“Achievement” and “Learning” in the Discourse of Virtual Schooling: Ideational Regimes in the Organization of Policy Collectives

Rick Voithofer (voithofer.2@osu.edu) Jan Nespor (nespor.2@osu.edu)
The Ohio State University
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Introduction

The number of K12 virtual schools (VS) – credential-awarding institutions offering curricula and programs exclusively online – is growing rapidly, as are their enrollments. Over 600,000 students attended such schools in the US in 2011-12, an increase of 16% from the previous year (Barbour & Reeves; John Watson, 2012; Searson, Jones, & Wold, 2011; Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Chris, 2011). Yet the organizations behind this expansion, which include government agencies, state legislators, corporate-legislative coalitions, Foundations, Non-profit and for-profit schools, Software & Information Industry Associations, technology vendors, consultants, researchers, lobbyists, and others, do not necessarily share goals or interests. As Newman (2001) points out, such collectives can be “informal and fluid, with shifting membership and ambiguous relations and accountabilities” (Ball, 2008, p. 749).

The discourses used to promote the growth of VSs have been similarly varied, combining a range of financial, curricular, pedagogical, and political arguments with multiple critiques of the limits and problems of traditional schooling. All, however, in one way or another rest on a kind of “discursive anchoring” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1999) that legitimizes VSs through the claim that they effectively promote student “learning” and “achievement.” This anchoring is built on traditional discourses of educational institutions in order provide legitimacy to the new networks of actors (e.g., charter schools, vendors, consultant) who have been working to establish themselves over the past decade or so. In particular VSs are promoted for their capacity to offer learning flexibility in terms of access to diverse content at unconventional times. Discourses often stress how individualized learning that can take place in an online environment promotes student achievement ¹. These advantages are often presented in the context of typically lower than average tests scores by VS students and high attrition rates (http://bit.ly/16Piw0g).

In Ohio, virtual schools, called eschools or e-schools, were made possible as part of “Community Schools” legislation passed in 1997 (House Bill (HB) 215). “Community School” is the State’s

¹ For example, a page promoting the mobile apps offered by the Florida Virtual school states that applications, “offer you a deeper level of individualized learning to meet your ever-changing needs.” http://www.flvs.net/myflvs/study-tools/mobilelearning/Pages/default.aspx
designation not for schools serving as central institutions in existing communities, but public charter
school functioning independently of school districts. HB 215 allowed chartering of such schools in
districts at the lowest ranking in the State’s rating system – “academic emergency” (which meant roughly
that the school had met less than a third of the state’s key indicators, ranked below the 70% percentile on
the state performance index, and had not met state growth targets for five consecutive years). 1999
legislation expanded the program into the 21 largest urban school districts, and by 2013 there more than
300 Charter schools in Ohio, many chartered and run by for-profit corporations, collectively receiving
around half a billion dollars a year from the state.

In this paper we begin tracing the network evolution of virtual schooling in Ohio, showing its
shifting linkages to different kinds of actors at varying national and transnational scales, and focusing in
particular on the discursive mechanisms – concepts such as “learning,” “achievement,” “and “content” –
in these processes. We use as our point of entry and tracer for the paper the first eschool in Ohio,
Electronic Classroom of tomorrow (ECOT), sponsored by the Lucas County (Toledo) Educational
Service Center. ECOT enrolled 2200 schools during the 2000-2001 school year, and has since grown into
the State’s largest eschool (graduating 17 students in 2001 compared to over 2000 in 2012); it draws
students from across the state, but also helps shape the virtual schools movement nationally and
exemplifies key features of that movement.

ECOT’s enrollment growth across the 2000s was a function of a series of legislative measures,
including one – a moratorium on the creation of new charter schools between 2005 and 2012 (enacted
during a Republican administration, but promoted by groups including Union-Public School coalitions
pointing to evidence of the poor performance by the charters) that allowed the small number of already
existing statewide eschools to expand into school districts of the state, generate new markets (see below),
and consolidate power. These measures will subsequently be tracked in more detail. ECOT is run by
Altair Learning Management, owned by William Lager, who was also ECOT’s founder. Lager’s other
companies include IQ Innovations that describes itself on its website as:

a pioneer in the world of online educating. With over a decade of experience, IQ Innovations has
seen online education move from strictly a distance-learning option for students with unique situations, to a more complete solution that enables teachers, schools, states, and regional or national organizations to improve the educational experience within the traditional classroom environment. The educators and technology experts within IQ Innovations are both leading and studying educational trends to continually empower teachers and schools with more robust solutions for educating our nation's youth. Headquartered in Columbus, Ohio, IQ Innovations works with states, districts, and schools from across the country (http://www.iq-ity.com/company.aspx).

