstrate the multiple levels of possible personalization as students do not have to learn at the same pace as an entire classroom. In a virtual school extra time for review, to receive additional support on lessons, or an accelerated pace can be an easy choice to meet the learners needs. According to an individual student's needs virtual schools can organize entire schedules. At FVS students do not have to fit classes into a fixed semester. Students may choose a traditional, extended, or accelerated pace for their courses. The content remains the same, but the time required from sixteen weeks to twenty-two weeks is adjustable (Tucker, 2007).

These types of personalized learning options are beneficial to students at all levels. Most virtual school programs began with and have been defined by Advanced Placement courses. However, John Bailey, the former director of the U.S. Office of Educational Technology stated, "Virtual schools serve students at both ends of the bell curve, not just AP students but also those needing remediation." (Bailey, as cited in Tucker, 2007). For example, over 23,000 which was almost half of the students enrolled in Utah's Electronic High School in 2006 were taking courses to receive credit for missed credits (Tucker, 2007).

Even with the rapid growth, popularity, and the possibility for innovation, virtual schools face many challenges as they spread across the nation. There are considerable differences in the quality of K-12 virtual programs. The Florida Virtual School and other virtual schools combine unique qualities of online learning as an instructional model to offer more rigor, personalization, and flexibility. Other virtual programs may provide

unchallenging lessons, give little student support, or not enough information to measure the quality of the program. At the moment, research does not tell us which types of programs, circumstances, or supports are needed to be successful (Tucker, 2007).

Another challenge facing virtual schools is inadequate funding. For instance two virtual schools in Georgia were prepared to open in the fall of 2010, but with very limited funding. Now these virtual schools are on hold while they appeal the state's decision on funding. Every public school in Georgia receives funding from two places, the quality basic education state fund and local revenue. All approved charter and virtual schools receive the quality basic education funding, however it is up to the Georgia Charter Schools Commission to decide local per pupil funding for these types of schools. Both the Kaplan Academy of Georgia and the Provost Academy Georgia were to receive the same amount of per pupil funding which was set at $3,200. The amount was low based on the commission's decision to not grant any local funding to either virtual school. For now Georgia only has one virtual school option available for elementary and middle school students and their families. Sonny Perdue, the Governor of Georgia is supportive of virtual schools as an additional educational alternative for families, but he has stated that the funding model for virtual schools is very different than traditional charter schools. Even though building construction and maintenance costs are not needed, technology expenses are more expensive. Also funding virtual schools could place additional expenses back to local taxpayers, as homeschooled children would have the choice of online instruction too, meaning more students and funds needed (Stansbury, 2010).

The Web-based Education Commission (2000) conducted a study to see how the internet could enhance learning opportunities for all learners from preschool through postsecondary education. Several areas were identified for improving education through technology. One area identified was the need for continuous and relevant professional development for educators at all levels. Teacher education programs should address the issue that not enough teachers have the knowledge or skills to make web-based learning meaningful for students. If this lack of knowledge continues, the opportunity to develop teacher skills will be lost on the next generation of teachers and the students they teach.

Additional research, appropriate online content, and revising outdated regulations were other areas of concern identified by the Web-Based Education Commission (2000). New education research is needed in order to see how students learn as well as how new technology supports learning. It is necessary for both educators and content developers to develop high quality online education content that meets high standards, as some online content is better quality than others. Outdated regulations that do not promote anytime, anywhere, any place learning need to be revised. Most regulations that govern education were written on a dated model of a teacher directed classroom, in which all learners were expected to advance at the same rate, regardless of individual needs or abilities. Educational services which provided funding, earned credits, and brick and mortar models primarily govern schools too. These regulations no longer match today's society. High school students could take online classes based on their own schedules, and advance after passing appropriate tests. Today, the defining elements of education are not restricted to time, institution, and location. The internet provides a platform for a student-centered education environment, yet the legal framework has not adjusted to

these changes in education. These gaps need to be addressed to ensure the quality of learning in the age of the internet (Web-based Education Commission, 2000).

A study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) examined the availability of distance education, courses offered, and enrollment trends in America's elementary and secondary schools for the 2002-03 school year. The survey was mailed to school district superintendents and participants were provided definitions. For example, distance education courses were defined as courses for credit taken by elementary or secondary school students enrolled in the district where the student and teacher were in different locations. These courses could be provided by the school district, a state virtual school, or a postsecondary institution. Courses could be delivered by video, internet, or through other computer technology. Also the distance education courses could include occasional face to face interaction between the teacher and student. School districts were asked to share about distance education Advanced Placement courses students in their district had access. Information excluded in this study included information about supplemental materials, virtual field trips, online homework, and staff professional development. The main focus of this study was to present national estimates. The number of school districts represented in the study was 15,040 (Setzer, Lewis, Greene, 2005).

During the 2002-03 school year, about one-third of public school districts had students enrolled in distance education courses, which represented about 5,500 out of 15,040 school districts. A higher proportion of large school districts and rural areas indicated they had students enrolled in distance education courses. Among all public schools with students taking distance courses, 76 percent were high schools, fifteen

percent were elementary and secondary combined schools, seven percent were middle schools, and two percent were elementary schools. Advanced Placement distance courses were seen in 50 percent of school districts, which represented 2,700 school districts. The proportions of these courses were greater in small or rural districts (Setzer, Lewis, Greene, 2005).

After the release of a review of online learning research in May 2009 by the U.S. Department of Education, an interest in blended or hybrid learning was increasing as an online learning choice. Especially since the report found that by combining online and face to face instruction this provided a larger advantage to student achievement than either entirely online programs or face to face instruction. However, how blended learning can best be used to support students is still up for debate. Along with blended learning is the coach model. For instance Iowa's state ran high school virtual program, an assigned coach is a requirement for any student enrolled in an online course to assist the student. The coach is usually a teacher, but must be a school district employee. In this program the presence of a good mentor is the best predictor of student success. In this model the coach frequently communicates with online instructors and the students' parents. It is expected that the coach e-mails a weekly progress report to the parents and notifies the online instructor of any personal events in the students' life that could affect their academic performance. Refining communication between all stakeholders in a virtual school placement is a growing trend in the success of this program (Ash, 2010).

Trends in School Choice

Since the 1960s opportunities for school choice in the United States has expanded. Parents have a variety of public school choice options and are not limited to

sending their children to an assigned school. Charter schools and magnet schools are both examples of school choice options available to parents. Charter schools are public schools which provide free education to elementary or secondary students under a charter granted by the state. Magnet schools are designed to attract students of different ethnic backgrounds or to focus on a specific academic or social theme. Private schools and home school are also options for parents to choose in educating their children (Grady, Bielick, & Aud, 2010).

Trends in school choice were examined from 1993 to 2007, using data from the National Household Education Survey (NHES) of the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The report studied trends in public school and private school enrollment. The NHES survey was based on telephone interviews that included students living in the United States, with samples ranging from contacting 45,000 to 60,000 residences. The survey was administered in the following years; 1993, 1996, 1999, 2003, and 2007. Some key points from this report consist of the following conclusions. First, the percentage of students attending public schools they were assigned to decreased from 80 percent to 73 percent. There was evidence to support this trend for white and black students, students with parents with some college or graduate education listed as their highest level of education, students from two parent households, and from all areas of the United States. Differences were noted for students in each type of school in 2007. A higher percentage of students who attended an assigned public school over any other type of school consisted of parents with less than a high school diploma. Charter schools were added to the 2007 survey, and about two

percent of students in first grade through the twelfth grade attended charter schools. A higher percentage of charter school students lived in cities (Grady et al., 2010).

In 2007, about three percent of all students between the ages of five to seventeen were homeschooled. Most of the homeschooled students in this survey utilized home school options full time. A greater percentage of students living in rural areas were home schooled, 4.9 percent than were students living in cities, 2.0 percent or suburbs, 2.7 percent. Also 3.6 percent of students living in a two parent household were homeschooled as compared to 1.0 percent of students living in a one parent household (Grady et al., 2010).

Even with charter and voucher choices, homeschooling is the fastest growing alternative to public schools. The number of home schooled students increased from 850,000 to an estimated 1.1 million between 1999 and 2003, according o the National Center of Education Statistics. These numbers only represent home schooled students who have registered with the state, which could be about half of families who actually choose to home school their children. In States that are keeping track of homeschooled students there is a definite increase. For example in 1990 Virginia had 3,816 registered homeschoolers and in 2007 this number had increased to 20,694. Maryland also experienced growth from 2,296 homeschooled students in 1990 to 24,227 in 2006. Homeschooling is becoming more recognized. In 2008 the journal *Education Next* surveyed a cross-section of Americans if they knew anyone who homeschooled their children and forty-five percent replied yes (Peterson, 2010). A report released from the research firm Ambient Insight reported that homeschooled students would annually increase by 9.5 percent over the next five years, which would be 4.6 million

homeschooled students in 2015. Ambient Insight's Research Officer believes the increase of homeschooling is a social phenomenon as educational online companies, such as K(12) curriculum, target the home school population. As families are able to have access to a certified teacher online then this will certainly lead to an increased interest in homeschooling (Nagel, 2011).

Today education is being thought of as something that must be a custom fit to the wants and needs of students and their families. The idea that families should have school choice is generally accepted as a legitimate right, even though the topic still has it controversies. All recent presidents have supported federal support to charter schools and forty states have charter school laws. Home schooled students can be found in every state and the U. S. Supreme Court ruled that voucher plans are constitutional. School choice challenges professional educators, while it validates parent rights to influence their child's education (Peterson, 2010).

The Progression of Choice in Kansas Schools

Log schools which were built by a community began to appear throughout Kansas in the 1870s in order to provide basic literacy and citizenship education. In 1874 the Kansas Legislature passed a compulsory school attendance law for children between the ages of eight and fourteen. By 1885, the state wanted a higher percentage of students to be provided with more than an elementary education, so county high schools were authorized. Courses of study for elementary and a sequence of high school classes were developed. During this time a school textbook adoption committee was created to support teaching a common knowledge base (Martinez & Snider, 2001).

Not all Kansas school districts were segregated, however after the Brown versus Topeka Board of Education ruling in 1954, districts were required to integrate schools while providing equal education opportunities for all children. Then in the 1970s, basic courses, special programs, and multiple academic tracks were common, even though this often separated students by race and economic status. Research supported that academic achievement suffered, especially those at-risk groups. So the Minimum-Competency Bill was passed in 1981 that required that a minimum competency assessment be developed in both reading and math. Regardless of the classes students were placed in, all regular education students were required to take the assessments. The assessment results were then analyzed to check mastery of all student groups (Martinez & Snider, 2001).

Systemic reform began in the 1990s and was based on integrating goals, standards, and strategies for achieving high standards and national goals. High stakes accountability has also been added. Teaching students about and through technology has been a goal for schools for over two decades. The most influential technological innovations in education have been the World Wide Web and the Internet. Especially since 1995, schools have increased resources offered in teaching students to use technology (Martinez & Snider, 2001). In 1997, e-rates became available to schools to aid with the cost of internet access through the creation of The Telecommunications Act of 1996. This provided $2.25 billion in yearly discounts for internet access, distance learning, and other technological advancements in education for schools and libraries ("NEA Urges Full Funding for E-Rate," 1998).

School Restructuring required new paradigms, models, approaches, and choices. Kansas restructuring efforts were based on the philosophy that all children can learn.

One method to ensure all children are learning included a charter school model. Charter schools in Kansas operate within a school district as an independent school. They are planned and operated by parents, community leaders, educators, education entrepreneurs, and others. They are free of charge to parents and are open to all students. Also, every charter school in Kansas is held to the same accreditation requirements of the state board of education and has to remain accredited to keep its charter. In 2009 Kansas had thirty-five authorized charter schools (KSDE website, 2009).

Home schools and private schools are other education approaches offered in Kansas. All home schools are categorized as non-accredited private schools. Non-accredited private schools are organizations which regularly provide education at the elementary or secondary level, which meet the compulsory school attendance laws of Kansas, but they are not accredited by the state board of education. Kansas does not actually authorize home instruction by state statue. Non-accredited private schools and home schools are required by law to register with the state board of education and registering does not mean the Kansas State Board of Education (KSDE website, 2009) has approved the school.

Virtual Schools as a Solution

In 1981, T.H. Bell, the Secretary of Education, formed the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The commission began because of Bell's concern about the rising public perception of something being extremely wrong with the educational system. Therefore, the first task of the commission was to examine the quality of education in the United States and to share the report with the nation. So in 1983, the United States Department of Education's National Commission on Excellence in

Education published the report, "A Nation at Risk" (Gardner & Larson, 1983). This report warned Americans that, "the educational foundation of our society are being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people." This report stated that most students were not learning basic skills and were not being challenged in both the areas of mathematics and science. Plus the majority of secondary students were not proficient in reading on grade level. Change is necessary for students to be able to succeed in an increasing global community. Numerous possibilities of the digital age are changing how we learn and teach. With the exception of No Child Left Behind, changes utilizing technology in education are being pushed by educators. They are motivated by new realities of a digital marketplace along with the rapid development of virtual schools. Serving a generation of students born in the digital age is a strong influence on motivating schools to adapt and change in ways never imagined (Paige, Hickok, & Patrick, 2004).

The accountability provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 expanded opportunities for school choice for students attending public schools that were not meeting state expectations. Research is beginning to demonstrate how useful school choice can be in improving educational opportunities for all children. There are some challenges to meeting requirements, such as the demand for transfers. Many districts use the lack of school capacity to deny families choices of selecting some of the higher performing schools (Hassel & Terrell, 2004).

In February 2004, the U.S. Department of Education set specific guidelines defining virtual schools as an acceptable and legal way to add additional options for students requesting to transfer. The Department of Education views virtual education as

a way to expand opportunities for learning at any time and place through advancements in technology, in support of the NCLB Act. The requirement is that the virtual school is a public elementary or secondary school and that it has not been identified for school improvement. After meeting these requirements a district may offer virtual schools to students eligible to transfer from schools in school improvement (Hassel & Terrell, 2004).

Online learning has grown rapidly over the past decade in both corporations and universities, and it has been increasing in availability to K-12 learners. There are many hypothetical benefits of online learning. While some have been researched well, others need further investigation to determine the benefits. Some common benefits according to online education advocates include better communication among students and between students and teachers, accommodating different learner styles, providing unlimited access to instruction, frequent assessment, and increasing the supply of teachers (Hassel & Terrell, 2004.) A 2001 survey about virtual schools found expanded curriculum access was one of the most repeated stated objectives of virtual programs. Virtual schools were found to have the ability to extend equitable access to a high quality education to students from rural and urban districts, students with disabilities, and low achieving students. Other studies have produced similar findings. In a 2001 cyber charter review reported by KPMG Consulting for the Pennsylvania Department of Education reported that virtual charter schools were able to provide an education to students who have historically been under-served by traditional school environments (Hassel & Terrell, 2004).

