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### Online ed: Virtual debate Online education, funding in lawmakers spotlight

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By Jennifer Brown, Denver Post Staff Writer



*Lori Cooney works with daughter Ashlyn on math at the Cooney home, as Sean, right, helps brother Shannon with homework. The kids are home-schooled through the Colorado Virtual Academy and are learning more now than they did in public schools, their mom says. (Post / John Prieto)*

Lori Cooney insists her three kids be dressed and finished with breakfast by 9 a.m. Then they go to school - just off the family room in front of three computers.

Sean, 13, tackles algebra first, while Shannon, 11, and Ashlyn, 8, hit the spelling problems. They study until 3 or 4 p.m., catching 20-minute "recesses" to go sledding or throw a football in their backyard.

The Cooneys are part of the online education boom in Colorado, which jumped from 166 students in 2000 to 9,150 last year - not including students who take online courses to supplement traditional classroom work.

The rapid rise in cyberschool popularity - along with a damaging state audit criticizing some schools for poor management - has Colorado lawmakers considering sweeping legislation to more clearly define the role of virtual schools and how the state should fund them.

All the attention has some families uneasy. Almost 300 parents and their children were at the Capitol recently, grabbing lawmakers in the hallways to tout online learning.

"Choice in education is what this is all about," said Cooney. Her kids are learning more now through Colorado Virtual Academy than they were before she pulled them out of traditional public school three years ago, she said.

Families involved in online programs want to shatter one way of thinking at the Capitol - that virtual courses are a good supplement to classroom education, but not the best way to educate a child full time.

"They tend to not get it, like if they don't go to a brick-and-mortar school something is wrong," said Kelly Weist, community manager for the Colorado Coalition of Cyberschool Families, which started three years ago.

But Sen. Sue Windels, who is leading the charge for more oversight of virtual schools, said the future is "a hybrid - both brick-and-mortar and online."

"We want online to grow, but we want it to be high quality," she said.

Families worry, too, about a legislative clampdown on rural school districts that run statewide cyberschools, a setup criticized in the audit. Colorado could save millions of dollars if online students were enrolled in their own districts instead of rural ones, which collect more per-pupil state funding.

Senate Bill 215 from Windels, D-Arvada, requires rural districts to prove they are capable of overseeing a statewide program before they can expand.

The bill, scheduled for its first hearing this week, encourages districts to operate online programs for district students only. It offers the full per-pupil funding rather than the minimum now paid for online students.

Vilas - a tiny southeastern Colorado school district under fire for lack of oversight of Hope Online Learning Academy centers as far away as Denver - would have a tough time getting permission to charter the academy again under Windels' bill, she said.

House Majority Leader Alice Madden, D-Boulder, is considering offering a bill that would tie state funding to the district where students live - a more direct approach. Madden said she has "no intention of punishing online schools," but several Republicans are wary of any attempt to shift funding.

A provision in Windels' bill that creates a four-member division of the state Department of Education to monitor cyberschools also has some naysayers.

"This bill is over-reaching and overly bureaucratic and flies in the face of local control," said Terri Rayburn, executive director of the education policy group Fund for Colorado's Future.

One piece of the legislation, though, is garnering widespread praise from families in online education. It would remove the requirement that home-schooled or private school children must attend a public school before enrolling in an online program.

The reasons students and parents choose online programs abound - gifted students who aren't challenged enough at school, children with Asperger's syndrome who have a tough time concentrating, and teens with full-time jobs.

Ninth-grader Bryce Myers enrolled in Colorado Virtual Academy five years ago after bad experiences with a teacher and a bully.

"We looked at private schools and traditional home-schooling and those just weren't for us," said his mother, Selina Myers.

Lawmakers insist they won't penalize online education for individual mistakes highlighted in the audit, which blasted poor student performance, sloppy accounting and lax oversight of taxpayer dollars.

"Any time something expands that rapidly, you're going to have growing pains," said Rep. Tom Massey, a Poncha Springs Republican who is on the House Education Committee.

Nina Lopez, with the Donnell-Kay Foundation, which studied online education this winter, believes it's a "watershed year for online policy."

"My hope, though, is that it is watershed because it is the beginning. We are just learning about online."

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## **2001-02**

Branson Alternative School

## **2002-03**

Connections Academy

Edison Academy

On Line Academy

V.I.L.A.S. Online School

## **2003-04**

Karval Online Education

## **2004-05**

Colorado Virtual Academy (Cova)

Huerfano County Opportunity and Enrichment School

Las Animas A+ Distance Learning School

## **2005-06**

Colorado Online Academy (Cola)

Hope Online Learning Academy Co-Op

## **2006-07**

Colorado Distance & Electronic Learning Academy

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