



## Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance

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# NEWS

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### **Wisconsin Virtual School Enrollment Growing Rapidly** New Limits Likely to Become Effective Within Five Years

MADISON—Wisconsin now has 2,951 students in 18 virtual schools, a 10-fold increase from just 247 in two schools five years before, according to a new report from the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance (WISTAX). At this rate of increase, enrollment will reach the state's newly established cap of 5,250 students within five or six years. The cap was set by the legislature in early 2008 as it reacted to a recent court ruling that placed all virtual schools in jeopardy. Virtual schools are public charter schools that use computers and the Internet to teach students statewide. Now in its 76th year, WISTAX is a nonprofit, nonpartisan public-policy research organization dedicated to citizen education.

In 2007-08, the state's largest virtual school, with 865 students, was the Wisconsin Virtual Academy run by the Northern Ozaukee School District. The new WISTAX study, "Public Schooling in Cyberspace," discusses how, in 2002-03, the Appleton Area School District took advantage of various changes in school law along with advancing computer technologies to open the state's first virtual schools: Wisconsin Connections Academy for students in grades K-8 and Appleton eSchool for high schoolers.

According to the new report, districts with the highest percentage of students attending virtual schools tended to be small. Of the 16 with the highest percentage, only Waterford had more than 600 students. Statewide, virtual school students were 0.3% of all public school enrollments. Two districts had more than 2% of their students attend virtual schools: Washington-Caldwell (six students, or 2.56% of enrollment) and Hilbert (12 students, 2.35%). Four other districts—Wausaukee, Tigerton, Flambeau, and Clayton—all had at least 1.5% of students learning virtually.

WISTAX researchers examined school district characteristics to understand why students opted for virtual education. They found districts with higher levels of homeschooling tended to participate more. In some ways, virtual schools may be perceived as an extension of homeschooling, as they allow access to the public education system while still retaining many of the desired features of homeschooling. Another factor, which seemed to play a smaller role, was income, WISTAX said. Higher-income districts tended to have a slightly higher percentage of students attending virtual schools. WISTAX noted that students from higher-income families are more likely to have computers and high-speed Internet access at home.

A final factor appeared to be district quality as measured by student test scores. Districts with below-average test scores tended to have a higher proportion of students attending virtual schools. The new WISTAX study compared test scores for virtual school students and their public school counterparts. On 2006-07 reading tests, virtual school students generally outperformed state averages. On math tests, the results were mixed, with

May 13, 2008

virtual school students in fifth, sixth, and eighth grades scoring above state averages. On average, math scores for virtual schoolers in third, fourth, seventh, and 10th grades were below statewide norms.

The new study shows how virtual schools in Wisconsin evolved from the combination of advancing technology and two legislative changes: the 1995 charter school expansion and the 1998 open enrollment law. The charter school expansion removed limits on the number of charter schools statewide. The open enrollment law allowed students to attend school in districts other than their home district. Although neither change was designed to encourage the creation of virtual schools, both were necessary.

WISTAX researchers noted that because virtual schooling cannot provide physical education, music, or extracurricular activities, students who want these programs will continue to use traditional schools. And, some students learn better in the structured environment a traditional school and classroom provide.

At the same time, virtual schooling may meet the needs of school districts with special challenges. The state has many small, sprawling school districts where consolidation may not be practical. Virtual schooling, or at least specific courses taught by distance learning, might reduce costs and make it possible for small districts to retain their local schools in some form. Virtual education may also provide the opportunity for districts to offer a broader range of courses, particularly in underutilized areas or in more-advanced subject matter.

A free copy of *The Wisconsin Taxpayer* report "Public Schooling in Cyberspace" is available by contacting WISTAX at 401 North Lawn Ave., Madison, WI 53704-5033; e-mailing [wistax@wistax.org](mailto:wistax@wistax.org); visiting [www.wistax.org](http://www.wistax.org); or phoning 608.241.9789. □

*(Editor's Note: An electronic version of this release is available at [www.wistax.org](http://www.wistax.org).)*