According to a Legislative Audit Bureau report that reviewed Wisconsin's online schools it appeared there were no clear answers to the positive impact of virtual schools

as an alternative form of education. For example, virtual charter schools in Wisconsin spent both more and less per student than traditional public schools and virtual school students scored higher in reading but lower in math than the statewide public school average. Parents of virtual students were satisfied with their child's education; however the school districts that were losing students to these online schools suffered financially. Key findings in this report include of the $17.8 million spent on virtual charter schools in the 2007-2008 school year, 47.5 percent was spent on curriculum related costs, which included technology, while 45.8 percent was spent on staff. Teachers at both the Monroe Virtual Middle and High School did not meet the new state requirement that virtual school teachers be licensed in the grade levels and subjects taught. Also, more than ninety percent of parents who responded to the audit bureau survey indicated some level of satisfaction with the teachers, online courses, and the services offered at their child's virtual school. The vice president of the Wisconsin Coalition of Virtual School Families said the report validated what most virtual school families already knew because if parents were not happy with virtual schools, enrollment would not continue to increase every year. However critics of virtual charter schools in Wisconsin believe this report raised more questions than provided answers with concerns if teacher licensure and attendance laws were being enforced as well as performance results reported. The chairman of the Senate Education Committee commented on the lack of diversity represented in virtual charter schools regarding race, ethnicity, and special education students. It wasn't a surprise that test scores and parental satisfaction were high given the population (Hetzner, 2010).

In their review of data from a study conducted by Phi Delta Kappa, support for NCLB has decreased. Bushaw & McNee (2009) found that only one out of four Americans believe it has helped schools in their community. On the other hand, Americans continued to support one part of the legislation, which was the annual testing of students in third grade through the eighth grade. This has remained unchanged since it was first asked in 2002. Americans continued to support testing and they favored using a single national test, instead of letting each state choose its own test.

The 4.35 billion Race to the Top fund is an unprecedented federal investment in education reform. Statewide reform grants received $4 billion and $350 million is included to support states working on improving the quality of their assessments. This competition between states is designed to reward states that are leaders in statewide education reform across the following four key areas:

1. Adopting standards and assessments which prepare students to be successful in the work place and college
2. Building data systems that measure student growth, while informing teachers and administrators how to improve instruction
3. Recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and administrators, where they are most needed
4. Turning around their lowest performing schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2010)

In the first round of states competing to support state based reforms, Delaware and Tennessee won grants based on their comprehensive reform plans. The second round of the Race to the Top grant competition was awarded to the following ten states; Florida,

Georgia, Hawaii, Massachusetts, Maryland, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Washington. This historic program is part of President Obama's economic stimulus plan. States are selected and rewarded for initiating extraordinary reforms to improve struggling schools, close the achievement gap, and to increase high school graduation rates. Many states that did not win any funding at this time said they plan to move forward at a slower pace with their proposed reforms. Education Secretary, Arne Duncan called this change a "quiet revolution" ("Massachusetts wins federal race," 2010).

A review by the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, (iNACOL) reported that the majority of the ten winning states submitted for the second round of the federal Race to the Top grant competition included strong online learning in their proposals. The organization highlighted the virtual components in all nineteen finalists' applications, which showed winning states were prepared to offer more online opportunities as well as to make the necessary revisions to state policies. Susan D. Patrick, the president of iNACOL, also emphasized the expansion of online learning opportunities were taking places in regions traditionally known to resist online learning. Mrs. Patrick recognized Florida as being an online education leader for a long time, while saying that wasn't new information. However, she thought it was impressive to see states such as Massachusetts and New York moving in the direction of online learning and considering the policy shifts this would create (Quillen, 2010).

Most states considering online learning and policy revisions involve replacing traditional seat time requirements. These requirements mandate how many hours a student has to spend in a class to receive credit with competency based requirements,

which allows for varying the pace a student has to pass a course based on mastery of the subject. In the Massachusetts application they focused on preexisting efforts to direct federal stimulus funds toward creating competency-based online and blended learning courses. The Massachusetts plan used a blended learning course by utilizing both traditional class experiences and virtual lessons for alternative school students. While New York's plan dealt with a statewide technology plan adopted in January of 2010 with the expectation for all students to be exposed to online and blended learning. Georgia's plan proposed an option to completely replace seat time standards, not only in traditional classes, but in online classes too. Rhode Island submitted a similar system which has been established in this state. Many of the winning states that outlined specific online courses, had a focus on the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. For instance, New York, Georgia, and Maryland all included in their applications the use of online classes for professional development to create more STEM instructors and courses for students. For example, Maryland's application for the Race to the Top funds included a plan to develop eight STEM courses over a four year period for the state's virtual high school. While iNACOL's review of the Race to the Top applications may be surprising for general followers of education policy, these findings should not be a surprise for those already working with virtual education (Quillen, 2010).

According to a 2008 report by the North American Council for Online Learning, thirty states had state led or statewide programs and nationwide there were 170 virtual charter schools. The estimated number of students was more than a million, which would be a 47 percent increase over student numbers in 2006. If enrollment numbers continue at this rate the virtual schools will rival charter schools. One projection has half of all

high school classes being taught online in 2019. Online education supports many types of students. Students wanting to take Advanced Placement courses in rural school districts that either cannot afford or find a teacher to teach at this level for a few students benefit from online options. High school drop outs are still able to obtain a high school diploma and online learning could be the only realistic possibility of an education for students with physical or emotional disabilities that impede regular attendance in a traditional school setting. Plus the quality of homeschooling more than likely improves when parents are able to obtain additional online resources (Peterson, 2010).

Students will have educational experiences specifically developed to meet their individual needs if technological innovation is implemented correctly. Prior attempts in education have not always been successful. Individualized education for students with disabilities has been lost at times in bureaucratic regulations and class size has not been decreased enough to where students were able to have their individual educational needs met. Traditional schools cannot provide an optimal individualized learning experience for all. However, as technology evolves schools will be better equipped to meet all learners' needs. Online learning provides hope in dealing with such issues (Peterson, 2010).

All of these positive outcomes of virtual schools can happen, but there are currently many questions as to when and how this will occur. Struggles between traditional school districts and virtual schools will continue to be complicated. Much of the debate surrounds the quality of virtual education. Currently the focus is on educational inputs rather than on student outcomes. Legislators are paying less attention to the amount of learning taking place in virtual schools. Teacher credentials, class size,

and the amount of communication between students and teachers has mainly been the focus. On the other hand, virtual schools cannot go unregulated. All virtual courses are not of top quality. Virtual education needs to be transparent with set common standards, along with the development of an outcomes based accountability system. Technological advances in education have the capability to address problems in the traditional school system. For example when the Florida Virtual School first opened it was for high school students only. Later the virtual school broadened its mission to include middle school and elementary school students. Once virtual schools become more general, those high school students who are now unsatisfied will be among the first to try online options. Preteens who are more capable than their parents in manipulating the latest in electronic technology may also prefer virtual schools (Peterson, 2010).

According to a report released by the research firm Ambient Insight, by 2015 preK- 12 educational institutions in the United States will spend $4.9 billion dollars on electronic learning services. Online education for preK-12 students is rapidly increasing because of rapid growth in virtual schools, an increase in online students, the recession, and state budget cuts. State budget cuts are the main reasons school districts are deciding to switch from summer school programs held in school buildings to offering self-paced online courses instead. By 2015 preK-12 students attending traditional schools will only decline by 4.2 percent. More than 10 million students will be involved in some type of online instruction by 2015, which would be an increase from 2010 where 2.9 million students participated in some online instruction. Ambient Insight's Chief Research Officer shared that the increase in online instruction was because virtual schools use to target offering courses not available to students living in rural areas and now they are

targeting credit recovery programs along with core curriculum courses. States, including Florida, North Carolina, and Arizona, are passing legislation to open virtual schools to the entire state as a way to cut costs (Nagel, 2011).

How Parents Choose to Educate their Children

The school choice movement can be traced back to the 1960's alternative school reform models, and since that time school options have continued to increase. Magnet school enrollment began to increase in the 1970s and 1980s. Student enrollment estimates based on the 1999-2000 school year showed 4.5 million children attended magnet schools. During the 2003-2004 school year about 1.7 percent of all public school students were enrolled in a charter school. A few states offered public funded voucher programs to families choosing to send their child to a private school. States with a voucher program include: Florida, Maine, Vermont, Wisconsin, Ohio, and the District of Columbia (Tice, P., Princotta, D., Chapman, C., & Bielick, S., 2006).

In addition to choices parents have in public education, they also have the option to choose a private school or to home school their children. Since the 1900's enrollment in private schools by both elementary and secondary students has been between seven to fourteen percent. The home school movement began in the 1950's and increased considerably in the 1980's and 1990's. It is estimated that the percentage of students being homeschooled in the United States from 1999-2003, increased from 1.7 to 2.2 percent. Even with the variety of choice in public schools, private schools, and home schools, not much is known about student enrollment trends in these education choices. Tice, et al., (2006) found parents of private school children were usually more satisfied with their child's school than were public school parents. Since there are more choices

offered in the public school system, little is known about parent satisfaction with public schools of choice.

Both parental perceptions and satisfaction involving school choice trends were tracked through the NHES survey from 1993 to 2007. The following results were determined. Between 2003 and 2007, the percentage of students attending their parents' first choice of a school increased from 83 to 88 percent. Then in 2007, about 50 percent of parents reported that public school choice was available where they lived, and 32 percent of those parents had considered other schools for their children. Also, whether or not the school was assigned or chosen, 27 percent of parents reported they had moved so their child could attend a specific school. Most parents in every type of school reported being highly satisfied with the school their children attended. Overall, schools that were chosen, whether public or private had more parents indicating their satisfaction and involvement than parents with children in assigned public schools. Also a higher percentage of parents of students attending private schools reported being more involved in a variety of ways than parents with students in assigned or chosen public schools (Grady, et al., 2010).

School choice has been a part of the American education system for quite awhile in the form of open enrollment, magnet schools, and homeschooling. The basis of school choice is the idea that educational choices can increase alternate educational options both in public and private school settings. Private school choice is the strongest form of school choice, whereas public school choice offers options to parents to enroll their children in a variety of public schools. School choice has expanded to include charter schools, voucher programs, and scholarship programs (NCSL, 2010).

School choice continues to be highly debated. Opponents of school choice policy argue that school choice takes resources away from public schools as well as contributing to the weakening of the common good. Some argue that school choice has not been proven scientifically to increase academic achievement. Others view school choice as a way to create innovation in education while providing parents with an opportunity to influence schools. School choice supporters also believe school choice helps with economic and racial inequalities that are still an issue in American public education (NCSL, 2010). According to the 41st annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll, the public's attitude toward public schools is fairly positive. When asked to assign a grade to their schools in their community more than 50 percent gave either an A or B, equaling the highest score, which was given in 2001. This positive trend in high grades continued when asked to grade the school their oldest child attended, again the highest scores recorded were given with almost 75 percent assigning an A or B. However, letter grades given to the nation's schools were significantly lower, with less than 20 percent assigning schools with an A or B. This continues to be a long standing difference, suggesting that Americans are satisfied with schools they know, but less positive about public education in general. Most Americans feel the biggest problem facing schools in their community was lack of funding. Lack of discipline and overcrowding were next on the list (Bushaw & McNee, 2009).

A study published by the Department of Education shared the benefits of charter schools. Results show that parents were more satisfied with charter schools regarding both the academic and social development of their children than were public school parents. Charter schools were rated as excellent by 85 percent of parents, while public

schools received an excellent rating by 37 percent of parents. The report addressed test scores and found that attending a charter school caused no statistically significant differences in overall reading or math scores. Since charter school parents chose to send their children to a charter school and they were satisfied, this indicated that test scores were only one area parents consider in evaluating a school. These parents seemed to have a child specific criteria list. They want schools that are safe, promote a positive learning environment, and are the best fit for their child's abilities (Richwine, 2010).

In a speech to the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools on June 22, 2009, Arne Duncan the Secretary of Education stated his and President Obama's strong support of public charter schools. During the speech Duncan shared that the charter movement provided a change in education that would provide new opportunities to educate underserved populations through competition and innovation. The PDK/Gallup poll has tracked public opinion on charter schools for many years and it is one of the most reported findings. The approval of charter schools has shown a fifteen percent increase in the past five years. Nearly two out of three Americans now favor charter schools. Still, Americans don't seem to fully understand charter schools. For instance they are evenly split on whether charter schools are public schools or if they can teach religion. Plus the majority believed that charter schools could charge tuition and three out of four Americans believed charter schools could select students who may attend. These results demonstrate the lack of knowledge regarding charter schools. Allowing high school students to earn credits online without attending a traditional school is yet another alternative. Americans are still split on accepting this choice. However, over the past eight years they have become more accepting to the idea of alternative education.

Opinions supporting online instruction are not age related, but Westerners are more open to the idea than residents of the Midwest, the South, and the East (Bushaw & McNee, 2009).

The availability of full time virtual schools leads to an important question; does it exclude students whose parents are unable to be involved? Students attending virtual schools on a full time basis must have parents that are able to maintain a greater role in daily educational experiences as compared to having a child in a traditional public school. Online learning is more successful with involved parents; however accommodations can be made for many students. Virtual schools continue to make accommodations for families which have both parents working by providing options for students to work with school mentors on site part time. Also some families form co-ops which allow their children to work at another family's house while they are at work. Regardless of how families make virtual schooling work for their family it is a large commitment. Parents considering this option should determine if they are able to provide both the time and support their child who takes courses online will need (Davis, 2011).

Research conducted by Erik Black found that parental supervision is vital to the success of a virtually educated student. In 2008 Black studied parental impact on students' virtual schooling by surveying 940 parents of high school students in Georgia. The majority of students in this study were taking one or two online classes and most did not have a full time stay at home parent. Black's 2008 study showed that parent involvement had a direct impact on student achievement in online learning. When parents are more involved then student outcomes improve. For students to be successful in a virtual school setting, especially in the primary grades, a parent or another adult must

be available to guide the student through the school day. Full time virtual schooling may not be an option for many families that work outside the home, which makes it difficult for the majority of families in the United States to choose this form of education for their children. Furthermore, Black's research found that the majority of families using virtual schools on a full time basis were white, well educated, and affluent. While virtual schools do expand choice, but there are still challenges to overcome (Black, as cited in Davis, 2011).

Parents of 65 high school students chose to enroll their children in a new San Francisco charter school which opened September 7, 2010, and is the first of its kind. This school's educational model is a hybrid. The program combines self paced online learning with a structured schedule, while including face to face interaction with both teachers and peers. This is a free alternative public school, authorized by the Board of Education, funded through taxpayers, and is available to any high school student that wants to attend. Online learning in not new, as tens of thousands of students across the United States attend virtual schools, however most of these students learn from home. Students attending the San Francisco Flex Academy go daily to a building, where teachers are available for assistance from 8:00 am to 3:00 pm. Students can choose from 130 courses which include advanced placement, foreign languages, marketing, game design, and oceanography. Students are expected to learn at their own pace during the traditional four year high school program (Tucker, 2010).

This new charter school is operated through the nonprofit Flex Public Schools, which has connections with K(12) a for-profit company that provides online courses from kindergarten through high school. This hybrid school model will more than likely be

replicated in traditional public schools over the next decade. Eventually this latest charter school plans to educate 400 to 500 high school students and they have been authorized to add middle school grades. Students attending the first week of school included a competitive ice skater, a homeschooled teenager attending school outside her home for the first time, and a student who felt she did not belong in the past three highs schools she attended. Even though these families are choosing an alternative way to educate their children, San Francisco Flex Academy has many of the attributes of traditional high schools with academic supports, sports teams, and field trips (Tucker, 2010).

