



Five Keys to Success with Virtual Education

As a veteran educator and administrator in a traditional brick-and-mortar school environment, Nadia Washington Seals initially didn't understand the need for virtual education. That quickly changed when Ms. Seals became director of the Southern University Laboratory Virtual School (SULS) in Louisiana, and she began to meet students and their families and get to know their stories.

"There is absolutely a need for virtual education," Ms. Seals says. "I've had parents tell me that when they would drop their child off at school in the morning, their child would immediately start vomiting because they were anxious about the bullying they were experiencing."

Virtual education meets the needs of so many students who aren't being served well in a traditional school setting, which is why it's critical for school systems to provide virtual options. However, virtual education can be challenging to deliver effectively, as the shift to remote learning during the pandemic demonstrated.

A model of success

SULS is a good example of how to lead virtual education successfully. A program of the Southern Laboratory School District (SLSD) at Southern University, SULS uses curriculum and instructors from Stride Learning Solutions to offer students in grades K-12 throughout Louisiana an exceptional and highly personalized online learning experience.

“One of the things we pride ourselves on is quality, not quantity,” Ms. Seals says. “We put caps on our (enrollment) to make sure we are providing a personal touch for every student. We want to make sure we give them a family atmosphere.”

This virtual school’s hands-on approach is paying off, as SULS has seen a sharp rise in the number of students achieving at grade-level proficiency over the last five years. Students even have an opportunity to earn college credit from Southern University as they’re taking high school courses.

What are the lessons that other school systems can learn from this highly effective program? Based on SULS’ experience, **here are five keys to success with virtual education.**

1 *Set clear expectations.*

Although virtual education might be just what some students need to excel, it isn’t for everyone. It’s important for educators and administrators to be transparent with families and establish clear expectations at the outset, so there are no surprises.

“We make sure parents know our expectations at the very front end,” Ms. Seals says. “We have clearly defined plagiarism, attendance, and discipline policies. This is just as necessary in a virtual setting so that participants know the boundaries. We send out our student handbook to families each year before students even have access to their courses.”

2 *Provide structure.*

Online learning gives students a great deal of flexibility, but students still need structure to ensure they’re successful. One way that SULS has provided this structure for students is by having its program mirror that of a traditional school in important ways.

“We try to make sure that our program looks very similar to a traditional brick-and-mortar school,” Ms. Seals explains. “For instance, we maintain an honor roll, and we mail out certificates to recognize our honor roll students.”

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– Nadia Washington Seals,
Director of the Southern
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3 *Create multiple layers of support.*

When teachers aren't seeing students in a classroom every day, it can be hard to know when they might be struggling. Having a multi-layered system of supports helps solve this challenge, allowing virtual school programs to identify potential problems and intervene quickly to help students succeed.

"With virtual schooling, issues can fly under the radar if you're not paying attention," Ms. Seals says. "We've created several levels of support so that we can immediately catch students who are falling behind."

The first layer of support is that every student is required to have a learning coach. This could be a parent or someone from the student's home school system who is responsible for that child's success.

The second layer is the child's virtual teacher. SULS classes are taught by certified Stride Learning Solutions instructors, each of whom holds regular virtual office hours and is readily available to answer questions and otherwise support students' success.

The third layer of support is a Stride mentor who regularly monitors each child's progress and follows up immediately if there are any issues, such as when a student hasn't logged in for a few days.

With this multi-layered system of supports in place, "we have been able to catch situations before they have become bigger problems, such as when a household has had COVID and everyone has been ill," Ms. Seals says. "We can take actions to help those students, such as giving them an extension for medical reasons or opportunities to make up the work."

4 *Practice 'aggressive communication.'*

Close communication and coordination between students, parents, learning coaches, teachers, mentors, and administrators is critical. It's what enables SULS program administrators to keep tabs on students and ensure their success.

"We always know what's happening with each child," Ms. Seals observes. "That has enabled us to build trust with families and keep students on track."



SULS Academic Advisor Karris Story has implemented a practice that he calls “aggressive communication,” in which he will call everyone listed on a student’s application if that’s what it takes to understand the student’s situation and enlist the help of family members as partners in that child’s education.

Mr. Story describes the example of an elementary student who was under a grandmother’s care while going through a custody situation. When Mr. Story was alerted that the student hadn’t attended class in a few days, he called the grandmother and learned that the child’s mother had custody of him temporarily. Mr. Story stayed in close contact with the grandmother and created a plan so the child was able to keep up with his studies during the whole process.

This aggressive communication “is one of our tools for success,” he says.

5 *Choose the right partner.*

SULS administrators cite their partnership with Stride Learning Solutions as another important element of their success.

Every other week, SULS administrators have a conference call with Client Success Manager Lauren Bone and other Stride personnel. They use these biweekly meetings to highlight what’s going well and address concerns. “We leave those calls with a sense of teamwork and ideas on how to make the program better,” Bone says.

For instance, when SULS team members noted that students weren’t doing well in writing, Stride integrated more opportunities for students to practice writing throughout the school’s curriculum.

“Our constant communication with Stride is huge,” says SLSD Director Herman Brister. “I can’t overstate the importance of those calls.” SULS’s partnership with Stride, he concludes, “has paid dividends for our students.”

Transforming instruction

For creating a statewide high school-university partnership that is helping students not only succeed but also earn college credits online while they’re still in high school, SULS was honored with a 2019 Transformation Award from Fuel Education (now Stride Learning Solutions).

By setting clear expectations, providing structure, offering multiple layers of support, aggressively communicating with students and their families, and choosing a committed partner like Stride, SULS demonstrates that virtual education can be highly effective with the right approach.

About Stride Learning Solutions

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