IQ Innovations develops IQity, a Learning Management System that is both used by ECOT and serves as the online platform for statewide California system called, “Caliquity” (http://www.caliqity.org/index.html). Certain elements of IQity form the backend system for the iLearnOhio VS curriculum repository² which will be discussed later.

Given the space constraints here we’ll limit our analysis to illustrating one of the ways in which we’re trying to analyze the kinds of relations outlined above. Most simply, the set of ties and organizations that function as an engine for generating relations of space, that is, topological spaces, defined less by a real geography than relations and flows. It links states from California to Ohio (and beyond), but the result is not the production of an “education space” (e.g., Lawn, 2011) based on the European model. Rather, certain key state/public functions are peeled away, detached from the geographical region, and subordinated to infrastructure and data management systems that translate them into forms that can be detached from particular situations and marketized – the market being national. IQity – or something that parallels it in function and form -- becomes an obligatory passage point that defines (or at least heavily constrains) the forms of curricula and instructional systems it must work with, the kinds of organizations that can generate those forms, and the ways they can be accessed.

Second, the web of relations sketched here takes the network form familiar to policy analysts (e.g., Ball, 2007, 2008, 2012; Miskel & Song, 2004; Peck, 2011) but our emphasis here, drawing on actor

² Described on its website as “a comprehensive e-learning platform funded by the Ohio General Assembly to ensure that Ohio students have access to high-quality online courses. This statewide platform includes a searchable repository of standards-aligned educational content (courses and digital resources), an e-commerce marketplace, and a learning management system to facilitate the delivery of course content from multiple providers to various end users. ilearnOhio is administered by the Ohio Resource Center, located at the . . . Ohio State University, under the direction of the Ohio Board of Regents” http://www.ilearnohio.org/about/
network approaches, will depart, though in complementary ways, from much of that research. First, we focus on the material heterogeneity of the networks – people, legislative texts, money, shifter terms, advocacy organizations, software platforms – each of which can do different kinds of things and connect to other elements in different ways. Second, we try to think of the network not as a stable set of ties and nodes but as a system of translations or transformations; that is, each link, as it connects, is transforming the nodes connected.

**Methods**

Our analytical methods draw from forms of “mapping” (e.g., Whatmore, 2009) ‘network’ theory (e.g., Ball, 2008; Knox, Savage, & Harvey, 2006) for analytical tools. Text selection centered on the work of prominent actors within the categories of government agencies, state legislators (and corporate-legislative coalitions), Foundations, Non-profit and for-profit schools, Software & Information Industry Associations, technology vendors, consultants, researchers, lobbyists operating in Ohio between 2004-2012. In our analysis we identified the following categories and actors:

- **Government agencies** - The Federal Department of Education and the Ohio Departments of Education.
- **National Non-Profit Associations** - National organization conduct a variety of activities in support of specific policy initiatives: International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNacol), National Association of Charter School Authorizers
- **State Non-profit agencies** - Ohio Alliance for Public Charter Schools, Ohio Council of Community Schools.
- **Foundations, Think Tanks & Institutes** - Fordham Institute, Gates Foundation, Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, Foundation for Excellence in Education, National Education Policy Center, American Enterprise Institute for Policy Research, The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC ) and the Mackinac Center.
- **Large Virtual Schools** - These statewide schools serve 5000 or more students per year across multiple school districts and counties. They include schools like Ohio Virtual Academy (OVA) and Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow (ECOT).³
- **For profit vendors** - While there are two dominant vendors in the VS market, Blackboard for the delivery of instruction and K12, Inc for curriculum and content, there are a host of vendors across the technology and content spectrum that offer products and

³ Both ECOT and OVA are charter schools run by for-profit organizations.
services to virtual schools: Village Virtual, Apex Learning, Connections Learning, and Advanced academics.