Parent Choice as a Function of Ideology

Research was conducted on areas of choice, including racial preference. Schneider, Teske, and Marschall (2000) analyzed data collected from the New York City and New Jersey public school choice plans. Differences between parents of diverse educational and racial background were noted. Parents were asked to evaluate two aspects of the racial composition of their child's school. Parents were asked about the importance of their child attending a school where the majority of the other students were of the same race and the importance of their child attending a racially and ethnically diverse school. The researchers found that less than one percent of surveyed parents listed race as important in evaluating schools. Student diversity in a school was more important to parents than racial likeness. Parents with a college education were significantly more likely to stress this point than were parents with less education and parents who chose public school found diversity to be more important.

Parents of different socioeconomic and racial background did value different components of schools. Lower socioeconomic and minority parents placed an emphasis

on schools that provided a safe environment for their children while teaching the fundamentals. These parents wanted the basics for their children so they would have a better chance of graduating and finding economic success. Many felt placing an emphasis on values and diversity was a luxury better suited for middle class parents. The importance of test scores was ranked as the most important part of a school by parents who had a high school diploma but not any college or were a minority. The analysis conducted by Schneider, Teske, and Marschall (2009) suggests that lower socioeconomic and minority parents were aware of the high stakes surrounding test scores and therefore wanted a more traditional academic curriculum. These results are reinforced by parents who found values to be important. Caucasian parents were significantly more likely to rank values as important as were minority parents. However, the biggest preference for school values was seen between public and private school parents. Private school parents were more likely to emphasize values. Regarding discipline, it was noted that minority parents placed a higher emphasis on discipline than white parents and the factors related to the importance of safety were comparable to those for discipline (Schneider, Teske, and Marschall, 2009).

Another study by Jacob and Lefgren (2005) focused on parental preferences for their child's education by analyzing parent requests for individual elementary school teachers, including information on teacher characteristics, and principal reports. The data for this study came from a mid size school district in the western United States. All parental requests for specific teachers during the 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 school year were collected and a survey was given to principals asking them to evaluate teachers. The study sample consisted of 251 teachers. In this school district there was not a formal

process for parent requests. Parents usually requested specific teachers during the spring or summer and principals made class assignments over the summer. Principals reported that they are usually able to accommodate all requests, so parents in this district have an incentive to honestly request their first preference (Jacob & Lefgren, 2005).

Findings in this study were that more experienced teachers received more parent requests than first year teachers or teachers new to the school. Parents also disliked mixed-grade classrooms. These classrooms had students from multiple grade levels when there were not enough students enrolled in a certain grade to justify creating a new class. This preference is consistent with research that mixed-grade classrooms decrease student achievement. In addition parents were significantly more likely to request the teachers that principals rated high in areas of raising student achievement, while parents also placed high value on a teacher's ability to make their child happy. The relationship between parent requests and teacher characteristics that promoted student achievement and satisfaction were strong. However, the study found that parents had a strong preference for teachers that promoted student satisfaction and a weak but statistically significant preference for teachers who fostered student achievement. Results from the study indicated that families who were not eligible for free lunch strongly value student satisfaction and were indifferent to the principal's evaluation of a teacher's ability to increase student achievement. The reverse is true for parents of students who do received free lunch. These results were similar to the preferences of low income and minority families, and higher income and non-minority families. Low income and minority families value the teacher's ability to increase student achievement while higher income

and non-minority families show a preference for student satisfaction (Jacob & Lefgren, 2005).

The results of Jacob and Lefgren's 2005 study indicate that parents in lower and higher income schools have very different preferences for their child's education. What parents' value in a school greatly depends on family circumstances and parent preferences. Therefore, advantaged and disadvantaged families exhibited systematic differences in educational programs and policies. This has important implications for school reform. For instance, communities could react differently to accountability polices such as No Child Left Behind (Jacob & Lefgren, 2005).

Through questionnaires and interviews, Erb (2004) found an interesting ideology about education from parents of students enrolled in a cyber charter school in Pennsylvania. Results were measured by parent support of school choice, parent evaluations of traditional public schools and cyber schools, and parent perceptions of increasing testing required by the federal and state legislature for accountability purposes. The questionnaire incorporated questions similar to questions used in the Phi Delta Kappa annual survey on public schools. The Kappan survey reported that parents usually rated the public school their children attend higher than the average public school. However the opposite was found by the survey participants in Erb's (2004) study. Participants noticeably rated the traditional public schools their children formerly attended lower than the average public school in the nation. Clearly, the survey respondents in this study were dissatisfied more with their local schools than the average respondent to the Kappan survey, as the majority of the study's participants believed students would achieve more of their potential in schools that were not traditional public

schools and believed in their community most students did not have equal educational opportunities (Erb, 2004).

Experts in education think of education as a co-produced good, which means for a child to have a good education, the child, family, community, and the school has to be actively involved. According to survey findings by Teske, Fitzpatrick, and Kaplan (2007) the role of the child in the school choice process is important and is more important than most public policy debate reveals. These findings could prompt changes about choice by moving from the concept of parent school choice to family school choice. Furthermore, respondents of children with special characteristics that sought to find a good fit for their child were noticeably more likely to mention their child was involved in the decision when it came to school choice (Teske, et al., 2007)

Parent Choice as a Function of Interest

Parents choose virtual education for many reasons, but at the root of the decision is the best interest of their child. Some families choose virtual schooling over traditional schooling for the following reasons. Some children are considerably ahead of or behind their peer group, while others have learning disabilities or health issues. A number of students were targeted by bullies in traditional schools and some were the bullies. Families in rural areas may have chosen virtual education because of transportation issues, though families in urban areas may have chosen it out of concern for the safety of their children. Parents of young authors, athletes, and musicians may have chosen virtual schools for the flexibility of scheduling offered. Also parents of children who simply need more personal attention in their education many times find virtual schools to meet the interests of the family (Revenaugh, 2006).

For example, in 2007 when Missouri first started its virtual program, it was targeted for students to be able to take courses not offered in their own district or for homebound students. However, educating special education students through the Missouri Virtual Instruction Program (MoVIP) has been the one area in which schools have most benefited. Virtual instruction is a choice for educating special education students who are not thriving in a school setting for a variety of reasons. MoVIP is available for Missouri residents who are between the ages of five to twenty-one in kindergarten through the twelfth grade. The school complies with all state laws, such as teacher certification requirements, curriculum standards and state testing. MoVIP is especially beneficial for students with disabilities as the virtual school can accept a special education student with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) as a referral from an IEP team from a public school if the team along with the MoVIP director of special education concludes it is an appropriate placement. Also parents can directly contact MoVIP in order to enroll their special needs child (Campfield, 2009).

MoVIP states that the program is not a school district and only provides online courses and not diplomas. Due to these conditions, MoVIP cannot offer the vast range of special education services that are provided in many school districts. For instance, if a student required physical contact, the student would need to receive those services either by the school district or the parents, but not by MoVIP. Parents may view MoVIP as one more choice available to help their children receive a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), though it isn't appropriate for all students with disabilities. Nevertheless, in the 2008-09 school year, 11.7 percent of the 16,000 students enrolled in MoVIP were students with special needs (Campfield, 2009).

However, as reported in a newspaper article, Missouri Governor Jay Nixon chose to cut $204 million from the $423.7 billion state budget in November 2009. This cut nearly half of the $4.8 million MoVIP budget. This was the majority of the money budgeted for the second semester of school, which began in January 2010. For a semester of classes, which includes four classes it would cost $1, 300. The state paid this tuition for the majority of students enrolled in the program. Now with the state budget cuts, parents will be responsible for paying the tuition. If fewer students are enrolled then the tuition price could increase. One parent interviewed in the article shared that she could not afford to pay the tuition for her children with such little warning and the reason they chose MoVIP was their unhappiness with public schools (Advocates of MoVIP, 2009).

Teske, Fitzpatrick, and Kaplan (2007) conducted a large research study concerning low income parents and their search for school choice. The survey asked parents who chose a specific school for their child, if their child had special characteristics. Examples provided on the survey included gifted, artistic, non-English speaking, and coping with a disability. The majority of the 800 parents surveyed responded, yes that their child did have special characteristics that became the focus of matching their child with a school. The need for gifted and talented programs was most cited by respondents. Social issues, both positive and negative were selected next. Many parents were seeking positive school environments for their children with a better peer group or getting their child out of a negative environment which included bullying. Next respondents selected their child's disabilities. A small number cited discipline and athletics as being an important factor in matching their child's special characteristics to a

school of choice. Of particular interest to the researchers of this study was the emphasis placed on gifted and talented characteristics. Participating low to moderate income parents may have been utilizing school choice in order to ensure their gifted children had the appropriate education to meet their needs, since low socio-economic communities repeatedly disapproved of the underrepresentation of minority and disadvantaged children in gifted and talented programs (Teske et al., 2007).

Low socioeconomic parents appeared to have similar interests in schools as did higher-income parents. The number one factor was academic quality, and the second factor was curricular focus of the school. This suggests parents were trying to match their child's needs to a good school program, such as bilingual or individualized instruction. Consequently, school choice is the search for a place that matches an individual child's unique needs in addressing the child's instructional strengths or weaknesses (Teske et al., 2007)

According to research conducted by Erb (2004) parents of cyber charter students most often responded, that their children were unhappy and did not want to attend school when asked why they had chosen to enroll their children in a cyber charter school. Next parents reported the social, moral, and academic climate of schools was unacceptable and their children were being bullied in previous schools. Parent respondents and those who were interviewed indicated safety of their children included a school climate beneficial to meeting both the emotional and physical well being of their children. Several parents shared similar school experiences as their children, as they recalled the emotional pain of being bullied. Ten of the twelve parents interviewed reported the middle school experience for their child was characterized by distress created in some part by the school

setting. Public school personnel also indicated that most parents withdrew their children from traditional public schools because they believed their child was bullied or they were dissatisfied with services provided by the school district, especially services for special education students. Eight of the twelve parents interviewed had at least one child with an IEP (Erb, 2004).

A large survey study of parents in six southwestern states (Stallworth & Williams, as cited in Marzano, 2003) found parents were highly interested in decisions related to practices and programs that directly impacted the achievement of their children. However, parents found little interest in making decisions about the hiring or firing of teachers and principals. There is an absence of research related to parents choosing virtual schools for one child in the family while choosing a traditional school for other children in the family. It is the intent of this research study to add this missing piece.

Parent Choice as a Function of Influence

School choice is intended to shift power to parents, allowing them to shop around for the best school for their child. In a traditional neighborhood school a residential zone is attached to particular schools within a district, creating little choice for many parents. School choice is a way to break this by shifting the selection of a school for a parent from a passive process to an active decision task. This provides parents with multiple choices and the opportunity to select a school that maximizes the best fit for their child and what the school has to offer. In order to make good school choices parents need to have an ideology about education, collect information about the schools available; make comparisons between the attributes of each school, and to choose the school that best meets the interests of the child (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000).

Selecting the best school for a child can at times be an overwhelming process for parents. Advice from a variety of people and places has an influence on parent decisions when deciding on a school. In a research study by Schneider, Teske, & Marschall (2000) public school parents were asked to list the first names of up to three people that they had discussed their child's education with during the last six months, not including their spouse or their child's teacher. Respondents also supplied further information about the people they most often talked with and the frequency of discussions. About forty percent of the respondents had no one to discuss educational topics with, while an additional eighteen percent had only one person. Around twenty percent of parents discussed education decisions with two to three other people. Study results showed that parents most often talk about schools with their neighbors and other parents of children attending the same school as theirs. These types of communication are natural as norms of trust, honesty, and reciprocity are developed through repeated interactions. Since these interactions are stratified by race and education level they might not provide quality information. There are two areas in which people spoken to about education were close to parents socially, but had the opportunity to more informed information regarding schools than other parents or neighbors, and that would be PTA members or school board members. These people have made a decision to be more involved in education than most parents and can be thought of as being highly informed with school issues. Compared to school staff, these are individuals from the community which makes the social distance between them and respondents small. In the research sample 37 percent of people spoken to about education belonged to the PTA and nineteen percent were on a

school board. These percents indicated that parents were purposively selecting well informed people to discuss school matters (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000).

Next the researchers Schneider, Teske, & Marschall (2000) examined the relationship in order to determine if parents found information gained from the communication to be useful when making educational decisions. Parents were asked to identify the people who provided the most useful information. Data analyzed clearly showed parents were more likely to respond that they received the most useful information from others who had some expertise in education, including both PTA members and individuals who work in schools. Based on these results, it is easy to conclude that the search for information about education strongly parallels other types of searches, such as parents relied on information from others who were perceived to be experts and involved in the product (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000).

Opposing results were found in Teske et al. (2007) study. When parents were actually choosing a specific school, they mostly relied on talking with their family and friends. Parents used different sources of information, however the most important source was found in social circles. Forty-six percent of parents reported speaking with five or more people, including school officials, while excluding their spouse and children. Twenty percent of parents did not talk with anyone outside of the family. Parents finding information from school officials were higher than reported in past studies, and could be based on school environments that encourage parents to talk to more people about school decisions. Low socioeconomic parents' preferred to gather information from other people rather than from written materials even though they reported written materials as being helpful. Parent respondents believe they can get information better by talking with

other people regarding school environment. When asked how they handle conflicting information by other parents or teachers, the majority of respondents chose other parents. Other parents seem to be the most trusted source of information, conceivably other parents were seen as being more honest than school officials or they were more comfortable in talking with other parents (Teske et al., 2007).

Glazerman (1998) conducted a research study using data from a public school choice program in Minneapolis, Minnesota in order to determine what influenced parents in their selection of a specific school for their children. The district used for this study had a district-wide system of public school choice that had been in place since 1989. The researcher analyzed the schools selected by families of 881 children who were enrolled in kindergarten in the 1993-1994 school year. Families in this district were asked to select a school for their child from a list of between nineteen and twenty-six of the city's fifty public elementary schools, depending on their home address. In Minneapolis at this time all families were required to complete a card listing their top three school choices. There was not a neighborhood school that was automatically assigned for families. The school choice program in this district was a public school choice and it was required for all kindergarteners. Unlike private school choice or school voucher programs, here there were a fixed set of schools to choose (Glazerman, 1998).

Results found in the Minneapolis study found that families tended to choose a school that was not the nearest one to their home. Only 26 percent of families chose the nearest school, while 66 percent chose a school that was not their neighborhood school. Other factors influencing parent decision included neighbors and test scores. The study indicated that parents were more likely to choose a school if more of their neighbor's

children were attending that particular school. Selecting a school in this manner might be one way of assuring a positive learning environment. Glazerman (1998) proposed that parents may care less about cognitive outcomes than affective outcomes, like self-esteem of their children, which was not measured in this particular study. One of the most reported and relied upon information measuring a school quality is its score on standardized assessments. However in this study a strong relationship between assessment scores and schools selected by parents was not detected. Also it was determined that families were less likely to select a school with children from single parent households or children living in poverty. Conclusions from the study indicated that what parents viewed as important is not what representatives that fund public schools emphasized as being important, which focused on measuring school performance on standardized assessments (Glazerman, 1998).

