

**The Report of the  
Accreditation Visiting Team**

**Utah Virtual Academy  
310 East 4500 South Suite 290  
Murray, Utah 84107**

**April 20, 2012**



**Utah State Office of Education  
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**Utah Virtual Academy**  
**310 East 4500 South, Suite 290**  
**Murray, Utah 84107**

**April 20, 2012**

**UTAH STATE OFFICE OF EDUCATION**

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## FOREWORD

The purpose of the accreditation process is to stimulate school growth and improvement so as to increase the quality of instruction and student achievement. In these efforts, the school staff makes a comprehensive evaluation of the school's programs, operations, and results. The school determines how actual practices align to stated objectives and resulting outcomes in a three-step evaluation: (1) self-evaluation, (2) on-site evaluation by an external team of educators, and (3) implementation using units of the evaluation to improve the school by effecting thoughtful change.

The evaluation, April 20, 2012, was conducted because of the school's desire to ensure quality education for all students in the school, and to increase student achievement.

The entire staff of Utah Virtual Academy is commended for the time and effort devoted to studying and evaluating the various facets of the total program and to preparing the materials used by the Visiting Team. The excellent leadership given by Head of School Stacey Hutchings is also commended.

The staff and administration are congratulated for their desire for excellence at Utah Virtual Academy and for their professional attitude, which made it possible for them to see weaknesses and strengths and to suggest procedures for improvements.

While these recommendations may be used to solicit financial support to acquire some of the materials, equipment, and services needed to carry out a more effective program, it is most important that the faculty and administration utilize them as they continue to evaluate and modify course offerings and administrative and classroom procedures to more dramatically increase student achievement at Utah Virtual Academy.

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State Superintendent  
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\*\*\* CMAC Representative Appointment

\*\*\*\*\*Charter School Representative Appointment

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# UTAH VIRTUAL ACADEMY

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Allison Holmes ..... Member  
Brian Maxwell ..... Member

## ADMINISTRATION AND STAFF

### School Administration

Stacey Hutchings .....Head of School  
Kathy VanOrden .....Operations administrator  
Amy Vance ..... High School Principal  
Kayleen Marble..... K-8 Principal  
Shelly Strahan ..... Special Ed Admin  
Felicia Booth.....Title 1 Coordinator

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Holly Willden  
Cathy Wilson  
Jenny Wilson

## **VISITING TEAM REPORT**

### **UTAH VIRTUAL ACADEMY**

#### **MISSION STATEMENT**

Utah Virtual Academy students will attain superior academic achievement through parent involvement, innovative teaching and school accountability within a virtual environment that embraces individual learning styles.

#### **DESIRED RESULTS FOR STUDENT LEARNING (DRSLs)**

1. Resourceful Thinker
2. Responsible Citizen
3. Effective Communicator

Date of visit: April 20, 2012

## **MEMBERS OF THE VISITING TEAM**

Janice Combe, Northwest Accreditation Commission/USOE Consultant, Visiting  
Team Chairperson

Sydney Young, Early Light Academy

Delaina Tonks, Open High School of Utah

Mark Smith, Early Light Academy

Elizabeth Anderson, Open High School of Utah

## VISITING TEAM REPORT

### UTAH VIRTUAL ACADEMY

#### CHAPTER 1: SCHOOL PROFILE

Utah Virtual Academy is in its fourth year of serving students. Utah Virtual Academy serves grades K-12. The curriculum used at Utah Virtual Academy is the well-known K12 Curriculum. Utah Virtual Academy is the largest charter school in Utah. It serves 2,050 students and has grown steadily over the past four years. Utah Virtual Academy offers a full range of services, including general education, Title I, ELL, and special education. Utah Virtual Academy employs 16 certified teachers in grades K-5, nine certified teachers in the middle school, and 17 certified teachers in the high school. The school also has three teachers dedicated to Title I and 11 teachers working in special education. Several administrators are employed to oversee the various grades and departments.

a) *What significant findings were revealed by the school's analysis of its profile?*

The Visiting Team recognizes that Utah Virtual Academy has experienced administrative turnover, student population growth, and teachers who are new to online education. The profile was informative and descriptive enough to describe the many aspects of Utah Virtual Academy.

b) *What modifications to the school profile should the school consider for the future?*

The Visiting Team would encourage Utah Virtual Academy to include data referenced material in the profile. There are several places where data is referenced, but not included (examples are on page 47). The Visiting Team would also liked to have seen more stakeholder participation in survey. We recognize that it is often difficult to obtain a large sample of survey results, but felt that the student/parent sample was very small when compared to enrollment.

c) *To what extent does the school's self-study accurately reflect the school's current strengths and limitations?*

The Visiting Team felt that the school profile was honest and reflective in its scope. Utah Virtual Academy was quick to acknowledge areas where there was room for improvement and suggest concrete ways to improve.