○ **Other Non-profit organizations** - These are institutions and organizations who have shaped and changed the discourse on virtual learning: Kahn Academy

○ **National For-Profit Associations** - Software and Information Industry Association, EverGreen Education Group

○ **Education Investment Groups**: NewSchools Venture Fund; Imagine K-12

○ **Accreditation Agencies**: AdvancED

○ **Consultants and lobbyists** - Because every state approaches virtual schooling based on different models (e.g., charter, district wide, statewide) and each virtual school must develop a unique technical and curricular infrastructure, they often rely on a host of consultants who guide the schools towards specific solutions. In a similar vein, lobbyist for various for-profit school and vendors’ interests try to influence federal and state policy issues to favor their market agendas.

From these actors we analyzed web pages, research reports, policy documents, legislation, key promotional materials, and the like, focusing on the uses of the constructs of “learning” and “achievement” but necessarily attending to the broader textual contexts in which those terms are used and the linked terms (e.g., synonyms for learning and curriculum) emerging from the analysis.

To trace the multiple ways “learning” and “achievement” are constructed across different virtual schools agendas we use both Urciuoli’s work on “strategically deployable shifters” (Urciuoli, 2003, 2010), and studies of movement “framing” and “ideational regime change” from sociology and political science (Benford & Snow, 2000; Somers & Block, 2005) to scrutinize the linked set of intertexts used to define and legitimize, and contest virtual schooling. Following Somers and Block (2005) we are interested in the “mechanisms that allow certain ideas to exert extraordinary political influence” (p. 261).

**Defining the Field – Ohio Virtual Schools 1997-2012**

In the case of this study we focus our field to the evolution of virtual schools in Ohio between 1997-2012, a period that marked the genesis, evolution and growth of VS in the state. Ohio has the second largest eschool enrollment in nation, second to Florida (Watson, 2012). This growth was guided through a number of legislative milestones.
Virtual schools (VSs), called eschools or e-schools in Ohio, are part of the community school initiative that began in 1997 as an alternative to traditional public K12 programs for Ohio districts in academic emergency. Community Schools, typically called charter schools, are public nonprofit schools that function independently of school districts. In Ohio the 300+ community (charter) schools receive approximately a half billion dollars a year and can be run by for-profit corporations. The first community school pilot was established in 1997 through House Bill (HB) 215 in Lucus County. In 1999, HB 282 allowed for the expansion of startup community schools into the 21 largest urban school districts. In 2000 any district that was in academic emergency status was allowed to develop a community school.

The first eschool in Ohio, Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow (ECOT), was sponsored by the Lucas County Educational Service Center and enrolled 2200 schools during the 2000-2001 school year. In 2003, HB 364 gave the State Board of Education oversight over community schools and extended the location of startup schools to “academic watch” and “challenged school districts” while further defining the role of community Internet community schools or e-schools. Through HB 364 eschools were required to establish a physical base of operations and provide students with Internet access and computers equipped with filtering software to screen out inappropriate content. In August 2003 HB 3 required schools to expel community school students with absences that equal more than 105 hours of instruction, in addition to requiring that the state board of education to suggest guidelines for ecommunity school governance. The guidelines were submitted by the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) under a report called, Legislative Recommendations for the Operation of eCommunity Schools and eCourses Offered by Schools (http://bit.ly/wqeLL5).

Because of various factors including fast growth, lack of academic standards beyond those imposed in the 2003 legislation and charter laws, low participation rates in state assessments along with low tests scores, and the siphoning of students from public bricks and mortar school districts Ohio enacted a moratorium on any new e-schools in 2005. In 2006 a study conducted by the state found that
ecommunity schools spent $5,382 per student, compared to $7,452 per student for other community schools, and $8,437 per student for school districts. The study concluded that these costs were “reasonable.” Because of the moratorium the number of ecommunity schools declined from 44 in 2005 to 27 in 2011. Legislation enacted in 2007 and later amended in 2008 directs the chancellor of the Ohio Board of Regents to establish a clearinghouse of online courses and materials from commercial and non-commercial providers offered by school districts, community schools, and higher education institutions for sharing within the state for a fee. The OhioLearns! (http://www.ohiolearns.org) project piloted this clearinghouse, but the project never extended to K12 and remains a higher education clearinghouse of online content. The K12 clearinghouse project came online at the end 2012, branded as iLearnOhio (http://www.ilearnohio.org).