Parent Choice as a Function of Information

If parents are making a decision regarding school choice for their children then they must have some information about schools. Cognitive effort and decision accuracy are intrinsic in all decision making. Individual decision makers try to minimize cognitive effort while trying to make the most correct decision, by using cost and benefit strategies. For most of the general public the costs of gathering information about education choices is high when compared to the benefits of gained information. Many people remain uninformed. For example on the cost side, general information about schools is not widely circulated and if it is available then it is difficult to understand. On the benefit side, it may not be worth finding out information on schools if the school a child attends falls in a predetermined boundary zone (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000).

Some circumstances in America have changed in ways that lead to increased knowledge of school choice. First, the rising education level in America leads to increased involvement in education services. More highly educated people are more likely to be surrounded by better social networks which can be efficient shortcuts in gathering quality information. Second, the improvement in mass media is another environmental change leading to increased knowledge. From the television to the internet enhanced technology greatly reduces the costs of acquiring information (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000).

In their work *Choosing Schools: Consumer Choice and the Quality of American Schools,* Schneider, Teske, and Marschall (2000) conducted research on patterns of sources parents use for gathering data about schools. In their research they asked parents to identify how useful they found certain sources of information. Two major categories of information sources available to parents were identified. The first category was made up of information that was close to the respondent such as interpersonal communication between a parent and both friends and parents of other children in the child's school. These types of sources are cheap and easy to use since information can be gained during a normal routine. The negative aspects of gathering information in this way are the information received depends on the quality of friends. A parent could be surrounded by misinformed individuals, so the information could not be reliable. Formal sources of information make up the second category. There isn't much information on school performance carried in the mass media and information reported is often in general terms. Other sources included school newsletters, teachers, and school staff. The social distance

between parents and these expert, detailed sources can be huge, especially for parents of lower socioeconomic status (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000).

An interesting finding was that well-educated parents use less sources of information and the same decline is seen in the evaluation of the usefulness of formal sources as education levels increase. Since parents are intertwined in networks of information that revolve around education, then highly educated parents are more likely to talk with other highly educated parents, whereas less educated parents are speaking with other less educated parents. So, highly educated parents have access to more reliable information about schools through their social networks. On the other hand less educated parents are caught in school conversations with others with less reliable information. Since this way of gathering information does not generate reliable information, less educated parents search for other sources of information more often. While there are numerous ways to gain knowledge about schools, the most reliable sources of information may be those used by parents with higher levels of education, because they are able to gain reliable information rather cheaply in their daily interactions with other well-educated parents (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000).

Research conducted by Teske, Fitzpatrick, and Kaplan (2007) asked 800 parents with incomes below $50,000 who lived in Milwaukee, Washington D. C., and Denver, how they gathered information about their school choice. Parents reported participating in several activities to gain information and they feel well informed. Most parents talked to other parents in their social circles when making a decision on a school for their child. Many respondents visited schools and talked to teachers and other school officials. The more information gathering activities parents participated in, the more likely they were to

report a high level of satisfaction with their school of choice. From the survey, respondents reported they visited schools and talked with other parents for firsthand information on topics such as school culture, safety, and environment. Test scores and other measureable outcomes were important to parents, but it was not the key factor of their choices. Also, when parents were compared by income, race, and education, information gathering and satisfaction were much the same. But, parent respondents with an income of less than $20,000 showed vast differences, because their social circles were smaller and less useful in gathering information. So, they felt less informed when making a decision on school choice and preferred support from a parent information center or a school choice counselor. Nevertheless, many of the lowest income parents reported being well informed and happy with their school choice (Teske et al., 2007).

Communication and participation are key components of effective parent involvement within the school community. Parents are not obligated to communicate with school personnel, according to the National Education Association (Marzano, 2003). So it becomes the school's responsibility to provide an environment for parents to want to initiate communication. However, one study conducted on four federal education programs reported that the most often used communication between school and home were newsletters, flyers, and bulletins, which provide limited opportunities for parents to respond. Parent participation in the day to day activities of a school cause parents to believe the school values and welcomes their ideas and physical contributions. An added benefit of an effective parent and school community is the significant addition to the school's resource base. Also, schools that include parents in daily activities report lower absenteeism and dropout rates (Marzano, 2003).

Public school choice was expanded through the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, especially for families of students attending schools in need of improvement. New accountability requirements required school districts to offer school choice for public school students in Title I schools which were identified for improvement, corrective action, or restructuring as a result of not meeting adequate yearly progress. Also congress created the Voluntary Public School Choice Program (VPSC) to support the emergence and growth of initiatives across America. The purpose of the VPSC was to assist states and local school districts to develop innovative strategies to increase school options to students (Yin, Ahonen, & Kim, 2007).

This report was presented for the U.S. Department of Education, where strategies for increasing information on school choice options for parents were discussed. The study reported findings from the fall of 2002 through the summer of 2005 through thirteen VPSC sites located across the United States. Ten of the sites were situated in primarily urban areas, two were located in areas that include both urban and rural, and one site was located in a rural only area. Data regarding parent information was collected through site visits, surveys, and program documents. One example for increasing school choice information for parents included one VPSC site that offered a user friendly online database, so parents were able to use this database to electronically search for information about their school choice options. At times the amount of information available for parents living in districts with a large variety of choice options could be overwhelming. Through organizing the information online, it made the task of finding information easier for parents. Other VPSC sites provided hard copies of information to parents outlining school choice options. Over time sites changed their information format from program

specific brochures on magnet schools or charter schools to school specific brochures describing all of the program choices available at specific schools. This change was made after they noticed that most parents already had thoughts of which schools they would consider sending their children. This format allowed parents to quickly collect information about the programs available at these certain schools, rather than to have to search through brochures covering all the school choice programs, which may or may not be relevant to them (Yin, Ahonen, & Kim, 2007).

Summary

The literature review provided the important elements for understanding the possibilities of parents choosing to leave behind the traditional public school system in support of enrolling their children in a virtual school. The literature review began with a brief history of technological advances that have laid the foundation for virtual education. A discussion of technological advances and their effect on all levels of education was presented. The parent component in the decision making process was offered in areas that included school ideology, interest, and influence. Chapter three describes the research design as well as the specific procedures used in conducting the study.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

For school districts in Kansas to understand why some parents are choosing virtual education for their children, the factors that cause them to decide virtual schools provide more of a quality education over traditional public schools must be studied. The purpose of this study was to determine those factors and determine if any factors are more prevalent in parent decisions to leave brick and mortar schools. This chapter presents the description of the research design and methodology of the study.

Research Design

A mixed methods study was designed by combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Roberts (2004) indicated that combining these two approaches allows for greater understanding rather than just focusing on one approach. Also, blending the two approaches helps to overcome the biases represented in each method. Quantitative and qualitative methods in a study complement each other by providing results with greater insight. Qualitative research extends the story from participant viewpoint providing descriptive detail. Quantitative research involves the study of samples and populations through numerical data and statistical analysis (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2005). In this study various sources and methods were used, specifically surveys and interviews with parents. The research questions guided the analysis of data, and the researcher's experience with online schools provided a background that enhanced an understanding of the circumstance for selecting this study.

The use of quantitative methods provided insight in answering the research questions deemed important to this study. Gall, Gall, & Borg (2005) defined quantitative

research as "collecting numerical data based on the observable behavior of samples and subject them to statistical analysis." Gall, Gall, & Borg (2005) also stated that research studies frequently yield a large quantity of numerical data and descriptive statistics serve a practical function by summarizing simple numerical expressions. This research study was based on ideas and measurement from prior research conducted by Erb in 2004.

Lunenburg and Irby (2008) stated, the science of qualitative research asks the researcher to look directly into the world of individuals and phenomena. In order to accomplish this, qualitative research places an emphasis on closely understanding phenomena through examining people's words and actions. This design was selected in order to provide a deep description of parents and their decision making processes surrounding virtual school choice. Good rapport, empathetic listening and establishing trust are important qualities when conducting a qualitative research design (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008).

The role of the researcher in this mixed methods study was unique in some ways, which enhanced trust and rapport. Throughout the study the researcher had one elementary aged child enrolled in a virtual school and one elementary aged child attended a traditional public school. Also during this research study the researcher was employed as a Title I Literacy Coach for a public school district in which one of the researcher's children was enrolled. This personal and professional status presented positive opportunities throughout the data collection and analysis sections of the study. The researcher also acknowledges that this posed a potential problem with bias and subjectivity. However, the mixed methods approach was selected so that researcher bias could be limited.

Incentive in research could be seen by some researchers as a valuable tool to find a sufficient amount of participants. Participants would not accept the reward if they didn't see worth in it for them, and by offering a reward, researchers get the participants they need. However, many research ethics committees have guidelines that state participant rewards should not be high enough to be a bribe. Some guidelines include the participant has to volunteer to participate in a research study and not be influenced by the reward offered. Plus, the Institutional Review Board should review the amount, method, and timing of payment to make sure the reward offered for participation has not been the main influence on the participant choosing to be involved in a study (Wilkinson & Moore, 1997).

In summary, the purpose was for the result of this study to be informative, one that would lead to a deeper understanding of the complexities of parent decision making in the circumstances of their child's enrollment in LVS. A mixed methods study was necessary for demonstration and comprehension of all the elements.

Population and Sample

The sample for this study consisted of approximately 1,000 parents with at least one child who had previously attended a traditional public school, and had children enrolled in the Lawrence Virtual School (LVS) during the 2009-2010 school year.

Sampling Procedures

Gall, Gall, & Borg (2005) explained the goal of purposeful sampling as selecting individuals for a study who are "information rich" with the topic of the researcher. Researchers search for key individuals with special knowledge that makes them important to obtaining a certain perspective. Therefore purposeful sampling was used to

identify participants within the population who met specific criteria to be included for this analysis. The criteria for the selection included:

1. Parents with at least one child who had been transferred from a traditional public school to the Lawrence Virtual School.
2. Parents willing to participate in an online survey, and those willing to participate in a telephone interview portion of the study.

The rationale for the first criterion was to accurately understand the decision making process of parents choosing virtual education over public education for their children. The second criterion suggests that each parent's willingness to participate was critical to this study. Since the design of this research involved a survey and the opportunity for an in-depth interview, participants needed to be willing to take the time necessary to share their decision making process. Respondents with children enrolled in kindergarten through eighth grade, who expressed an interest in participating in a telephone interview process and who could be reached, were randomly selected and invited to an interview.

Instrumentation

Survey participants were asked to respond to questions or statements based on a survey used by Rebecca E. Erb in her dissertation study, *From Traditional Public School to Cyber Charter: How Parents Decide*, which was conducted in Pennsylvania in 2004. Permission to use and revise both the survey and interview questions was granted to the researcher through an e-mail message on January 10, 2009 from Dr. Erb. A copy of the e-mail is located in Appendix A. The survey instrument used in the research was a questionnaire using the internet tool SurveyMonkey.com. This tool allowed the

researcher to create a custom survey with multiple choice questions. Some questions had space available for participant comments. Survey questions were designed to provide measurement of the variables specified in the research questions. The survey allowed the participants the opportunity to share perceptions of both public and virtual school settings. The questions allowed participants the chance to identify and describe institution perceptions, information sources, influences, interests, and ideologies that led to the choice of virtual education. A copy of the survey is located in Appendix B.

The survey consisted of the following questions:

Demographic Information

How long have you had one or more children attending LVS?

How many children do you have in LVS?

What is your child's age? _____ Grade? _____

What city do you live in?

Do you have a child attending LVS and another child attending a traditional public school?

Institution

Which grade would you give traditional public schools in the nation as a whole?

- A
- B
- C
- D
- Fail

In your opinion, do all students in this community, regardless of their social class background, have equal educational opportunities?

- Yes, the same
- No, not the same
- Don't know

Students are often given the grades of A, B, C, D, and Fail to denote the quality of their work. Suppose the traditional public schools themselves, in your community, were graded the same way. Which grade would you give the schools here?

- A
- B
- C
- D
- Fail

In your opinion, do all students have the ability to reach a high level of learning, or do only some have the ability to reach a high level of learning?

- All have the ability to reach a high level of learning
- Only some have the ability
- Don't know

Information

I first learned about LVS as an educational alternative for my child from:

- A public school administrator or teacher from where my child previously attended school.
- The newspaper, internet, or other media source

- A friend/relative/neighbor who knew about LVS
- A friend of my child
- Other

I received more specific information about LVS before enrolling my child from:

- The public school my child previously attended
- LVS
- Another source
- I never received more specific information before enrolling my child at LVS

Influence

Of the information you received, what was the most influential in your decision to use LVS?

- School or district newsletter
- Newspaper, television, or website
- Discussions with other parents and/or students
- Speaking with the principal and/or teacher
- None of the above

Who had the most influence on your decision to move your child from a public school to LVS?

- My child, spouse, or other relative
- A friend or neighbor who knew about LVS
- LVS personnel

- A public school administrator or teacher where my child previously attended school
- Another influence

Interests

I chose to enroll my child in LVS for the following reason(s):

- My child was not achieving well in the previous school
- My child was bullied in the previous school
- School officials were uncooperative in meeting my child's needs
- Teachers seemed unable to meet the academic and/or emotional needs of my child
- My child was unhappy in the previous school and did not want to attend
- My child was/is ill and was not able to attend the previous school on a regular basis
- My child's special needs were not being met in the previous school

Ideology

Do you think most students achieve their full academic potential in traditional public schools, or do you think more students would reach their potential in other kinds of schools?

- Most students achieve their potential in public schools
- Most students only achieve a small part of their potential in public schools
- Most students would achieve more of their potential in other schools
- Don't Know

Do you feel virtual schooling contributes to raising the nation's academic standards?

- Yes
- No
- Don't Know

Do you think virtual schools, such as LVS, should be accountable to the state the same way traditional public schools are accountable?

- Yes
- No
- Don't Know

Do you favor the use of standardized testing to determine the achievement of students?

- Favor
- Oppose
- Don't Know

I chose to enroll my child in LVS for the following reason(s):

- I prefer the flexibility of online schooling for my child
- My family is involved in work related activities that require extensive travel
- I prefer to have a more active role in my child's education
- I believe the curriculum offered at LVS is more suitable for my child than the curriculum at the previous school
- The social, moral, and academic climate of public schools is unacceptable

The last question on the survey indicated to the researcher if the participant was willing to be contacted for future interviews to further explain why they chose to enroll their children in LVS. There was a place for participants to provide contact information and a statement indicating they would receive a $5.00 gift card from Borders for participation in the interview portion of data collection.

Survey participants who were willing to be interviewed were asked to respond to questions or statements based on parent interview questions developed and used by Rebecca E. Erb in her dissertation study. A copy of the interview questions is located in Appendix C.

The interview questions also focused on the research questions of the study. The interview allowed the participants an additional chance to share perceptions of both public and virtual school settings. The questions allowed participants the chance to identify and describe institution perceptions, information sources, influences, interests, and ideologies that led to the choice of virtual education.

The interviewer asked the following:

1. Institution

Please share your experiences with traditional public school(s) your child attended.