#### **Suggested Areas for Further Inquiry:**

- Include more data to better describe programs.

## CHAPTER 2: NORTHWEST ACCREDITATION COMMISSION (NORTHWEST) TEACHING AND LEARNING STANDARDS

### **Mission, Beliefs and Desired Results for Student Learning (DRSLs):**

- a) *To what degree were the school's mission statement, beliefs, and DRSLs developed and/or revised collaboratively by the school community to define a compelling purpose and vision for the school and to support student achievement?*

The Visiting Team found that Utah Virtual Academy made broad and regular use of surveys to gauge alignment of ideas and goals. Survey participation seemed relatively low (147 respondents from a population of over 2,000 students). However, the Visiting Team did not know the number of families represented, so this may be misleading. The survey results found that more than 80 percent of respondents felt that Utah Virtual Academy was meeting or substantially meeting the goals set out in its mission.

- b) *To what extent do the school's mission and beliefs align to support the school's DRSLs?*

The Visiting Team noticed a clear alignment between the mission and beliefs and the school's DRSLs. The mission calls for "superior academic achievement," which is supported by the three DRSL pillars: Resourceful Thinker, Responsible Citizen and Effective Communicator. Teachers use this language in their lessons to promote these ideas as a foundation for academic achievement. Teachers and students are able to adapt the curriculum delivery process to support individual learning styles in terms of pacing and individual support.

- c) *Describe the indicators (measures) that have been developed to assess the school's progress in assessing the DRSLs.*

The Visiting Team found that Utah Virtual Academy has a very detailed and effective set of measures to assess the school's progress in achieving its DRSLs. The rubric includes grade-level-specific steps and timelines for completing assessment. Individuals are assigned to report on each step and have resources identified to support the tasks.

- d) *To what extent do the school's mission, beliefs, and DRSLs guide the procedures, policies and decisions of the school, and appear evident in the culture of the school?*

The Visiting Team found that Utah Virtual Academy used the mission, beliefs, and DRSLs as a guide in its decision-making process. For instance, Utah Virtual Academy tailored parental communication to be less frequent but more valuable to increase parental involvement. In response to CRT scores, Utah Virtual Academy

expanded tutoring options and revised and expanded its remediation process. They encourage innovative teaching with focused professional teams (called pods), examining more and varied way to use technology to make the classroom more engaging.

### **Curriculum:**

- a) *To what extent does the staff work collaboratively to ensure the curriculum is based on clearly defined standards, the Utah Core Curriculum, reflecting the Utah Life Skills: A Guide to Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions for Success?*

The Visiting Team acknowledges that the Utah Virtual Academy staff makes a concerted effort to collaborate together regularly.

The K12 curriculum is not fully aligned to the Utah Core Curriculum. The school is already taking measures to examine pacing guides and make improvements to alignment for next year, particularly with middle-level science courses and the transition to Common Core for math.

Clearly defined standards are communicated from the teachers to the students at the beginning of (as well as during) some of the live and recorded class sessions observed.

Utah Virtual Academy's DRSLs (Resourceful Thinker, Responsible Citizen, Effective Communicator) reflect the Utah Life Skills.

- b) *To what extent does the curriculum engage all students in inquiry, problem-solving, and higher-order thinking skills?*

The Visiting Team recognizes that the K12 curriculum used at Utah Virtual Academy engages most students, but there will always be some students who are not motivated to participate regardless of the efforts on the school's part. Lessons are recorded, and students are able to play them back as often as needed in order to review.

The online content has a variety of versatile tools and manipulatives to help a variety of auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learners. Utah Virtual Academy has a focus on individualization and embracing different learning styles during both online and offline lessons. Offline content expands on ideas and drives students to solve real-world problems, as is evident with observed lessons in history, language arts, math, and science. Higher-order thinking skills are more evident with older grades. Break-out sessions are arranged to allow for fluid placement of students who are accelerated, approaching understanding, or needing remediation throughout a typical lesson.

There is room to grow and engage ALL students with higher-order thinking skills.