Passed in 2011, HB 153 lifted the moratorium on new e-schools beginning Jan 1st, 2013. HB 153 also required that the superintendent of public instruction develop a set of standards for e-schools by January 2013 and if none were adopted to implement the iNacol standards (http://bit.ly/qLyoEz), a set of national standards for online K12 teaching. Ohio e-schools must comply with these standards by August, 2013. HB 153 also repealed the minimum amount per pupil requirement that had been in place since 2007, replaced by a new set of funding standards calculated by a percentage of expenditures. Finally HB 153 called for the creation of the Ohio Digital Learning taskforce to, “to develop a strategy for the expansion of digital learning that enables students to customize their education, produces cost savings, and meets the needs of Ohio's economy” (http://1.usa.gov/10xUToj). The task force was comprised of the CFO of ECOT, three school superintendents, one school principle, the state relations VP for Connections Academy (a national virtual school provider), a member of the State Board of Regents, and two state legislators. The state’s Director of 21st Century Education who later became the state Superintendent of Schools chaired the committee.

HB 316 was passed in 2012 as a result of recommendations of the Ohio Digital Learning taskforce. It makes explicit the ability of Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to create or convert traditional schools, all or in part, to blended schools. While the number of e-schools declined during this
moratoria, enrollments steadily rose, particularly in state level schools like ECOT and the Ohio Virtual Academy (OVA), student enrollment doubled from 17,000 (2004-2005) - 35,000 (2011-2012). The state legislative trajectory, especially in recent years has been influenced by shifts in federal education funding policies.

One piece of Federal Policy, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) flexibility initiative, enacted in 2011 has particular relevance to state legislative policies around virtual schools. ESEA gives states the capacity, in the form of waivers, to act outside the strict No Child Left Behind requirements. These waivers, which represent the primary Federal K12 reform policies, require college and career readiness standards, statewide accountability systems, teacher evaluation tied to student achievement, and new forms of state level administration and reporting. The waiver provides flexibility in the 2014 timeline to bring all children to 100% academic proficiency, removes school and district improvement plans, as well as Title 1 (funds to training and recruitment) the education of disadvantaged students) and Title II (funds for teacher and principle improvement) fund restrictions for districts that miss highly qualified teacher (HQT) requirements. These waivers allow state virtual schools to continue to exist in light of the fact that test scores in virtual schools are often dramatically lower compared to traditional schools (Miron & Urschel, 2012). Ohio was approved for an ESEA exemption on May 29, 2012 (http://tinyurl.com/cfqu87).

In addition to ESEA Ohio e-schools have benefitted from Race to the Top (RTT) funding. Race to the Top is a federal grant program designed to increase student achievement by requiring states to implement performance based standards for teachers and principles, adopt the common core standards, develop new data systems to support instruction, and promote charter schools. On June 30th, 2011 Ohio was awarded $400 million in second round RTT funding. ECOT was awarded $2.7 million of Race to the Top funding (http://tinyurl.com/cn5hgy) to increase attendance and graduation rates and improve statewide test scores (http://tinyurl.com/bteyyl).

Nationally there is pressure to deregulate online schools so that it is easier for their numbers to grow. Recently the National Governors Association (NGA), published a report, *Regulating Online*
Postsecondary Education: State Issues and Options, that encourages governors to review existing laws and regulations around virtual schools to in order to, “identify opportunities for simplifying and streamlining the process and to explore the possibility of joining an interstate reciprocity agreement for authorization (Roach, 2013)”. Other voices of deregulation come from business interests and education investment groups (e.g., Imagine K-12) who anticipate large opportunities in VS growth. For example, states with a significant number of low performing schools are seen as a lucrative business opportunity (http://bit.ly/MuAZUii). Robert Lytle, owner of Parthenon Group's Education Center of Excellence developed the following graphic (Figure 1) to identify states where low scores coupled with high per student expenditures may offer the greatest opportunity for investment in education. States like Tennessee and Nebraska in the upper right quadrant are seen as good investment opportunities, particularly because they have Republican governors who are typically pro-business.

