

What is VLACS? What is virtual learning in NH ? Fact sheet 10/3/17 Janet W.

Information from VLACS website and a 9/29/17 conversation with co-founder Steve Kossakoski

New Hampshire's VLACS, VIRTUAL LEARNING ACADEMY CHARTER SCHOOL, is a public charter school and a 501 c 3 organization. It was approved by the NH Board of Education on May 9, 2007. It opened in January of 2008 and served 14,000 students in 2016, most of them from New Hampshire. A participating student is one who has enrolled in and demonstrated competency in one ½ credit course. The online school is staffed by certified teachers and utilizes courses developed by a number of online content providers, including Florida Virtual School, and have created their own online courses as well. VLACS online courses are free to anyone under 21 without a high school diploma.

The creation of VLACS was inspired by co-founder Steve Kossakoski's participation in the design of an Exeter public charter school, Great Bay Charter School, which was approved by the NH Board of Education in 2004. Steve has experience both as a classroom teacher and an assistant school superintendent. Great Bay Charter School is not an online school, but it does make use of online resources. The program "emphasizes project-based learning in a purposefully designed smaller learning community." Great Bay is funded using \$6350 from the state of NH per enrolled student per year (pro rated) based on Average Daily Membership. Costs are \$9000 per pupil. The school is responsible for raising the balance of the required funds.

Drawing from his Great Bay Charter School experience, sensitive to the reality that "there are many ways for students to learn," and knowledgeable about the possibilities for innovation in teaching offered by online courses, Steve engaged in the design of VLACS. Initial funding for VLACS was obtained by the NH Department of Education through a federal Department of Education initiative, which offered financial support for start-up charter schools. Additional funds came from NH's Education Trust Fund. The average cost per VLACS student [earning six credits in an academic year] is \$5700. The national average is \$6900. Today funding comes largely through NH's Education Trust Fund.

The emphasis at VLACS is on "customized learning." Its course content comes from the Florida Virtual School, which was founded in 1997 and was the first statewide internet-based public high school and largest state virtual school in the United States. VLACS hires only experienced, accredited traditional classroom teachers who are provided a sixteen week training course to prepare them for the online learning environment. During training a teacher is assigned five to six students and is mentored by an experienced online instructor during training. There are 190 teachers on VLACS staff, of whom 23 are full time.

Each course begins with a thirty minute conversation known as a welcome call that involves the student, parent(s) and teacher. Course content and expectations are discussed. Each month the teacher contacts the student and parent(s) and discusses the progress made and any challenges that have arisen. At the end of the course the teacher has a twenty to thirty minute conversation with the student to determine if competency has been attained. The customized online courses often involve internships, travel, and whatever projects students want to design to achieve competency in the course they are taking. Ten hours of community service are required of full-time VLACS students to establish and maintain a

connection with the students' communities. Steve noted that some VLACS teachers believe that their online students are known "at a deeper level" than students in a traditional classroom because of the required communication and personalized approach to each course of study.

VLACS has a very positive relationship with high schools, middle schools and elementary schools through the state. In some cases schools may not publicize its existence because of concern that they might lose students to it. Other schools take advantage of the opportunities VLACS offers its students. Some critics of online education worry that a sense of community will be lost if online education takes center stage. In fact, 72% of VLACS part-time students come from traditional public schools. VLACS allows students from every corner of the state to access a wide variety of courses and advanced learning opportunities regardless of where they reside. It also includes regular opportunities for students to engage in 'real world' experiences that require building relationships with community members.

While VLACS offers great possibilities to customize and personalize learning, its approach is different from that of a traditional public school. Can the VLACS approach be gradually and carefully folded into traditional public school pedagogy in a way that would enhance and enrich teaching and learning? That is a challenging question.

Steve shared with me an observation made by Ernest Boyer, one of the authors of "A Nation at Risk," an assessment of U.S. education published in 1983. Boyer noted the intransigence of long-standing institutions and the difficulty such institutions have with the idea of change. But opening the door to online learning might initiate an exciting new chapter in public school education.