How would you describe the traditional public school your child attended?

2. Information

Who did you talk to in order to learn about LVS and what did you learn from them?

3. Influence

Who or what conditions most influenced you in your decision making process which led to enrolling your child in LVS?

4. Interests

How do you believe LVS will help to meet your child's needs better than the traditional public school he/she previously attended?

5. Ideology

If you have a child attending LVS, but you have another child attending a traditional public school, please share your experiences that led to this decision.

Measurement

The intent of this research study was to identify variables in a specific public virtual school that contributed to parent choice of a non-traditional education for their K-8 children. Research questions were written to address a particular group of individuals in a very specific setting. Survey questions were then written to target each research question. An online survey was designed to better reach the targeted population, as virtual school families reside over the state of Kansas. Also, all parents participating in the survey had access to a home computer as a requirement of having a child enrolled at LVS. In order to have a more in depth picture of the variables influencing parent decisions in choosing virtual education for their children, interview questions were designed supporting the five research questions.

Validity

Both the survey and interview questions used in this study were modified versions of the parent survey and interview questions used in Erb's 2004 study. The survey from the previous study was developed by using similar questions from *The 33rd Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools.* Erb also used peer consultation for feedback in order to increase validity in her 2004 study.

The modified survey and interview questions were tested as part of the validity for the current study. Before sending the survey out to LVS Parents, a test survey was sent out to friends and colleagues of the researcher. The researcher also used feedback from cohort members and faculty advisors on the e-mail letter explaining the research and data collection process in order to increase understanding of the purpose.

Data Collection Procedures

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and The Lawrence School District, (copies of the approval letters are located in Appendix D and in Appendix E) parents were sent an e-mail message on March 22, 2010 that included an explanation and a link to the survey instrument. Parents with at least one child, who had previously attended a traditional public school, were asked to complete an anonymous survey and participate in an interview if interested, regarding factors contributing to enrolling their child at LVS. The message to parents is located in Appendix F. In the e-mail message participants responded to an online survey through a link to SurveyMonkey.com. The message identified the researcher, explained the research study, and solicited the individual to voluntarily participate in completing the survey and interview portion. Selections for interviews were based on parents volunteering to participate through the survey. With permission, the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed.

A weekly reminder on the LVS electronic parent newsletter was sent over a three week period in order to increase participation. Due to the nature of virtual schools LVS student residences cover the state of Kansas, so for parents willing to participate in an interview, the researcher conducted the interview by telephone. Participants who

completed the online survey and participated in the interview process received a $5.00 gift card form Borders as a small thank you for their time in this research study.

Data Analysis & Hypothesis Testing

Descriptive statistics were used to report survey questions. The researcher used surveymonkey.com, which provided descriptive statistics from the data that included an item analysis reporting frequency of responses and percent of responses. Survey questions thirteen through seventeen and question twenty included the following demographic information; How long their children had attended LVS, how many children they had enrolled in LVS, the age and grade of their children that attended LVS, the city they resided in, if they had a child attending LVS while another child attended a traditional public school, and if they were willing to participate in an interview.

The research questions addressed in this study required both a quantitative and qualitative approach in order to analyze data and to test the hypotheses. A nonparametric analysis was conducted at a .05 level of significance, which is used to determine whether two or more frequency distributions of data differ significantly from one another. All collected data were incorporated in the analysis, using a chi-square test of equal percentages. The researcher identified the following hypotheses which correspond to questions on the survey. Each hypothesis was tested by using the chi square test.

1. Survey questions five, six, and seven were used in testing the hypothesis for the first research question: How did parents perceive the institutional setting of the public school they left in favor of the Lawrence Virtual School?

   Research Hypothesis: Parents had a negative perception of the public school they left in favor of the Lawrence Virtual School.

2. Survey questions one and two were used in testing the hypothesis for the second research question: What sources of information did parents who chose the Lawrence Virtual School rely on in their decision-making process?

   Research Hypothesis: A larger proportion of parents who chose the Lawrence Virtual School used the internet as a main source of information in their decision making process.

3. Survey questions three and four were used in testing the hypothesis to the third research question: Who had an influence on parents who chose the Lawrence Virtual School?

   Research Hypothesis: Public school personnel influenced a larger portion of parents who chose the Lawrence Virtual School after experiencing a public school education.

4. Survey question eighteen was used to test the hypothesis to the fourth research question: What were the interests of parents who chose the Lawrence Virtual?

   Research Hypothesis: Meeting their child's unique needs are the interests of parents who choose the Lawrence Virtual School delivery system for their child.

5. Survey questions eight through twelve and question 19 were used to test the hypothesis of the fifth research question: What was the ideology about education of parents who chose the Lawrence Virtual School?

   Research Hypothesis: The ideology of education represented by parents who chose the Lawrence Virtual School for their child was based on their child being unhappy in previous public schools.

According to Gall, Gall, & Borg (2005) one method to produce meaningful findings in qualitative research is through interpretational analysis, which involves a systematic set of measures to code and classify qualitative data to guarantee the essential constructs, themes, and patterns surface.

The following steps of interpretational analysis were followed by the researcher in order to effectively preserve and analyze relevant information. Files containing the entire interview data collected throughout the study were prepared. After tape-recorded interviews were transcribed, the researcher reviewed all of the data by numbering each line of text in sequential order. Then the text was divided into meaningful sections by the five initial themes of institution, information, influence, interests, and ideology. Responses were sorted and grouped by each research question while highlighting relevant information. All segments were coded by a specific category and lastly, constructs emerging from the categories were generated (Roberts, 2004).

An interview summary form was created based on an example of a contact summary form used in a 1994 case study (Miles & A. Huberman, as cited in Gall, Gall, & Borg (2005). Qualitative researchers use these types of forms as a way to summarize how data is both collected and analyzed from a contact. This form allows the researcher to identify patterns from a list of pre-indentified themes as well as a place to note new themes emerging from the interview process. A copy of this form is located in Appendix G.

In summary, the data analysis was conducted by taking into consideration all of the data, organizing the data in themes, reducing data by remaining focused on the stated

research questions, and by the data collection process and background knowledge of the researcher.

Limitations

The sample of parents who participated in this study was limited to parents who were contacted through correct e-mail addresses, limited to parents that understood the questions, and limited to parents that answered truthfully.

Summary

The methodology chapter provided the research study design and implementation. This chapter included the following areas: introduction, research design, population and sample, sampling procedures, instrumentation, measurement, validity, data collection procedures, data analysis and hypothesis testing, limitations, and summary. Chapter four presents the results and findings of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

As stated in chapter one, the study reported here examined and evaluated the dynamics of parent decision making in situations involving the transfer of a student from a traditional public school to a public virtual school. The chapter begins with descriptive statistics and the results of the qualitative analysis are provided. This is followed by results of the hypothesis testing, which is organized by the five specific research questions. The chapter ends with a section on additional descriptive analyses and a brief summary.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive data were used to describe the sample used for this research study. Data collection consisted of an online survey and parent interviews which were conducted by telephone conversations. Originally 138 surveys were completed. However, twenty surveys included comments by parents that their child had never attended a traditional public school, which was the focus of this research study. The researcher deleted these surveys from the data analysis process. Therefore, the data analyzed in this study consisted of the responses from 118 parent surveys. Initially, the researcher spoke with eight parents in the interview portion of data collection and opted not to use two interviews because the parents shared their children had only been homeschooled or enrolled in a private school setting before choosing LVS.

Descriptive statistics were used to report the survey questions. Survey questions thirteen through seventeen as well as question twenty provided respondent demographic information, which included:

- How long their children had attended LVS, 28 percent of parents had a child enrolled in LVS for less than a year, and 28 percent of parents had a child enrolled in LVS for over two years.
- How many children they had enrolled in LVS, 66 percent of parents had one child enrolled at LVS.
- The age and grade of their children that attended LVS, parents' surveyed included children representing kindergarten through the eighth grade.
- The city they resided in, parents surveyed included both city and rural residences.
- If they had a child attending LVS while another child attended a traditional public school, thirty percent of parents had one child attending LVS while another child attended a traditional public school.
- If they would be willing to participate in an interview, 64 percent of parents were willing to participate in an interview.

The 118 parent surveys showed there were a total of 167 students from kindergarten through the eighth grade which attended the Lawrence Virtual School. The grade level distributions are presented in Table 4. The number of students enrolled at LVS in each grade level is fairly evenly spread from kindergarten to the eighth grade. Third grade had the most with twenty-eight students enrolled whereas eighth grade had the lowest enrollment with thirteen students.

Table 4

2009-2010 LVS Study Student Number and Percentages

Students per Grade Level	*n*	%
Kindergarten	15	9.0
First Grade	15	9.0
Second Grade	20	12.0
Third Grade	28	16.8
Fourth Grade	18	10.8
Fifth Grade	17	10.2
Sixth Grade	20	12.0
Seventh Grade	21	12.6
Eighth Grade	13	7.8
Total	167	100.0

Qualitative Analysis

The following information is based on telephone interviews with parents who chose The Lawrence Virtual School to educate their children. This study focused on six parent interviews. Interviewees represented the following Kansas cities: Overland Park, Kansas City, Savonburg, Wichita, Andover, and Burden. Students were represented from second through the sixth grade. Half the families had multiple siblings attending LVS. There were a total of six boys and four girls enrolled at LVS, according to interviews. Over half of the parents interviewed had a child attending LVS, while another child attended a traditional public school. Three girls and one boy represented the children

enrolled in public school and their grades included elementary, middle school, and high school. These excerpts offer details that indicate some of the patterns and themes found through analyzing data.

The majority of the parents interviewed shared similar experiences of dissatisfaction with the traditional public school system their children attended. All six parents had a negative perception of the school their children previously attended. During interviews two parents said they would consider their children returning to a traditional public school; however, they did not view that as a possibility at the moment. A couple of parents mentioned their concern with large class sizes. Samples of parent comments included:

> "On a scale of one to ten, I would rate the public school my son attended at a three."
>
> "I don't care for schools that want perfect little children to fit their mold.
>
> "One size fits all education doesn't fit most."
>
> "We struggled through and completed the school year."

During interviews all parents shared a concern about public schools not being able to meet the specific needs of their children. One mother said, "We were desperate to find something else." Academic, bullying, behavior, and social concerns were mentioned. Academic concerns were mentioned by all parents. One parent interviewee said, "The curriculum was beneath her," while another parent said, "My son was not getting the quality education he needed." When asked, three parents who were interviewed said bullying was a definite concern in public schools. One mother shared that her son was bullied at school because he was smaller than the other boys and his lunch money was

stolen on a daily basis. A couple of the parents concerned with bullying also were concerned with their own child's behavior as a result of being bullied. Both parents felt their children were labeled as trouble makers for fighting because the public school could not stop their children from being bullied by other children.

A child's special needs not being met in previously attended schools was identified during parent interviews. Of parents interviewed, only one parent shared her son's behavior concerns were not being met by the special education resources in the school district. This parent shared that her main concern focused on her son's special needs not being met by her local school district. The district offered to bus her son to a different school district for their special education programs. Samples of this mother's comments included;

> "They wanted to separate him from kids he'd been with for two years and bus him to a different school district to their special education program."
>
> "One was a double-wide trailer with basically a broom closet in it that would be used for a time out room."
>
> "I didn't want him on a bus for over two hours a day and I didn't think locking him up would be a cure for immaturity."

When asked, two of the six parents interviewed mentioned social skills as a concern. One parent shared that both of her sons lacked social skills. This mother also said, going to school socially was, "like throwing my younger son in the deep end of the pool, not being able to swim." Another mother said her children had a difficult time adjusting socially at school with tasks such as walking in a line in the hallway and staying focused with the school day schedule, because they were previously homeschooled.

When parents were asked about who they talked with to learn about the Lawrence Virtual School, the following was reported. The majority of parents spoke with personnel from K(12) after locating information about their curriculum on the internet. One parent contacted K(12) after viewing one of their television ads. These parents were then referred to LVS as a school in their state using the K(12) curriculum. One parent learned about LVS from a friend who had a child enrolled in LVS. This friend invited their family to participate in a LVS family activity night. Another parent attended a LVS meet and greet in her community and spoke with Gary Lewis, the principal of LVS.

When asked to share who or what conditions had the most influence in the decision to enroll their children in LVS, all parents interviewed replied they were looking for a place that would better fit their child's educational needs. The majority of parents interviewed said both their spouse and child had the most influence when making the decision to transfer from a traditional public school to LVS. Only one parent said a friend of a LVS student had the most influence in her decision making process.

Themes from parent interviews regarding interest were generally similar. All of the parents interviewed mentioned that school officials were uncooperative in meeting the needs of their child and teachers were unable to meet their child's academic or emotional needs. Each and every one had multiple telephone calls and office visits with the principal about their child. Parent perceptions were that there was a lack of support from administration. The majority of parents said teachers were not meeting their child's emotional needs. According to one mother, a teacher made her feel that her son, "behaved differently than any child in the history of teaching." Another mother shared the teacher believed her son was doing well, however when he came home from school

her son described feeling invisible at school, along with feeling the teacher didn't notice him either. One parent mentioned academics as a concern and that the teacher seemed unwilling to provide more advanced assignments for her child.

According to every one of parents interviewed, they believed the curriculum offered at LVS was more suitable for their child than the curriculum at their previous school. One parent interviewee said, "LVS doesn't use the learn and go on approach, whether your child learned it or not. I like the mastery approach." Another parent said, "LVS offers a very structured program with a good balance of online activities and ink and paper books." While one parent mentioned, "My daughter has already mastered many lessons and is able to fly through materials to get new topics of interest."

The last interview question asked for parents to share their decision making process if they had a child attending LVS, while they had another child attending a traditional public school. This question targeted a specific subgroup of the LVS parents who participated in the interview process. Four parents interviewed were able to respond to this last question. These parents offered insight surrounding their belief system in simultaneously educating their children in both a traditional and virtual public school setting.

All of the parents interviewed had a child attending LVS; however, four of the six interviewees also had a child that attended a traditional public school. One parent had a special needs son who was in high school and LVS did not offer high school courses. This parent did not know about LVS when her oldest son was younger and struggling in school. Another parent also had a daughter in high school who attended public school. One family had a daughter in elementary school and one more family had a daughter in a

public middle school. Most of these parents interviewed mentioned the importance of choice in educating their children differently. One mother shared how they look at each child each school year to make school placement decisions. While another parent believed children need choices in their education, too. A couple of parents interviewed with daughters attending local public schools described their circumstances as:

"My daughter is very sociable, an extrovert, with no school problems."

"My daughter has been on the basketball team for two years."

"Our district has a fabulous music director and my daughter is in the band."

Hypothesis Testing

Five research questions guided the study. The researcher identified hypotheses which corresponded to questions on the survey. Data from the research questions and the results of the hypothesis testing is presented in this section. Supplementary data pertaining to the last two research questions are located in the Additional Descriptive Analyses section.

The first research question identified how parents perceived the institutional setting of the public school they left in favor of the Lawrence Virtual School. Parent responses addressed this question by responding to the following three survey questions which are presented in Table 5, Table 6, and Table 7 respectively.