Figure 1 - Source: http://bit.ly/11a4ymx (Robert Lytle, Parthenon Group's Education Center of Excellence).
Lytle notes opportunities in three areas: 1) curriculum—what is being taught?; 2) pedagogy—how is it being taught? And human capital—who is teaching?

Another national players who support the grown of VS includes the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). ALEC is a group of conservative members of congress along with corporations and scholars who favor large scale privatization of education and have developed a number of examples of model legislation that would lead to the expansion of charter and virtual schools. ALEC, whose corporate members include K12, Inc. and Connections Academy, has a long history of influence in Ohio legislation with a number of education bills in recent years containing language from ALEC’s model legislation. Its current governor, John Kasich, is a former member of ALEC.

The Fordham institute’s credo notes the need for “educational diversity, competition, and choice.” (http://bit.ly/14pKAdu). This dynamic of choice is deeply woven into an economic metaphor of education in which students and their caregivers are consumers in the marketplace of education. For example, arguing for “choice centered reform” based on the deregulation of educational “bureaucracy” the American Enterprise Institute for Public Research advocates policies that would allow for greater VS flexibility by unbundling a whole school approach to education in favor of an “a la carte” model driven by consumer choice (Hess, Meeks, & Manno, 2011). These positions make the assumption that given sufficient choices, caregivers and students will make the best choice to support student learning.

**Tracing the Policy Streams in Ohio**

To examine the evolutions of these policies we use the five elements of Zahariadis’ Multiple Streams Framework: problem streams, policies streams, politics steams, policy windows, and policy entrepreneurs (Zahariadis, 2007). Each of the three streams has its own rules and dynamics, however these streams come to a confluence during particular policy windows influenced by policy entrepreneurs. In this framework “Problem” streams are the specific circumstances that policy makers and the interested parties (e.g., citizens) want to address. Initially policies that lead to the formation of e-schools were the result of the problem of low performing schools. This identified problem lead to the introduction of

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4 We have modified the scale from the National scales that Zahairidis describes to a state scale.
Community Schools in 1997. Policies streams consist of all the ideas that compete to address the problems including introducing charter schools, changing funding structures, implementing various standards, etc. The politics stream has three elements: the national and state mood (e.g., the push for virtual schools from various elements including Think tanks, business interests), lobbying campaigns, and administrative or legislative turnover (e.g., new governor). During this period Ohio saw both Democratic and Republican governors, although the Ohio General Assembly had mostly Republican majorities.

Nationally in 1997 there was a trend in which states with lower performing schools adopted charter school legislation at a higher rate (Mintrom & Vergari, 1997). Charter schools were presented as a way to give parents and caregivers an alternative to local low performing public schools. They inaugurated a discourse of choice that has been strategically deployed by VSs. Typically, as was the case in Ohio, charter schools had to meet fewer accountability requirements compared to traditional public schools. Policy windows are defined as fleeting opportunities for advocates of proposals to push their pet solutions, or to point attention to specific social problems. Problems occur when policy entrepreneurs use the wrong window to pursue their goals. Policy entrepreneurs, individuals or corporate actors who attempt to couple multiple streams to achieve their goals, have been operating aggressively at state legislatives nationally to pave the way for e-schools (Fang, 2011).

Reviewing the growth of VSs in Ohio a number common threads emerge. First community schools were created as a response to low achievement in particular districts. Because these districts were often low performing urban districts, early and current (see: [http://bit.ly/10ETiz1](http://bit.ly/10ETiz1) ) e-schools growth in Ohio took students and thereby funding away from school districts, often those with the most need of financial support. Early e-schools did not fall in line with traditional measures of achievement because they were not required to participate in state testing – this eventually changed. The 2005-2012 moratorium allowed a small number of statewide e-schools to experience dramatic growth in this period and to consolidate power. This can be seen clearly during this time in the case of ECOT, currently the state’s largest e-school, and a clear policy entrepreneur in Ohio and nationally. ECOT had representation on the 2011 Ohio Digital Learning Task force. In the past it has had representation on the iNacol board
and its Teacher Evaluation Rubric was used in the development of the national standards for online teachers. ECOT is run by Altair consulting a company that is owned by Bill Lager who also owns IQ Innovations that develops IQity a Learning Management System that is used by ECOT, as well as, being adopted as the statewide online platform for California called, “Caliquity” (http://www.caliquity.org/index.html).

