

Distance Education: Bahamas 2000

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Abstract

The geography of the island nation of the Bahamas (twenty-two inhabited islands) and its scattered population have made distance education a viable option for the provision of education to the almost 50,000 students in more than 160 schools. The ability of the government to ensure quality and equity in education for all is seriously affected by the need to duplicate infrastructure and resources on each island. Not only will distance education enable us to respond more adequately to the challenging demands for tertiary education, but it will also allow us to address upgrading and retraining issues. In addition we can offer access to sound secondary education to those students living on the more remote islands and cays.

The demand for higher education in the Bahamas has always exceeded availability, so elements of distance education – correspondence courses, educational broadcasts and offshore programmes – have generally been an integral part of our educational system. This paper presents a brief overview of distance education initiatives undertaken in the Bahamas during the past 20 years. It examines existing programmes and gives the projected way forward, focusing on adult education and “at risk” populations on the Family Islands as well as New Providence.

Bahamas 2000

The Bahamas, with an estimated population of 300,000 spread over some twenty-two inhabited islands, has always had elements of distance education. Students on remote cays were educated by correspondence and educational broadcasts were introduced as early as the 1950s. Face-to-face courses were supplemented by media, whenever available.

In 1985, the Organization of American States (OAS) helped to fund a joint College of the Bahamas/Department of Education Pilot Project

using distance methods. Programme developers researched existing models for distance learning, designed and wrote ninth-grade level courses in Language Arts, Maths, Science and Social Studies, and piloted the courses over a period of two years. These courses are still used by the College of the Bahamas to re-mediate students with borderline entrance requirements.

In 1992, the Bahamas hosted a conference sponsored by the Commonwealth of Learning on delivering technical/vocational education

using distance education methods. The delegates considered how lecturers who are competent in the content area may be trained in professional education methods, using programmed learning and criterion-referenced assessment methods “borrowed” from educational institutions in Canada.

Until a few years ago correspondence courses were still available, perhaps more organized than before. There were educational radio broadcasts for an hour every school day. These programmes, with the occasional TV special, informed the public and supplemented the curriculum. Audio- and videotape facilities were provided to capture broadcast material and place it in the hands of the classroom teacher. There was borrowed programmed learning for professional development.

In the last decade or so, the Ministry of Education and Youth has placed renewed emphasis on providing quality and equity in education for all. The use of a more structured approach to distance learning was given prominence, particularly as more than 100 of the 163 government-owned schools are located in the Family Islands. Cable Bahamas, with its modern communications infrastructure, opened up a range of possibilities for delivering quality education to students of all ages on the remote islands and cays. The capability to supplement existing face-to-face programmes using distance education methods has been immensely improved.

Radio broadcasts and audiotapes are still, by far, most readily accessible to a large majority of the population, but advances in technology have enabled us to extend the range of options for delivering distance education, in order to improve student performances in key subject areas and to provide professional development

and retraining opportunities for teachers. The Ministry of Education and Youth is currently undertaking a number of distance education projects:

- The “A Time for Education” radio programme targets lower primary students and preschoolers during the school day, and includes the wider community in its audience later during the day.
- The Technical/Vocational Unit of the Department of Education, in collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning, has implemented a training programme for teachers. Enrolment includes teachers from Andros and Abaco, as well as from New Providence.
- The Ministry is using a fully equipped mobile studio to produce a series of videotapes of master/senior teachers in the classroom. This “best practices” project will expose teachers to subject content and current strategies and techniques for professional development, while supplementing the specialist subject areas for students in schools where specialist teachers are not available.
- A dubbing centre produces copyright-free material for teachers on demand. Cable Bahamas transmits many programmes that are copyright-free and videotapes for supplementing lessons are available in many subject areas. Many teachers, particularly those on the Family Islands, find these quite beneficial.
- A virtual Maths programme, which focuses on grades seven to nine, is being piloted this September. The course will be available on the Internet and also on CD-ROM, and is designed as a stand-alone or teacher-assisted programme.

- A technology integration project is being implemented in primary schools, to familiarize students with the Internet and computing hardware that will enable them to progress faster in the future.

In September 2000, the Ministry will have its own dedicated satellite link to the Internet and by April of 2001, twenty-seven primary schools and twenty-three secondary schools will be linked to it. Twenty-seven satellite up/down-links throughout the Bahamas to resource centres and schools will make research easier and quality education by distance will be within the reach of the vast majority of school students and adult learners in the Commonwealth.

Although it is expected that our distance education initiatives will be technology driven, in our efforts to allow “at risk” sectors of the population to learn at their own pace opportunities to use print and other “low-tech” media will continue to exist. The immediate focus is on a comprehension textbook, emphasizing independent and individualized learning using indigenous resources. This will be piloted in primary schools starting in September of this year.

The phasing in of modern technology to the primary schools will allow us to customize existing instructional programmes, to provide culturally relevant and socially acceptable content for use in distance learning.

The Bahamas realizes that educating a society comprised of small communities is fraught with a number of challenges - the provision of trained, highly skilled manpower in adequate numbers, the appropriate, necessary infrastructure and, of course, financial support. Nonetheless, it remains firmly committed to ensuring that as many citizens as possible are given the opportunity to become productive members of society.

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