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Educators, School Administrators Prepare for Growth in Online Learning at NACOL Regional Professional Development Symposium

Chicago Public Schools Office of eLearning Hosts National Online Learning Experts at Regional Event

Alexandria, VA (April 7, 2006) – For two days, teachers, school administrators and online learning experts met to discuss strategies and exchange lessons learned on how to effectively implement a successful online learning program in the K-12 marketplace. The symposium, organized by the North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL), an international K-12 non-profit organization representing online learning practitioners in the United States, Canada, and Mexico, was designed to encourage dialogue about how online learning can help address the alarming student drop-out rate facing our nation.

“A recent report, “Silent Epidemic,” stated that the reason student drop-out rates are on the rise is because students feel ‘they are not learning anything.’ We believe we can change this trend with online learning. Online learning not only engages students, but it is a viable solution that more and more schools are using to provide students with a high quality learning experience,” said Susan Patrick, CEO and President, NACOL. “Our goal for today’s symposium is to provide schools with effective strategies to better engage today’s students. With the growth of online course enrollments growing at a pace of 30% annually, we know students are engaging and they are demanding access to the kind-of education that can prepare them with 21st century, lifelong-learning skills.”

The symposium’s two-day agenda was designed to enhance the knowledge teachers and school administrator’s have of online learning and to introduce them to new and creative ways to implement elearning. The national experts presenting at the NACOL symposium covered everything from the fundamentals of mentoring online students and teaching

online to helping at-risk students. Breakout sessions also offered a broad mix of topics including assessing and evaluating online learning as well as communicating with your elected officials on the value of online learning. A unique element were the hands-on learning labs that allowed participants to gain first-hand experience with emerging technologies currently being used e-Learning and to begin to experience moving from the paper world to the digital world.

“Technology use will offer students the ability to manage complexity, solve problems, inspire innovation, and the technological know-how to thrive in our Digital Age global knowledge economy,” said Sharnell Jackson, Chief eLearning Officer, Office of Technology Services, Chicago Public Schools, the host organization for the NACOL symposium. “Online learning better prepares students for an increasingly complex, information-rich society, ready to use higher-order knowledge and skills that allow them to function effectively in an ever changing environment in a variety of roles vital to the economic viability of our country.”

Virtual schools are experiencing tremendous growth which is demonstrated by the over 500,000 course enrollments in K-12 online learning programs during 2005. The October 2005 report, “Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning,” reported that 23 states have statewide virtual school programs, thousands of districts and hundreds of charter schools. These programs are experiencing consistent growth of between 50 to 100 percent per year. Additionally, *Education Week’s Technology Counts* report states that 6 states have both a virtual school and at least one cyber charter school. Furthermore, student drop-out rates in online learning programs are historically low as well. For example, at Florida Virtual School the average completion ratio is greater than 85%, remarkably better than higher than graduation rates at some of the nation’s best high schools.

The NACOL Regional Professional Development Symposium in Chicago is the third regional training organized by the organization. Founded in 2003, NACOL’s mission is to increase educational opportunities and enhance learning by providing collegial expertise and leadership in K-12 online teaching and learning. NACOL is planning a

second symposium for June 22 – 23, in Orlando, Florida, and has scheduled the 2006 Virtual School Symposium for November 5 – 7 in Plano, Texas. Additional information about both events is available online at: www.nacol.org.

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About NACOL

The North American Council for Online Learning is an international K-12 non-profit organization representing the interests of administrators, practitioners, and students involved in online learning in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. NACOL is dedicated to fostering a learning landscape that promotes student success and lifelong learning by facilitating collaboration, advocacy, and research to enhance quality K-12 online learning. The founding members of NACOL are public and private school organizations, teachers, school support staff, and professional staff all with an interest in promoting online learning.

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