IQ Innovations is also the vendor providing the backend for the iLearnOhio VS curriculum repository. IQity uses a learning objects repository called Reactor, which is essentially a marketplace for various for-profit and non-profit vendors including: Currium, PowerSpeak, Rethink Learning, Music Within Me, Accelerate Education, Class.com, Carnegie Learning, CICERO, CK-12, Daydream Education, DriversEd.com, Educators Virtual Mentor, Khan Academy, Learning Bridges, Thinkfinity by Verizon, StarrMatica, and Virtual Nerd. IQity even brands the aggregation of these vendors as the “IQity Marketplace”. Recall that Lytle identified curriculum as one area of economic growth. This model of delivering online instruction will be discussed more in the following section on learning and achievement.

iLearnOhio also is being developed in partnership with the Ohio Resource Center at the Ohio State University. While the degree of influence is not always visible in public records, it is clear that each major policy window and growth in the way that e-schools are offered in Ohio has benefitted the growth of ECOT in Ohio and IQ Innovations nationally.

In the next section we will look more closely how the discourses of learning and achievement are being reconfigured through e-schools in ways that justify the existence of e-schools despite a negative track record along traditional measurements of achievement.

**Language Games and New Discursive Technologies**

For the remainder of this paper we provide a preliminary analysis of one facet of the discursive work ECOT does for the state. Our analysis of VS actors in Ohio and beyond shows a number of strategies with which learning and achievement are deployed. In order to understand these discourses and how meanings shift within these discourses we use the concept of “strategically deployed shifters”. According to Urciuoli, “people routinely use what seem to be the same referring expression in reference
to what appears to be the same thing in ways that are often incoherent, sometimes even contradictory…

[This is due to the varying ways in which referring expressions get sedimented as they travel along
different discursive paths in different discursive fields” (Urciuoli, 2010, p. 48). Through the process of
eventualization (Silverstein & Urban, 1996) discourses like “learning” and “achievement” are perceived
as coming separately from their origins (i.e., traditional notions of learning and achievement) and invested
with an ahistorical and free floating authority. The authority comes less from referential specificity,
instead favoring a more strategic alignment. Often these investments come from neoliberal discourses. As
was seen in the earlier policy analysis neoliberal discourses of open markets and educational
entrepreneurialism are deeply embedded in the virtual school policy streams. Similarly neoliberal
ideologies that structure an ideal workforce supplied by students who possess entrepreneurial skills
(Springer, 1998) can be found in the way that learning and achievement are deployed in virtual school
discourses.

Achievement in Ohio eschools has become reconfigured away from strictly traditional measures
of test scores. This is a type of “ideational regime change” in which an idea or discourse survives
disconfirming data by changing the terms of the debate (Somers & Block, 2005). Consider the fact that
despite the original justifications for charters as a response to failing schools, the schools themselves,
including ECOT, have generated consistently poor test scores (see http://bit.ly/kiN451). Yet ECOT (and
the other large e-school providers in Ohio) continue to thrive.

Achievement in education is typically thought about as student performance on standardized
tests. The achievement gap is often referred to as differential test performance between groupings of
students based on divisions including schools, districts, SES, race, and nation. It places the locus of
responsibility on students and is used as a way to gauge the success or failure of teachers and different
interventions. Achievement gaps are places around which policy initiatives are developed and are one of
the most talked about issues in American education. Interestingly, rarely in educational and policy
discourses is the meaning of achievement and achievement gap challenged or debated (Ladson-Billings,
2006). As will be shown in this section eschools are able to shift traditional promises of achievement
toward other measures of success including choice, personalization and convenience. This shift allows virtual schools to define their own measures of success and illustrate ways in which they meet the measures that they created on their terms.