A chi-square test of equal percentages was used to test the hypothesis using responses to the fifth survey question. The test indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = 37.49$, $df = 2$, $p = .000$). More participants believe all students in their community, regardless of their social class background, have equal educational opportunities (68) than is expected by chance (39.3).

Table 5

Survey Question 5, In your opinion, do all students in this community, regardless of their social class background, have equal educational opportunities?

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
Yes, the same	68	39.3
No, not the same	36	39.3
Don't Know	14	39.3
Total	118	118

A chi-square test of equal percentages was used to test the hypothesis using responses to the sixth survey question. The test indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = 22.59$, $df = 4$, $p = .000$). More participants gave a grade of a C to the traditional public schools in their community (43) than is expected by chance (23.6).

Table 6

Survey Question 6, Students are often given the grades of A, B, C, D, and Fail to denote the quality of their work. Which grade would you give the traditional public schools in your community?

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
A	18	23.6
B	25	23.6
C	43	23.6
D	18	23.6
Fail	14	23.6
Total	118	118

A chi-square test of equal percentages was used to test the hypothesis using responses to the seventh survey question. The test indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = 55.36$, $df = 3$, $p = .000$). More participants gave a grade of a C to the traditional public schools in the nation as a whole (60) more than is expected by chance (29.5).

Table 7

Survey Question 7, Which grade would you give traditional public schools in the nation as a whole?

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
B	8	29.5
C	60	29.5
D	35	29.5
Fail	15	29.5
Total	118	118

The second research question identified how parents became aware of virtual school options as they responded to the question: What sources of information do parents who choose the Lawrence Virtual School rely on in their decision making? Parent responses addressed this question by responding to the following two survey questions which are presented in Table 8 and in Table 9 respectively.

A chi-square test of equal percentages was used to test the hypothesis using responses to the first survey question. The test indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = 106.75$, $df = 4$, $p = .000$). More participants learned about LVS from a friend, relative, or neighbor who knew about LVS (43) than is expected by chance (23.6). More participants also learned about LVS from the newspaper, internet or other media source (57) than is expected by chance (23.6).

Table 8

Survey Question 1, I first learned about LVS as an educational alternative for my child from:

Response Selection	Observed	Expected
A friend of my child	3	23.6
A friend/relative/neighbor who knew about LVS	43	23.6
A public school administrator or teacher from where my child previously attended school	1	23.6
Other (please specify)	14	23.6
The newspaper, internet, or other media source	57	23.6
Total	118	118

A chi-square test of equal percentages was used to test the hypothesis using responses to the second survey question. The test indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = 216.58$, $df = 3$, $p = .000$). More participants received more specific information about LVS from LVS (98) than is expected by chance (29.5).

Table 9

Survey Question 2, I received more specific information about LVS before enrolling my child from:

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
The public school my child previously attended	1	29.5
LVS	98	29.5
Another source	16	29.5
I never received more specific information before enrolling my child at LVS	3	29.5
Total	118	118

The third research question identified who influenced parents who chose the Lawrence Virtual School. Parent responses addressed this question by responding to the following two survey questions which are presented in Table 10 and in Table 11 respectively.

A chi-square test of equal percentages was used to test the hypothesis using responses to the third survey question. The test indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = 41.58$, $df = 4$, $p = .000$). More participants were most influenced in their decision to use LVS by speaking with the LVS principal and/or teachers (40) and through discussions with other LVS parents and/or students (34) than is expected by chance (23.6).

Table 10

Survey Question 3, Of the Information you received, what was the most influential in your decision to use LVS?

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
School or district newsletter	1	23.6
Newspaper, television, or website	15	23.6
Discussions with other parents and/or students	34	23.6
Speaking with the principal and/or teacher	40	23.6
None of the above	28	23.6
Total	118	118

A chi-square test of equal percentages was used to test the hypothesis using responses to the fourth survey question. The test indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = 100.90$, $df = 4$, $p = .000$). More participants were most influenced by their child, spouse, or other relative when making the decision to transfer their child from a public school to LVS (64) than is expected by chance (23.6).

Table 11

Survey Question 4, Who had the most influence on your decision to move your child from a public school to LVS?

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
My child, spouse, or other relative	64	23.6
A friend or neighbor who knew about LVS	12	23.6
LVS personnel	6	23.6
A public school administrator or teacher where my child previously attended school	7	23.6
Another influence	29	23.6
Total	118	118

The fourth research question asked, what are the interests of parents who chose the Lawrence Virtual School? Parents had the opportunity to respond through a survey question in which respondents could select as many choices as necessary to respond accurately. A chi-square test of equal percentages was used to test responses to each of the seven reasons for enrolling a child at LVS, listed in the nineteenth survey question.

The test for the first reason, my child was not achieving well in the previous school, indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = 8.68$, $df = 1$, $p = .003$). Fewer participants responded their child was not achieving well in the previous school (43) than is expected by chance (59).

Table 12

Interest Reason 1, My child was not achieving well in the previous school

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
Selected	43	59
Not Selected	75	59

The test for the second reason, my child was bullied in the previous school, indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = 13.56$, $df = 1$, $p = .000$). Fewer participants responded their child was being bullied in the previous school (39) than is expected by chance (59).

Table 13

Interest Reason 2, My child was bullied in the previous school

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
Selected	39	59
Not Selected	79	59

The test for the third reason, school officials were uncooperative in meeting my child's needs, indicated that participant responses were not significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = .542$, $df = 1$, $p = .461$).

Table 14

Interest Reason 3, School officials were uncooperative in meeting my child's needs

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
Selected	55	59
Not Selected	63	59

The test for the fourth reason, teachers seemed unable to meet the academic and/or emotional needs of my child, indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = 28.51$, $df = 1$, $p = .000$). More participants responded that teachers were unable to meet the academic and/or emotional needs of their child (88) than is expected by chance (59).

Table 15

Interest Reason 4, Teachers seemed unable to meet the academic and/or emotional needs of my child

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
Selected	88	59
Not Selected	30	59

The test for the fifth reason, my child was unhappy in the previous school and did not want to attend, indicated that participant responses were not significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = 1.66$, $df = 1$, $p = .197$).

Table 16

Interest Reason 5, My child was unhappy in the previous school and did not want to attend

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
Selected	52	59
Not Selected	66	59

The test for the sixth reason, my child was/is ill and was not able to attend the previous school on a regular basis, indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = 81.39$, $df = 1$, $p = .000$). Fewer participants responded their child was ill and not able to attend the previous school on a regular basis (10) than is expected by chance (59).

Table 17

Interest Reason 5, My child was/is ill and was not able to attend the previous school on a regular basis

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
Selected	10	59
Not Selected	108	59

The test for the seventh reason, my child's special needs were not being met in the previous school, indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = 19.53$, $df = 1$, $p = .000$). Fewer participants responded that their child's special needs were not being met in the previous school (35) than is expected by chance (59).

Table 18

Interest Reason 8, My child's special needs were not being met in the previous school

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
Selected	35	59
Not Selected	83	59

The fifth research question identified the ideology of education by parents who chose to educate their children at the Lawrence Virtual School. Parents had the opportunity to respond through the following five survey questions which are presented in Table 19, Table 20, Table 21, Table 22, and Table 23 respectively.

A chi-square test of equal percentages was used to test the hypothesis using responses from the eighth survey question. The test indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = 81.53$, $df = 3$, $p = .000$). More participants believe most students only achieve a small part of their potential in public schools (53) and that most students would achieve more of their potential in other schools (55) than is expected by chance (29.5).

Table 19

Survey Question 8, Do you think most students achieve their full academic potential in traditional public schools, or do you think more students would reach their potential in other kinds of schools?

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
Most students achieve their potential in public schools	4	29.5
Most students only achieve a small part of their potential in public schools	53	29.5
Most students would achieve more of their potential in other schools	55	29.5
Don't Know	6	29.5
Total	118	118

A chi-square test of equal percentages was used to test the hypothesis using responses from the ninth survey question. The test indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance (X^2 = 43.0 3, *df* = 2, *p* = .000). More participants believe all students have the ability to reach a high level of learning (67) than is expected by chance (39.3).

Table 20

Survey Question 9, In your opinion, do all students have the ability to reach a high level of learning, or do only some have the ability to reach a high level of learning?

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
All have the ability to reach a high level of learning	67	39.3
Only some have the ability	42	39.3
Don't Know	9	39.3
Total	118	118

A chi-square test of equal percentages was used to test the hypothesis using responses to the tenth survey question. The test indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = 190.064$, $df = 2$, $p = .000$). More participants feel virtual schooling contributes to raising the nation's academic standards (110) than is expected by chance (39.3).

Table 21

Survey Question 10, Do you feel virtual schooling contributes to raising the nation's academic standards?

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
Yes	110	39.3
No	26	39.3
Don't Know	6	39.3
Total	118	118

A chi-square test of equal percentages was used to test the hypothesis using responses to the eleventh survey question. The test indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance (X^2 =15.37, *df* =2, *p* = .000). More participants feel virtual schools, such as LVS, should be accountable to the state the same way traditional public schools are accountable (59) than is expected by chance (39.3).

Table 22

Survey Question 11, Do you think virtual schools should be accountable to the state the same way traditional public schools are accountable?

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
Yes	59	39.3
No	26	39.3
Don't Know	33	39.3
Total	118	118

A chi-square test of equal percentages was used to test the hypothesis using responses to the twelfth survey question. The test indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = 12.27$, $df = 2$, $p = .002$). More participants favor the use of standardized testing to determine student achievement (52) than is expected by chance (39.3).

Table 23

Survey Question 12, Do you favor the use of standardized testing to determine the achievement of students?

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
Favor	52	39.3
Oppose	44	39.3
Don't Know	22	39.3
Total	118	118

Parents also had the opportunity to address a research question regarding ideology by responding to the following survey question, in which respondents could select as many choices as necessary to respond accurately. A chi-square test of equal percentages was used to test responses to each of the five reasons for enrolling a child at LVS listed in the twelfth survey question.

The test for the first reason, I prefer the flexibility of online schooling for my child, indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = 46.41$, $df = 1$, $p = .000$). More participants preferred the flexibility of online schooling for their child (96) than is expected by chance (59).

Table 24

Ideology Reason 1, I prefer the flexibility of online schooling for my child

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
Selected	96	59
Not Selected	22	59

The test for the second reason, my family is involved in work related activities that require extensive travel, indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = 84.75$, $df = 1$, $p = .000$). Fewer participants represented families that were involved in work related activities that required extensive travel (9) than is expected by chance (59).

Table 25

Ideology Reason 2, My family is involved in work related activities that require extensive travel

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
Selected	9	59
Not Selected	109	59

The test for the third reason, I prefer to have a more active role in my child's education, indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = 54.24$, $df = 1$, $p = .000$). More participants preferred to have a more active role in their child's education (99) than is expected by chance (59).

Table 26

Ideology Reason 3, I prefer to have a more active role in my child's education

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
Selected	99	59
Not Selected	19	59

The test for the fourth reason, I believe the curriculum offered at LVS is more suitable for my child than the curriculum at the previous school, indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = 28.51$, $df = 1$, $p = .000$). More participants believed the curriculum offered at LVS was more suitable for their child than the curriculum offered at the previous school (88) than is expected by chance (59).

Table 27

Ideology Reason 4, I believe the curriculum offered at LVS is more suitable for my child than the curriculum at the previous school

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
Selected	88	59
Not Selected	30	59

The test for the fifth reason, the social, moral, and academic climate of public school is unacceptable, indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = 32.58$, $df = 1$, $p = .000$). More participants believed the social, moral, and academic climate of public schools was unacceptable (90) than is expected by chance (59).

Table 28

Ideology Reason 5, The social, moral, and academic climate of public schools is unacceptable

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
Selected	90	59
Not Selected	28	59

Additional Analyses

An additional component in this research study specifically addressed the interests and ideology of parent choice of virtual school for one child in the family, but not for their other children. Of the 118 participants, thirty-five indicated on the online survey that they did have at least one child enrolled at LVS, while another child in the family attended a traditional public school. Table 29, Table 30, and Table 31 show the significant findings of this subgroup of parents and how they responded regarding interest in survey question nineteen; I chose to enroll my child in LVS for the following reasons. A chi-square test of equal percentages was used to test the parent subgroup's responses to the nineteenth survey question. The rest of the tests did not yield a significant finding.

The test for the first reason, teachers seemed unable to meet the academic and/or emotional needs of my child, indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance (X^2 = 12.6, *df* = 1, *p* =.000). More participants perceived teachers as being unable to meet the academic and/or emotional needs of their child (28) than is expected by chance (17.5).

Table 29

Subgroup Interest Reason 1, Teachers seemed unable to meet the academic and/or emotional needs of my child

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
Selected	28	17.5
Not Selected	7	17.5

The test for the sixth reason, my child's special needs were not being met in the previous school, indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance (X^2 = 8.26, *df* = 1, *p* =.004). Fewer participants responded their child's special needs were not being met in the previous school (9) than is expected by chance (17.5).

Table 30

Subgroup Interest Reason 6, My child's special needs were not being met in the previous school

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
Selected	9	17.5
Not Selected	26	17.5

The test for the seventh reason, my child was/is ill and was not able to attend the previous school on a regular basis, indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = 24.03$, $df = 1$, $p = .0000$). Fewer participants responded their child was ill and was not able to attend the previous school on a regular basis (3) than is expected by chance (17.5).

Table 31

Subgroup Interest Reason 7, My child was/is ill and was not able to attend the previous school on a regular basis

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
Selected	3	17.5
Not Selected	32	17.5

Table 32, Table 33, Table 34, and Table 35 show the subgroup of parents, with one child enrolled in LVS and another child enrolled in a traditional public school, and how they responded regarding ideology in survey question twenty; I chose to enroll my child in LVS for the following reasons. Parents had the opportunity to respond through a survey question in which respondents could select as many choices as necessary to respond accurately. A chi-square test of equal percentages was used to test the parent subgroup's responses to the survey question.

The test for the first reason, I prefer to have a more active role in my child's education, indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = 8.26$, $df = 1$, $p = .004$). More participants preferred to have a more active role in their child's education (26) than is expected by chance (17.5).

Table 32

Subgroup Ideology Reason1, I prefer to have a more active role in my child's education

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
Selected	26	17.5
Not Selected	9	17.5

The test for the second reason, I prefer the flexibility of online schooling for my child, indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = 6.43$, $df = 1$, $p = .004$). More participants preferred the flexibility of online schooling for their child (25) than is expected by chance (17.5).

Table 33

Subgroup Ideology Reason 2, I prefer the flexibility of online schooling for my child

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
Selected	25	17.5
Not Selected	10	17.5

The test for the third reason, the social, moral, and academic climate of public school is unacceptable, indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = 4.83$, $df = 1$, $p = .0280$). More participants believed the social, moral, and academic climate of public schools was unacceptable (24) than is expected by chance (17.5).

Table 34

Subgroup Ideology Reason 3, The social, moral, and academic climate of public schools is unacceptable

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
Selected	24	17.5
Not Selected	11	17.5

The test for the fourth reason, I believe the curriculum offered at LVS is more suitable for my child than the curriculum at the previous school, indicated that participant responses were not significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = 3.46$, $df = 1$, $p = .0630$). There was no evidence for a response tendency for this particular reason.