- c) *To what extent does the teaching staff work collaboratively to support the development of a curriculum that focuses on the school's DRSLs?*

The Visiting Team recognizes that the school has an intense focus and desire to work collaboratively together developing and refining curriculum and virtual instructional strategies focused on the school's DRSLs, and that it places a high priority on these activities.

Faculty members regularly collaborate in person and virtually, using a variety of online tools and programs to foster collaboration. Some staff members commented on feeling a greater sense of collaboration in this virtual environment than in a traditional brick-and-mortar setting.

- d) *How does the staff use assessments to drive curriculum to ensure that all students can reach the intended learning outcomes?*

The Visiting Team acknowledges Utah Virtual Academy's concerted effort to use assessment data to drive instruction. Tracking participation and student performance on a variety of formative and summative assessments helps teachers know which students to check in with more frequently during the month.

The assessment data reflects that not all students are reaching intended learning outcomes. Efforts are in place to check alignment of curriculum against state standards, as well as provide educational support and interventions to better reach intended learning outcomes and ensure all students have the support to succeed.

**Instruction:**

- a) *To what extent do teachers use a variety of instructional strategies to enhance student learning?*

The Visiting Team was impressed with the live curriculum presented. Teachers exhibited engaging presentation skills and varied instructional strategies to engage students. It is interesting to note that this looks different in an online environment. Many of Utah Virtual Academy's teachers are new to the online environment, but appear well trained and supported as they master the online strategies.

- b) *To what extent have the school and the staff developed strategies for instruction that build the capacity for explicitly teaching the identified DRSL in every classroom?*

Each live and taped session that the Visiting Team viewed began with an overview of Utah Virtual Academy's mission statement and DRSLs. Students were prompted, in varied ways, to identify the school's chosen DRSLs.

- c) *To what extent is the school's professional development program guided by identified instructional needs, and how does it provide opportunities for teachers to develop and improve their instructional strategies that support student learning?*

The Visiting Team commends Utah Virtual Academy for its data-driven and comprehensive professional development. This school has had to facilitate the training and mentoring of many new online teachers. It has done so in varied ways: Friday staff meetings, departmental meetings, pod guided discussions, QRG (quick reference guides) for commonly asked questions, individualized training, K12 training, etc.

- d) *To what extent are teachers proficient in their content area, knowledgeable about current research on effective instructional approaches, and reflective on their own practices?*

All teachers are hired for and work in their content specific area. Many support staff members are licensed teachers being used as paraprofessionals. All EYE/mentored teachers contribute to a reflective blog about experiences and best practices. Teachers are routinely asked to share best practices and experiences in faculty meetings, both virtually and in person.

- e) *To what extent does the school effectively implement a well-defined plan for the integration of technology into its curriculum, instruction, and assessments?*  
Utah Virtual Academy is an online school. Students, by the very nature of the setting, are learning to use technology. All additional technology was embedded in the K12 curriculum. The Visiting Team found Utah Virtual Academy to be adept at using formal and informal assessment to gauge interaction, mastery and engagement.

**Assessment:**

- a) *To what extent has the staff developed classroom or school-wide assessments with performance standards based on clearly articulated expectations for student achievement?*

The Visiting Team found that Utah Virtual Academy had a clear performance standard for mastery of each lesson. Tracking of these standards and pacing deadlines alert the student support infrastructure—including learning coaches, homeroom and classroom teachers, and family support advocates—when additional help is required. The Visiting Team felt that Utah Virtual Academy could use more discrete criteria to measure students and learning coaches who were new to Utah Virtual Academy, disaggregating them from data for the school as a whole.

- b) *To what extent does the school have a process to fairly and equitably assess school-wide and individual progress in achieving academic expectations?*

The Visiting Team found that the process equitably assessed when students are ready to move to the next lesson, versus simply relying on teacher schedules. Furthermore, students are fairly measured and supported based on their individual learning needs, especially as they are reflected in IEPs.

- c) *To what extent does the professional staff use data to assess the success of the school in achieving its academic expectations?*

The Visiting Team found that teachers made extensive use the data collected about student learning to respond during class sessions, to individualize learning plans, and to schedule student support. For instance, teachers are able to informally check for understanding by inserting quick response questions into their lessons. The Visiting Team also observed that this facility was only available to the teacher for students attending the “live” session, and that more could be done to encourage participation in live sessions.