One way that learning is being reconfigured in VS discourses is the way that learning, curriculum, and content delivery are often synonymous. For example, the iNacal “About” page asserts that, “Quality online learning opportunities are led by outstanding course content delivered by highly qualified educators”. The two largest VS vendors Blackboard and K12, Inc sell standards aligned content and a highly structured platform (i.e., a learning management system) to deliver that content. As was previously discussed platforms like iQity and iLearnOhio are systems that focus on content and delivery aggregation. The underlying assumption of this discourse is that a being provided a selection of content and lessons gives teachers the necessary tools to enhance student learning. A promotion video for the iQity vendor space illustrates how this discourse is constructed (http://bit.ly/11any4h). The video portrays a “Virtual Curriculum Super Market Place” with an animated shopper walking through a virtual learning market (see Figure 2) that is “Scalable to Millions”, “Content Neutral”, “Flexible”, addresses “Digital Rights Management”, “Fully integrated”, “Easily customizable”, and “Standards aligned”.

![Virtual Curriculum Super Market Place](image.png)
The scalability of VS learning is often used as a way to promote the advantages of VSs as public education is confronting new economies of scale. According to the South Regional Education Board, “Economies of scale should benefit states in funding state virtual schools over time” (http://bit.ly/Zr2veV).

The video transitions to a kitchen scene (See figure 3) with the following narration,

“Once the district has made all of its selections (of curriculum vendors), the courses are then made available to the teachers. The teacher simply selects one of the approved courses, maybe adds an assignment or two, spices it up with a couple of dynamic learning objects. Once the teacher has prepared a course for his and her specific classroom, the teacher is ready to serve up a delicious well-balanced education.”

Figure 3 – Screenshot from promotional video – Teacher’s Kitchen

“Learning” and “achievement” are often shifted onto benefits beyond school and the classroom. For example, The iNacol mission statement focuses on the importance of VSs to provide access to educational opportunities that prepare [students] for “a lifetime of success.” The K-5 promotion page for ECOT begins with the tagline: “The path to a lifelong love of learning” (http://bit.ly/ZFpOot). Describing their teachers, the nexus academy offers, “Our dedicated, licensed teachers work with students both
online and on-site helping each student develop key skills for **life-long success**—such as creativity, critical thinking skills, organizational skills, leadership and communication skills” ([http://bit.ly/17qSIZQ](http://bit.ly/17qSIZQ)).

“Access” and “Learning” are often conflated. One of the consistent shared assumptions that can be found about online learning is that access to a virtual learning space via an internet connected device (e.g., desktop, laptop, mobile phone, tablet, etc.) automatically leads to learning. For example, a steady refrain about VSs is that they offer students in districts with fewer course choices access to advanced placement courses or students in need of credit recovery courses access to courses at any time, not just when they happen to be offered through a traditional school schedule. A counterpart to this conflation is that learning is personalized. “Nexus Academy provides students with a unique blend of online and classroom learning with personalized learning plans and a challenging curriculum featuring Advanced Placement and Honors level courses in Mathematics, Science, Language Arts, Humanities and Social Studies. Nexus Academy limits enrollments to 300 students in order to deliver a more personalized learning environment” ([http://bit.ly/NQgXYu](http://bit.ly/NQgXYu)). Another aspect of this discourse is that access is free. Many of the statewide eschools in Ohio promote the fact that they are tuition-free. The header of every Ohio Virtual Academy (OVA) pages reads, “Ohio Virtual Academy | Free public home school online” while the main page offers, “Full-time, tuition-free online public school option”. ECOTs tagline on their main page states, “A Tuition-Free, Fully Accredited Online K–12 School”.

VSs also construct the discourse on learning by carefully constructing the subject for whom the learning is structured. In Ohio and many other states, learning in VS is for non-traditional students. The homepage of ECOT profiles students who can’t attend traditional schools because of illness or bad experiences in local neighborhood schools, athletes who must travel, and home schooled children.