Table 35

Subgroup Ideology Reason 4, I believe the curriculum offered at LVS is more suitable for my child than the curriculum at the previous school

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
Selected	23	17.5
Not Selected	12	17.5

The test for the fifth reason, my family is involved in work related activities that require extensive travel, indicated that participant responses were significantly different than those expected by chance ($X^2 = 31.11$, $df = 1$, $p = .0000$). Fewer participant families were involved in work related activities that required extensive travel (1) than is expected by chance (17.5).

Table 36

Subgroup Ideology Reason 5, My family is involved in work related activities that require extensive travel

Response Selections	Observed	Expected
Selected	1	17.5
Not Selected	34	17.5

Summary

This chapter focused on presenting data collected in order to determine parent decision making in choosing to transfer a child from a traditional public school to a virtual public school. Parents of children enrolled at the Lawrence Virtual School participated in this data collection through an online survey plus six parents participated in a recorded telephone interview. Descriptive statistics, hypothesis testing, and additional analyses were addressed in this chapter. Chapter five presents the study summary, findings, implications for action, recommendations for future research, and concluding remarks.

CHAPTER FIVE

INTERPRETATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter provides an overview of the study and central conclusions drawn from the data presented in chapter four. Chapter five includes a review of the methodology used to gather data and outlines the major findings and themes resulting from the findings. Included in this chapter are recommendations that will serve to inform policy makers and school officials in their decision making progress regarding parents choosing to educate their children in a virtual school rather than continuing to educate them in a traditional public school. Also included in this chapter are the findings related to the literature in K-8 virtual education, and concluding remarks regarding parent choice.

Study Summary

Understanding parent decision making is critical to addressing academic and social needs in both virtual and traditional public school settings, as virtual education continues to grow as an educational alternative for families. Through research Cavanaugh (2009) found that K-12 virtual education continues to increase and students attending virtual schools in the United States could possibly reach several million by 2012. Online learning could improve public education for both elementary and middle school students. Currently there is more information surrounding secondary and post-secondary students. In order to understand why some families are choosing to virtually educate their children, specifically kindergarten through the eighth grade student population, more research studies need to be conducted. Past studies are limited in focusing on parent decision making and choice when it comes to making the decision between traditional or virtual schools.

The purpose of this study was to examine and evaluate the dynamics of parent decision making in conditions regarding the transfer of a traditional public school student to becoming a public virtual school student. Another reason for conducting this particular study was to gain an understanding of what factors led parents to choose to educate their elementary and middle school aged children in a virtual setting rather than in a more traditional public school setting. Understanding the rationale of parents deciding to try this educational alternative could support the entire educational community in improving education for all students in multiple school settings.

A mixed methods study was designed by combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The population for this study consisted of parents of children attending LVS during the 2009-2010 school year. Participants with at least one child, who had previously attended a traditional public school, were asked to complete a survey and participate in an interview if interested, regarding factors contributing to enrolling their child at LVS. The survey allowed the participants the opportunity to share perceptions of both public and virtual school settings. The last question on the survey indicated to the researcher if the participant was willing to be contacted for future interviews. The interviews took place over the telephone and each conversation was recorded. Quantitative data were tested through analysis using chi-square tests of equal percentages. The qualitative data was also measured by identifying trends and patterns from transcribed participant interviews. Research questions guided the analysis of data, and the researcher's experience with online schools provided a background that enhanced an understanding of circumstances regarding this study.

Major Findings

According to the qualitative findings in this study parents had a negative perception of their child's previous traditional public school, specifically noted were teachers and school officials not meeting their child's social and emotional needs. Also parents believed public schools were not able to meet the specific needs of their children. Quantitative findings included that parents believed all students in their community, regardless of their social class or background, had equal educational opportunities. Furthermore, parents rated both public schools in their own community and in the nation as a whole as average.

Regarding the sources of information parents relied on in deciding on a virtual school, parents gained information about LVS from the newspaper, internet, or other media source. Parents gained more in depth information about LVS from a friend, relative, or neighbor who knew about the virtual school. Qualitative data in this study found that parents spoke directly to K(12) personnel after locating information about their curriculum on the internet or viewing a television commercial.

The quantitative findings on the topic of who or what most influenced parents' in their decision making process showed that parents were most influenced to transfer their child from a traditional public school to a virtual school by their spouse, child, or other relative. Parents were also influenced to choose LVS by speaking with the principal and/or teacher. Discussing LVS with other LVS parents and/or students provided a strong influence too. The qualitative findings also showed that parents were influenced by the need to locate a place that would better fit their child's educational needs.

Regarding the interest of parents who chose to transfer their child from a traditional public school to LVS, both the quantitative and qualitative findings supported that parents believed teachers were unable to meet the academic and/or emotional needs of their child at the previous public school. Qualitative findings in this study added that parents believed school officials were uncooperative in meeting the needs of their child. However, findings for the child being ill and not able to attend school on a regular basis, the child's special needs not being met , and the child being bullied in the previous school were all inconclusive.

The quantitative findings in this study identifying the ideology of education by parents who chose to educate their children in a virtual school include that parents believed most students only achieve a small part of their potential in public schools and parents felt most students would achieve more of their potential in other schools. Also parents believed all students have the ability to reach a high level of learning. Virtual schools contribute to raising the nation's academic standards, should be accountable to the state the same way traditional public schools are accountable, and parents favored the use of standardized testing to determine student achievement. In addition to these viewpoints, parents preferred to have a more active role in their child's education and they preferred the flexibility of online schools. Lastly, parents believed the social, moral, and academic climate of public schools to be unacceptable. Findings from the qualitative data in this study included that parents believed the curriculum offered at LVS was more suitable for their child than the curriculum used at their previous public school, they valued school choice in educating each of their individual children, and a student's social attainment was an indicator for LVS parents to keep a child in a traditional public school

setting, while another child's social failure was grounds to transfer to a virtual school placement. Findings for families who were involved in work related activities that required extensive travel was inconclusive.

In order to add to the limited research examining the dynamics of parent decision making involving the transfer of a student from a traditional public school to a public virtual school, this study also focused on a small subgroup of parents who had a child attending LVS, while another child was attending a local public school. This subgroup of families was included in this study as a recommendation for future research in Erb's 2004 study. Thirty-five of the 118 survey respondents in this study had a child attending LVS while another child attended a traditional public school, and four of the six parents interviewed were in this same situation. This subgroup selected many of the same responses to the research questions regarding interest and ideology.

Regarding interest the subgroup of parents also perceived teachers as being unable to meet the academic and/or emotional needs of their child at the previous school. In addition to this viewpoint, parents believed school officials were uncooperative in meeting their child's needs. So whether parents had all of their children enrolled in LVS or if they had children in both virtual and traditional school settings, the majority of their reasons were the same.

The ideology of education of the subgroup of parents who chose the Lawrence Virtual School for one child, but not for another child in their family was also based on the preference of having a more active role in their child's education. They preferred the flexibility of online schooling for their child, and viewed the social, moral, and academic climate of schools as being unacceptable. Through interviews these parents shared

similar interests and ideologies of education for their children as did parents of children who only attended the Lawrence Virtual School. Parents chose virtual education for one child and not for the other child for many reasons. Ultimately the decision was based on the best interest of each individual child. The importance of having the choice to educate their children differently was a strong belief amongst the majority of these parents. Some families look at each child each school year in order to make the best decisions for school placement, while others take into account their child's views on school choice.

To have a better understanding of the decision making process that parents experience in choosing to educate one child in a virtual school while another child attends a local public school in the same household, one must consider both views of education. Every parent interviewed that chose to keep a child in a traditional public school while simultaneously having another child enrolled in LVS held common values regarding education. For the children remaining in a traditional school setting, public schools were viewed as meeting their child's specific needs and these children were perceived as being successful in school. For the children transferred to a virtual school setting, public schools were not viewed as meeting their child's needs and these children were not perceived as being successful in the previous public school they attended.

Academic achievement was not the factor most often mentioned by parents of children enrolled in traditional public school, rather their child's social success was emphasized. Parents characterized their public school children as being sociable and extroverted. Parents mentioned the importance of their child being on a sports team or a part of an outstanding music program instead of referring to the quality of academic opportunities offered in a traditional public school.

Findings Related to the Literature

The results of the hypotheses of this research study are described as well as compared and contrasted to prior research findings.

Prior research and this study confirm that parents have a negative perception of the public school they left in favor of attending a virtual school. All parents interviewed in this study had a negative perception of their child's former public school experience. Large class sizes, bullying issues, poor curriculum, and teachers or school personnel not meeting the social and emotional needs of their children were cited by parents as problems regarding public school. Similarities were noted in Erb's 2004 study. Parents in this former study mentioned bullying, class size, effectiveness of teachers and uncooperative school officials as being a part of their decision making process in leaving the public school setting and choosing to virtually educate their children. Results from the 41st Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the public's attitude of public school showed that most Americans reported the lack of discipline and overcrowding were among the biggest problems facing schools in their community (Bushaw & McNee, 2009). Some families chose virtual schools over public schools because students were targeted by bullies in traditional schools while some students were the bullies (Revenaugh, 2006). Findings from a study by Jacob and Lefgren (2005) included that more experienced teachers received more parent requests than a first year teacher or new teachers to the school. Also parents were more likely to request teachers the principal rated highly in the area of raising student achievement.

Also, results published by the Department of Education indicated that parents were more satisfied with charter schools concerning both the academic and social

development of their children than were public school parents. In this same report public school only received a rating of excellent by thirty-seven percent of parents, while charter schools were rated as excellent by eighty-five percent of parents (Richwine, 2010). More results illustrating negative perceptions of public schools can be shown using data from the National Household Education Survey. For example the percentage of students that attended the public school they were assigned decreased from eighty percent to seventy-three percent. In 2007, nearly three percent of all students from five to seventeen were homeschooled (Grady et al., 2010).

The public's attitude towards public schools depends on if the school is part of their community or not, according to the 41st annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll. Results from this poll indicated that in general parents rated the public school their children attended in their community higher than the average public school in the nation. The opposite was found to be true in Erbs's 2004 study in Pennsylvania, as survey respondents clearly rated the public schools their children formerly attended in their community lower than the average public school in the nation. Survey respondents in this current study rated both the public schools their children formerly attended in their community and the average public school in the nation as average. Noticeably, the survey respondents in this study and in Erb's 2004 study were more dissatisfied with their local public schools than the average respondent to the Kappan survey, as the majority of both study's participants believed most students would achieve more of their potential in schools that were not traditional public schools and that most students only achieve a small part of their potential in public schools.

One major difference in the LVS study and Erb's earlier study was found as survey respondents in the former study believed that in their community most students did not have equal educational opportunities, whereas most survey respondents in the LVS study believe all students in their community have equal educational opportunities. A few differences between these two studies could account for this discrepancy. For instance in Erb's study the focus was on middle and high school students, whereas in the LVS study the student population consisted of elementary and middle grades. Also in the former study the charter virtual school was in its first year, while LVS has been available to families for over four years. These differences could provide reasons why Kansas parents believe all students in their communities have equal educational opportunities. Kansas families have been given the additional choice of virtual schools for a longer period of time.

Results from the study indicated parents who chose LVS used the internet as a main source of information in their decision making process. Most of the survey respondents in this study learned about the Lawrence Virtual School from the newspaper, internet or other media source. Many also gained initial information about LVS from a friend or relative who knew about the Lawrence Virtual School. The majority of survey respondents received more specific information about LVS from the LVS school website and school personnel. However, most of the parents interviewed actually first learned about the curriculum LVS uses by searching on the internet and locating information regarding K(12) curriculum, which is a research based online learning system. The Lawrence Virtual School was listed on the website as an option to educate their children

with the K(12) curriculum in the state of Kansas. Only one parent interviewed gained information from a friend with a child enrolled at LVS.

Two main categories of information sources available to parents were identified by Schneider, Teske, & Marshall (2000). Formal sources consist of school newsletters, school staff, and mass media. Informal sources include interpersonal communication between a parent and friends of parents of other children in the child's school. One problem of informal sources of information is that a parent may have misinformed friends, which could lead to unreliable information. This way of generating information may not be reliable; therefore parents often search for other formal sources of information. Erb's 2004 study also found similar results, as the majority of parents she interviewed gathered information from a local media source or a friend or relative with a connection with another family that chose the same cyber school.

In Erb's 2004 study, examining the people or conditions that influenced parents in the decision making process to transfer a child from a public school to a virtual school, was a suggestion for future research. In order to establish a baseline, people and factors that influenced parents in the decision making process were examined. This research study did not support that the majority of parents who chose LVS after experiencing a traditional public school education were influenced by public school personnel. Participants were most influenced when making the decision to transfer their child to LVS from a traditional public school by their child, spouse, or other relative and by speaking with LVS school personnel. According to Scheider, Teske, & Marschall (2000) school choice provides parents with options that could maximize the best fit for their child by what that school is able to offer. This choice can be an overwhelming task for

parents; therefore, advice from an assortment of people and places has an influence on parent decision making when they are choosing a school for their child. Results from a research study indicated that public school parents most often talked about schools with their neighbors and other parents of children attending the same school as their children. Interestingly, many of these respondents had no one to discuss educational topics. Parents also responded that they received the most influential information from people who had some expertise in education (Scheider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000).

The main interest of parents who chose LVS centered on the concern that teachers seemed unable to meet the academic and or emotional needs of their child in the previous school setting. Respondents were asked to select as many choices as necessary to answer accurately. According to surveyed parents in Erb's (2004) study, the response most often selected was that parents chose a virtual education for their children because their children were unhappy and did not want to attend school.

Parents choose virtual education for many reasons. Ultimately the decision is based on the best interest of their child. Some families choose virtual schools over traditional schools because some children are significantly ahead of or behind their peer group; others have learning disabilities or health issues, while other students are targeted by bullies in traditional schools. Families in rural areas may choose virtual education because of transportation issues, whereas families in urban areas may choose it out of concern for the safety of their children. Parents of young authors, athletes, and musicians may choose virtual schools for the flexibility of scheduling offered. Furthermore parents of children who may need more personal attention in their education often find virtual schools to meet the interests of the family (Revenaugh, 2006).

Ideology in both Erb's (2004) study and in this research study consisted of both the philosophy and values parents had as they searched and selected a different way to educate their children. The data on school ideology of parents who chose LVS for their child were most concerned with the unacceptable atmosphere of public schools. Respondents were asked to select as many choices as necessary to answer accurately. The main responses selected on the survey by parents were the preference of having a more active role in their child's education preferring the flexibility of online schooling for their child, and viewing the social, moral, and academic climate of schools as being unacceptable. Both the preference for parents to have a more active role in their child's education and finding the social, moral, and academic climate of schools as being unacceptable were in the top five of selected responses by parents in Erb's study in 2004.