- d) *To what extent does the school’s professional development program allow for opportunities for teachers to collaborate in developing a broad range of student assessment strategies?*

The Visiting Team observed that the Utah Virtual Academy has an active and well organized system of professional development. Year-round employment allows for more collaboration outside the traditional school year calendar. Individuals attend PD organized by K-8 or high school, and work in departmental pods/groups on different assessment ideas. The Visiting Team also recommends that Utah Virtual Academy focus more time on mentoring new teachers in the various tools available to them for both formal and informal assessment.

- e) *To what extent is there organizational agreement on the use of a school-wide scoring tool to assess the identified DRSL?*

The Visiting Team observed that Utah Virtual Academy has developed a rubric that applies school-wide for assessing progress in achieving the DRSLs. The rubric identifies the three main objectives of the DRSL and details the assessment process. The rubric is divided into K-8 and high school sections for more targeted monitoring of progress.

### **CHAPTER 3: NAAS SUPPORT STANDARDS**

#### **Leadership and Organization:**

- a) *To what extent does the school leadership promote quality instruction by fostering an academic learning climate that actively supports teaching and learning?*

The Visiting Team acknowledges the extensive process that the high school departments worked through this year, with department heads meeting virtually once a week and monthly full faculty meetings alternating between face-to-face and online. Teachers seem to be given the resources necessary to succeed in an online arena, as do students, through upgraded onboarding processes. The Visiting Team does recommend examining the teacher role to ensure sustainability of program and job duties.

- b) *To what extent does the school leadership employ effective decision making that is data-driven, research-based, and collaborative to monitor progress in student achievement and instructional effectiveness?*

The Visiting Team found that Utah Virtual Academy collects and analyzes copious amounts of data, including CRT tests and Scantron Performance and Achievement for Math. Data reviewed includes how students learn and how standards are addressed. A great example is how the Math and Science Departments opted for more live teaching sessions, increasing to three times a week from one. This change was prompted by data-driven information and the collaborative process.

- c) *To what extent does the leadership provide skillful stewardship by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and allocation and use of resources at the school for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment which aligns with the school goals, DRSLs, and school improvement?*

The Visiting Team determined that there are multiple roles and layers of staff members with varying levels of responsibility. It appears that Utah Virtual Academy has sound hiring practices, evaluation processes, and mentoring programs. Teacher job descriptions have increased to include a more structured eight-to-five schedule, twelve months per year. Opportunities for students to collaborate have increased, and an advisory time was implemented for students to chat once a week. The administration has worked hard to produce a united vision.

- d) *To what extent does the school leadership empower the entire school community and encourage commitment, participation, collaboration, and shared responsibility for student learning through meaningful roles in the decision-making process?*

There are surveys for DRSLs (plus belief statements), weekly newsletters, slides of DRSLs to begin each class, fill-in-the-blank contests for the mission statement, and other positive reinforcement.

- e) *To what extent has the school established a formal system through which each student has an adult staff member who knows the student well and assists the student in achieving the school-wide expectation for student learning?*

The Visiting Team found Utah Virtual Academy to be large but very aware of its student population. In its system, the learning coach is the parent who would be the

first contact for the student. If teachers have students not attending or falling behind, the family success advocate becomes involved. Through regular collaboration with the administration, teachers, advocates, and learning coaches (parents), students always have a caring adult who monitors their learning.

### **School Services:**

This standard is dealt with in the school's NAAS Annual Report, which requires specific responses and information regarding student support services, guidance services, health services, library information services, special education services, and family and community services.

### **Facilities and Finances:**

This standard is addressed in the school's annual report to Northwest, which requires specific responses regarding the physical plant, finances, audit of school records, advertising, etc.

## **CHAPTER 4: NAAS SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT STANDARD**

### **Culture of Continual Improvement:**

- a) *To what extent has the school developed and implemented a comprehensive school improvement plan using Collaborating for Student Achievement, the Utah basis?*

The Visiting Team acknowledges that school improvement is a priority of Utah Virtual Academy. Ongoing reflection and evaluation are evident. The school's improvement plan is not just looked at once and put away, but is reviewed regularly. Training and professional development are directed toward areas identified in the improvement plan.

- b) *To what extent does the school build skills and the capacity for improvement through an aligned and ongoing professional development plan focused on the school's goals for improvement?*

Professional development is focused on goals for improvement. Regional in-person and virtual professional development are frequent and deliberate. Professional development is a collaborative effort, with teachers presenting as well as receiving information. Utah Virtual Academy is continually seeking to upgrade teachers' skills and abilities. K12 as a company provides a significant amount of professional development.