According to ECOT ([http://bit.ly/Ifj7uE](http://bit.ly/Ifj7uE)) the following types of students benefit from VSs:

- Students with Jobs
- Students with Medical Issues
- Professional Athletes and Musicians
- Pregnant and Parenting Students
- Bullied Students
- Students Wanting to Eliminate the Distractions of the Traditional Classrooms
• Advanced Students Needing a Challenge
• Students Needing to Change Schools Mid-year

Other ways that VSs receive authority in the ways that they define student learning and achievement is through accreditation. Both ECOT and OVA are accredited by a company called AdvancED (or accreditation agencies like North Central Association (NCA) and Commission on International Trans-Regional Accreditation (CITA) that AdvancEd has acquired in recent years) (http://bit.ly/10gnm87, http://bit.ly/15fu4Mg). AdvancED accredits schools in over 70 countries, 30,000 schools and 16 million students and represents one aspect of the global scaling of education. According to the AdvancEd website:

The AdvancED Accreditation Process, a protocol embraced around the world, is a clear and comprehensive program of evaluation and external review, supported by research-based standards, and dedicated to helping schools, districts and education providers continuously improve. AdvancED’s position as a thought leader in education continues to expand as we provide a national and international voice to inform and influence policy and practice on issues related to education quality (http://bit.ly/145LP0O).


Conclusions

As we noted at the start, this paper represents the beginning of our effort to trace the network evolution of virtual schooling in Ohio and beyond by showing the shifting linkages between different kinds of actors at varying local, national and transnational scales. In the process of doing this we found one actor, ECOT, operating on all of these scales. In tracing this actor across various policy networks and discursive spaces we came to the following conclusions:

1) ECOT was founded in one of the limited geographical areas designated as eligible for a charter school within the state system; its creation is a punctuation point at the intersection of multiple, long-term network-construction projects, from the 1950’s Ford Foundation instructional television efforts, to the Charter School movement, to the neoconservative attacks on public education, and others. Many of these developed relatively independently. “Technology” becomes a glue tying them together.
2) ECOT moves and combines with other entities through multiple media: Not only the computer-based technologies themselves, but forms of texts such as legislation in the decade after its founding (some of that legislation is itself the product of other flows, in particular template legislation from the American Legislative Exchange Council - ALEC); it also moves through money – which quite possibly influences some of that legislation. Each connected element can move in different ways and function as a circuit switch to shape the flows of different kinds of things. William Lager, for example, can act as a transforming link to shape curriculum into campaign contributions. In each of these ties the actor network is transforming what moves and the entities connected by its movement.

3) ECOT is managed by a company owned by its founder (Altair). This “mutation” (Peck, 2011) of school into management firm provides an additional layer of protection from the state and also allows the network to operate along other circuits and generate different kinds of network ties (such as IQity). As DePaoli & van Lier (2013) conclude:

While Ohio law sets up charter school boards as the entity to be held legally responsible for a school’s academic and financial performance, it does not do the same for management companies, many of them for-profit, that are contracted by schools to manage their daily operations. These companies are often in charge of making major decisions for a school, including hiring and firing teachers, assessing academic performance, contracting with vendors, budgeting, developing curriculum, and providing basic classroom materials. Yet the closure law places no penalty on CMOs when their schools meet academic closure criteria. This omission creates a loophole for managers to keep “closed” schools open and continue to receive public funds for failing schools.

4) Different nodes in the ‘ECOT network’ have different transformational potentials. IQity seems to function as the philosopher’s stone in this alchemical network: it can transmute different types of entities – states and softwares, schools and political campaigns; public curriculum repositories and for-profit marketplaces – into contingent circuits that can reach from politician’s pockets in Florida to a teacher’s classroom in California.

5 According to the blog Plunderbund, Lager donated a total of $220,795 to officials running for state office in Ohio in 2010. http://www.plunderbund.com/2011/05/01/mr-governor-shut-this-school-district-down/
Since we have defined a rough outline of the various actors and traces within the “ECOT network” (i.e., the topological spaces) our next task is to explain how the connections and translations are made across this network. This analysis will provide a better sense of how the policies and discourse scale across borders and different types of institutions, the conditions under which this scaling occurs, and the direct and indirect actions taken by actors moving within this network.
References