In this study and in Erb's prior study the majority of survey respondents believed virtual schools contributed to raising the nation's academic standards and that virtual schools should be accountable to the state the same way traditional public schools are accountable. However, an interesting difference on parent views regarding the use of standardized testing to determine achievement of students was revealed. For instance, according to a review of a study by PhiDelta Kappa, Bushaw & McNee (2009) found that Americans continued to support annual testing of students in the third grade through the eighth grade, and this has been the case since the question was first asked in 2002. In the LVS study parents also favored the use of standardized testing. However in Erb's 2004 study parents were evenly divided on their support of determining student achievement based on standardized testing.

Implications for Action

This mixed method study was designed to: inform policy makers and school officials in their decision making process in considering virtual education for elementary and middle school students, provide districts already implementing virtual schools with data to improve their current practice by understanding what is important to families choosing virtual education rather than remaining with a more traditional education for their younger children, assist districts that plan to begin a virtual school or program, and add data and evidence to the limited research base regarding parent choice of K-8 virtual education. The results of this study can help both local school districts and state leadership understand the underlying factors behind parent decision making in removing students from traditional public schools in favor of enrolling them in virtual schools.

Proactive strategies should be implemented in traditional public schools to address parent concerns regarding issues found in this study that ultimately resulted in parents' choosing to transfer their children to a virtual school. Concerns included both academic and social issues, as parents were looking for an education system that met their child's unique needs. The majority of students will have their academic and social needs met in a traditional public school system, nevertheless public school officials should be aware of the importance of reaching all students needs. It is important for the educational community to be understanding of parents choosing educational alternatives such as virtual schools. Also, policy makers should embrace the rising trend of virtual education as a way of continuing to educate all students by implementing virtual schools into the public school system.

Recommendations for Future Research

Below are recommendations for future research that should provide further information for policy makers, school officials, parents, and students regarding virtual school choice. The following recommendations for future research may also be used to emphasize a virtual school alternative by providing information based on data collected through the Lawrence Virtual School, in the state of Kansas.

Future studies should explore:

- Why home school parents choose to enroll their children in a virtual school.
- Why parents of children with disabilities choose to enroll their children in a virtual school.
- Why parents choose to enroll their children in a hybrid or blended learning model.
- Why some parents choose to transfer their virtual school student back to a traditional public school setting.
- How the age/grade/learning style of the student impacts parents' decision in choosing how to educate their child.
- How the quality of a virtual school education impacts parent decision making.
- How satisfied are parents of choosing a virtual education for their child after their child has graduated.
- Replicating the current study in an elementary based virtual school in another state as well as in a different country.

Concluding Remarks

Virtual education has come a long way from the 1970's telecourse offerings in higher education to the present growth of virtual schools for students of all ages. Today, the educational community must decide how this alternate form of education can best meet the needs of all learners. Just as virtual schools are increasing across the Nation, research focusing on a variety of perspectives surrounding virtual education continues to rise. This study adds an important emphasis on families who ultimately are choosing to leave behind the traditional public school and making decisions instead to educate their children in a virtual school. Specific insight is gained by targeting parents of elementary and middle school students who have chosen this educational path. High school and college students are able to accomplish online instruction more often than not independently. This is not typical for younger students. The significance of this study is the focus of examining and understanding this portion of parents who are choosing virtual school for their youngest, which involves more of a personal time commitment than having older children in virtual schools. The findings in this study expanded the work of Rebecca Erb's 2004 study in the area of parent decision making in situations involving the transfer of a student from a traditional public school to a virtual school. As the researcher in the study who also went through the same decision making process as other families represented in this study, I believe in the importance of understanding the factors which lead parents in choosing one type of educational setting over another. Throughout this process my own knowledge was increased and the intent is this study will do the same for others. Findings from this study will benefit all stakeholders to make more informed decisions on educating current and future students.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Research Instrument Permission

Research Instrument Permission

From: Rebecca E. Erb, Ed. D [mailto:rebecca.erb@tus.k12.pa.us]
Sent: Saturday, January 10, 2009 3:21 PM
To: Prosser, Charlsie
Subject: RE: Cyber Charter Dissertation Survey Permission

Charlsie,

You have my permission to use and/or modify the parent questionnaire and interview questions. You may be interested to know that I have in a minimal way revisited the study with a group of parents in my new district. I would be happy to share those data with you as well. The cyber charter option is very interesting in PA where (I believe) a market has developed within the cyber charter schools for service delivery.

Also, a teacher in my district who has a son with Aspergers has chosen to use a cyber option provided by the district through Aurora. She may be willing to speak with you.

Good luck with your study.

Rebecca Erb

From: Prosser, Charlsie [mailto:Charlsie.Prosser@raytownschools.org]
Sent: Sat 1/10/2009 3:01 PM
To: Rebecca E. Erb, Ed. D
Subject: Cyber Charter Dissertation Survey Permission

Dr. Erb,

I am currently in an Educational Leadership Doctoral Program at Baker University and my dissertation focus is similar to several of the topics found in your dissertation, *From Traditional Public School to Cyber Charter: How Parents Decide.* I would like your permission to use and modify (if needed) your Parent Questionnaire, and the interview questions for both parents and administrators.

Currently I am a middle school teacher in Raytown, Missouri as well as an adjunct instructor at Avila University. I have two elementary age children and our son is Autistic (high-functioning). After four years of unsuccessful public school programs and experiences for him, we enrolled him in the Missouri Virtual Instructional Program (MoVIP) in October 2008 and the program is a great fit for our son and family.

My focus would be on the elementary section of the K-12 virtual program and I would like to expand on at least three items listed in your future research section.

- Parent choice in a different demographic setting.
- Parent choice of cyber school for one child in the family, but not for their other children.
- The fifth "I" to examine people or conditions which influenced parents in their decision.

If you would like more information, please let me know, I tried to be brief. I look forward to hearing from you and I have enjoyed reading and discussing the ideas presented in your work.

Sincerely,
Charlsie Prosser
6th Grade Reading
Raytown Middle School

Appendix B: Online Survey Questions

Survey Questions for Parents

1. I first learned about LVS as an educational alternative for my child from:
    a. A public school administrator or teacher from where my child previously attended school.
    b. The newspaper, internet, or other media source
    c. A friend/relative/neighbor who knew about LVS
    d. A friend of my child
    e. Other (explain_____)

2. I received more specific information about LVS before enrolling my child from:
    a. The public school my child previously attended
    b. LVS
    c. Another source (explain_____)
    d. I never received more specific information before enrolling my child at LVS

3. Of the information you received, what was the most influential in your decision to use LVS?
    a. School or district newsletter
    b. Newspaper, television, or website
    c. Discussions with other parents and/or students
    d. Speaking with the principal and/or teacher
    e. None of the above

4. Who had the most influence on your decision to move your child from a public school to LVS?
    a. My child, spouse, or other relative
    b. A friend or neighbor who knew about LVS
    c. LVS personnel
    d. A public school administrator or teacher where my child previously attended school
    e. Another influence (explain_____)

5. In your opinion, do all students in this community, regardless of their social class background, have equal educational opportunities?
    a. Yes, the same
    b. No, not the same
    c. Don't know

6. Students are often given the grades of A, B, C, D, and Fail to denote the quality of their work. Suppose the traditional public schools themselves, in your community, were graded the same way. Which grade would you give the schools here?
    a. A
    b. B
    c. C
    d. D
    e. Fail

7. Which grade would you give traditional public schools in the nation as a whole?
    a. A
    b. B
    c. C
    d. D
    e. Fail

8. Do you think most students achieve their full academic potential in traditional public schools, or do you think more students would reach their potential in other kinds of schools?
    a. Most students achieve their potential in public schools
    b. Most students only achieve a small part of their potential in public schools
    c. Most students would achieve more of their potential in other schools
    d. Don't Know

9. In your opinion, do all students have the ability to reach a high level of learning, or do only some have the ability to reach a high level of learning?
    a. All have the ability to reach a high level of learning
    b. Only some have the ability
    c. Don't know

10. Do you feel virtual schooling contributes to raising the nation's academic standards?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Don't Know

11. Do you think virtual schools, such as LVS, should be accountable to the state the same way traditional public schools are accountable?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Don't Know

12. Do you favor the use of standardized testing to determine the achievement of students?
    a. Favor
    b. Oppose
    c. Don't Know

13. How long have you had one or more children attending LVS?
    a. Less than a year
    b. 1 year
    c. 2 years
    d. 3 or more years

14. How many children do you have in LVS?
    a. 1 child
    b. 2 children
    c. 3 children
    d. 4 or more children

15. What is your child's age? _____ Grade? _____

16. What city do you live in?_____

17. Do you have a child attending LVS and another child attending a traditional public school?
    a. Yes
    b. No

18. I chose to enroll my child in LVS for the following reason(s):
SELECT AS MANY CHOICES AS NECESSARY TO RESPOND ACCURATELY

A. My child was not achieving well in the previous school
B. My child was bullied in the previous school
C. School officials were uncooperative in meeting my child's needs
D. Teachers seemed unable to meet the academic and/or emotional needs of my child
E. My child was unhappy in the previous school and did not want to attend
F. My child was/is ill and was not able to attend the previous school on a regular basis
G. My child's special needs were not being met in the previous school

19. I chose to enroll my child in LVS for the following reason(s):
SELECT AS MANY CHOICES AS NECESSARY TO RESPOND ACCURATELY

A. I prefer the flexibility of online schooling for my child
B. My family is involved in work related activities that require extensive travel
C. I prefer to have a more active role in my child's education
D. I believe the curriculum offered at LVS is more suitable for my child than the curriculum at the previous school
E. The social, moral, and academic climate of public schools is unacceptable

20. Would you be willing to participate in an interview to further explain why you chose to enroll your child in LVS?
    a. Yes
    b. No

Please complete and contact Charlsie Prosser at charlsie.prosser@comcast.net with the following information if you are interested in assisting with this research by participating in interviews.

Parent(s) Name:
Contact Information:
When is the best time to reach you?
What grade is your child in?
Additional Comments:

Appendix C: Questions for Interviews with Parents

Questions for Interviews with Parents

1. Please share your experiences with traditional public school(s) your child attended.

2. How would you describe the traditional public school your child attended?

3. Who did you talk to in order to learn about LVS and what did you learn from them?

4. Who or what conditions most influenced you in your decision making process which led to enrolling your child in LVS?

5. How do you believe LVS will help to meet your child's needs better than the traditional public school he/she previously attended?

6. If you have a child attending LVS, but you have another child attending a traditional public school, please share your experiences that led to this decision.

Appendix D: Approval Letter

Baker University Institutional Review Board

February 08, 2010

Charlsie Prosser
10124 E. 68th St.
Raytown, MO 64133

BAKER UNIVERSITY
Own Confidence

Dear Ms Prosser:

The Baker University IRB has reviewed your research project application (M-0084-0204-0208-G) and approved this project under Exempt Review. As described, the project complies with all the requirements and policies established by the University for protection of human subjects in research. Unless renewed, approval lapses one year after approval date.

The Baker University IRB requires that your consent form must include the date of approval and expiration date (one year from today). Please be aware of the following:

1. At designated intervals (usually annually) until the project is completed, a Project Status Report must be returned to the IRB.
2. Any significant change in the research protocol as described should be reviewed by this Committee prior to altering the project.
3. Notify the OIR about any new investigators not named in original application.
4. Any injury to a subject because of the research procedure must be reported to the IRB Chair or representative immediately.
5. When signed consent documents are required, the primary investigator must retain the signed consent documents for at least three years past completion of the research activity. If you use a signed consent form, provide a copy of the consent form to subjects at the time of consent.
6. If this is a funded project, keep a copy of this approval letter with your proposal/grant file.

Please inform Office of Institutional Research (OIR) or myself when this project is terminated. As noted above, you must also provide OIR with an annual status report and receive approval for maintaining your status. If your project receives funding which requests an annual update approval, you must request this from the IRB one month prior to the annual update. Thanks for your cooperation. If you have any questions, please contact me.

Sincerely,

Charmaine B. S Henry

Charmaine Henry, PhD
Chair, Baker University IRB

P.O. Box 65
Baldwin City, KS 66006
785.594.6451 | 785.594.2522 fax
www.bakerU.edu

Appendix E: Approval Letter

Lawrence Public Schools

Lawrence Public Schools
110 McDonald Drive
Lawrence, Kansas 66044-1063
Telephone: (785) 832-5000

LAWRENCE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

February 25, 2010

Charlsie Prosser
10124 E. 68th Street
Raytown, Missouri 64133

Re: RS4794

Dear Ms. Prosser:

Your application to conduct research in the Lawrence Public Schools has been reviewed and approved.

Final approval rests with the building principal, Mr. Gary Lewis. A copy of this letter of approval and a thorough explanation must be provided to Mr. Lewis at the time you request to work with the district's students/parents and/or staff. Mr. Lewis must sign the enclosed Principal's Consent Form and this signed document must be on file in this office prior to initiating your study.

While we recognize the importance of your research, it may not interfere with the district's educational program. All costs associated with this research are the responsibility of the researcher. Any changes in your project must have approval from this office prior to implementing the changes.

Please note that your research project has been assigned Lawrence Public Schools research number RS4794. Your permission to conduct research in the District expires one year from the date of this notice. If your project is to extend beyond this date, you will need to reapply for authorized permission prior to the expiration date and obtain the requisite principal signature(s). Failure to reapply will result in the inability of the principal investigator to conduct further research in the Lawrence Public Schools. Until such time as a new application to conduct research is approved by the district's Institutional Review Board, no research may be conducted. Thank you for your cooperation with our district policies and procedures.

We request that you submit an abstract of your findings as soon as they are available for possible dissemination among interested educators. We appreciate your interest in Lawrence Public Schools and hope that meaningful data is gained from your efforts.

Sincerely,

Terry McEwen, Ph.D.
Director, Assessments, Research, and School Improvement

Enc: Principal's Consent Form

C: Karen Vespestad, Ph.D., Director, Grants, Board Services, and Strategic Planning; HSCL

Appendix F: Participant Consent Letter

Dear Participant,

I'm a public school educator completing the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program at Baker University and I have one child enrolled in a virtual school while my other child attends a traditional public school. I'm looking for parents to participate in a research project directed toward identifying the reasons parents choose to transfer a student from a traditional public school to a virtual school. This project is designed to inform policy makers and school officials in their decision-making process, in providing districts already involved in virtual schools with information to improve their current practice, and to assist districts that plan to begin a virtual school.

A link to a short survey is provided and participation is strictly voluntary.

Also if you are willing to participate in a recorded telephone interview, please indicate by providing your contact information at the end of the survey. In appreciation for your support of this research, you will receive a $5.00 Borders gift card for participating in the interview.

I hope you will take the time to complete both the survey and interview. Survey responses are anonymous and the identity of interviewees will be kept confidential.

If you have any questions or concerns about completing the survey, participating in the interview process, or about being in this study, you may contact me at the following e-mail address; charlsie.prosser@comcast.com or by telephone (816-313-0323). The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Baker University has approved this study.

Sincerely,

Charlsie Prosser
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix G: Interview Summary Form

Interview Summary Form

Phone _____ _____ _____
With whom, by whom place date

Date coded _____

Coder_____

- Pick out the most relevant points in the contact. Number in order on this sheet and note page number on which point appears. Number point in text of write-up. Attach theme to each point. Invent themes where no existing ones apply and asterisk those. Comment may also be included in parentheses.

Page	Relevant Points	Identified Themes