- c) *To what extent is the new/revised school-wide action plan adequate in addressing the critical areas for follow-up and is there sufficient commitment to the action plan, school-wide and system-wide?*

The school-wide action plan adequately addresses critical areas for follow-up, including accountability, individualizing for student needs, training teachers, differentiating instruction, and supporting change. The action plan addresses steps, timelines, responsible parties involved, and resources needed. Assessment indicators are included and reviewed regularly.

- d) *To what extent does the school create conditions that support productive change and continuous improvement?*

The virtual environment supports continuous improvement and change. The staff relies on data to drive remediation and improve student academic achievement.

The overview provided by “Total View” provides valuable information at a glance for contacting learning coaches and tracking academics and attendance, as well as providing a summary of engagement and overall progress.

There is support for the need to be flexible and adapt to the student needs that come with enrollment growth and changing needs of the student population.

Curriculum changes will be coming with Common Core on the horizon and the need to revisit alignment of K12 curriculum to state standards. There is a supportive atmosphere of welcoming change and helping meet the needs of a diverse student population.

## **CHAPTER 5: COMMUNITY BUILDING**

- a) *To what extent does the school foster community building and working relationships within the school?*

Even though the faculty is not in a central location, Utah Virtual Academy does a good job of building relationships within the staff. The school communicates regularly using staff calls, regular professional development, and faculty meetings. During the accreditation process, Utah Virtual Academy learned that teachers were in need of meaningful feedback to help them improve. Through the findings of the leadership focus group, the administration learned some valuable lessons to improve relationships within the school community. The school has implemented and is implementing programs to build better overall communication and relationships with the staff and administration.

- b) *To what extent does the school extend the school community through collaborative networks that support student learning?*

Utah Virtual Academy puts forth significant effort to engage parents, students, teachers, and community members in school activities and programs. Utah Virtual Academy makes every effort to expose its students to learning outside of the computer classroom and their home environment. The school organizes educational field trips, student to student learning experiences, and other educational opportunities. Utah Virtual Academy engages in several service activities, and has been at Camp Williams, Hill Air Force Base, and the Murray Boys and Girls Club.

- c) *To what extent has the school engaged the school community in a collaborative self-study process on behalf of students?*

The self-study conducted by Utah Virtual Academy was a collaborative effort involving the entire staff. The entire staff participated in focus groups and departmental analyses, as well as monthly professional development and weekly staff meetings. Parents are a major component in the Utah Virtual Academy educational system. They are the learning coaches for their students; therefore, they are collaborative members of the school community. The Visiting Team did recommend that Utah Virtual Academy try to engage more parents in the collaborative process.

- d) *How are results of school improvement identified, documented, used, and communicated to all stakeholders?*

Utah Virtual Academy has well documented and identified results, though these are not always what the school had hoped for. The school has very honestly identified areas of needed growth and used these results to guide school improvement. Utah Virtual Academy communicates these with stakeholders in several ways. The school has “family success advocates” who communicate with both parents and teachers. They also use Kmail, which is an internal, secure email system and a valuable form of communication between teachers and students/parents. Utah Virtual Academy also has a weekly newsletter that is sent to each parent and student.

## **CHAPTER 6: MAJOR COMMENDATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE VISITING TEAM**

### **Commendations:**

- The Visiting Team commends Utah Virtual Academy on its frequent communication of its DRSLs to all stakeholders.

- The Visiting Team commends Utah Virtual Academy on its honesty and reflexive process in evaluating their strengths and areas of growth. The Visiting Team found the school willing to adjust when necessary.
- The Visiting Team commends Utah Virtual Academy on its dedication to improving their professional development both virtually and face to face.
- The Visiting Team commends Utah Virtual Academy on its effective use of technology to deliver curriculum and assess student achievement, participation, and engagement. This is done both formally and informally.
- The Visiting Team commends Utah Virtual Academy on its additional learning opportunities for student outside the traditional academic setting. The school has created tutoring, classroom break-out, family success advocates, and homeroom teachers to help students be successful.

**Recommendations:**

- The Visiting Team recommends that Utah Virtual Academy focus on aligning the K12 curriculum to Utah Core Standards.
- The Visiting Team recommends that Utah Virtual Academy examine the roles and level responsibilities of teachers in data collection, accountability, and personal touches to avoid overlap of responsibility in some areas and gaps in others.
- The Visiting Team recommends that Utah Virtual Academy involve more stakeholders in its accreditation process. The focus groups should include parents, board members, students, and faculty members.