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## **Virtual Schools, Actual Learning: Digital Education in America**

*Pioneer Institute event to feature state and national online education leaders*

BOSTON, MA – Julie Young, CEO of Florida Virtual School (FLVS), the country's largest state-wide Internet-based public high school, will deliver the keynote address at “Virtual Schools, Actual Learning: Digital Education in America,” a forum sponsored by Pioneer Institute, Democrats for Education Reform and Harvard University’s Program on Education Policy and Governance. The event will take place on Monday, December 5<sup>th</sup> at 3 pm at the Omni Parker House.

Young will be introduced by former Massachusetts Governor Jane Swift, CEO of Middlebury Interactive Languages, a joint venture of Middlebury College, renowned for its world language programs, and K12 Inc., the nation’s largest provider of curriculum and online education for K-12 students.

FLVS was founded in 1997 with the goal of making high-quality, online instruction accessible for students throughout the Sunshine State. Last year, it enrolled over 100,000 K-12 students.

“Massachusetts parents want to have a say in where and how their children are educated,” says Jim Stergios, executive director of Pioneer Institute. “Virtual schools should join charter schools, parochial schools, METCO, and vocational-technical schools as mechanisms for ensuring that all parents have educational options that work for their children.”

Young’s address will be followed by a panel discussion moderated by Dr. Paul Peterson, the Henry Lee Shattuck Professor of Government and Director of the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard University. Panelists will include Massachusetts State Representative Will Brownsberger (D-Belmont), Dr. Susan Hollins, Superintendent, Greenfield Public Schools, and Kathie Skinner, Massachusetts Teachers Association.

The forum will mark the release of Pioneer Institute’s latest white paper, [\*Virtual Schools, Actual Learning: Online Education Becomes a Valid Option\*](#), by former *Providence Journal* staff writer William Donovan.

The report reviews the status and prospects for expansion of Massachusetts’ experiment with digital learning and recommends that state officials devise a policy for how statewide virtual schools should be managed. The study incorporates lessons gleaned from interviews with state education officials, virtual school directors, district superintendents, researchers and non-profit executives.

Digital education carries the promise of using technology to profoundly transform the way students learn. Many argue that the schools personalize education by emphasizing student mastery rather than “seat time,” the traditional expectation that material should be covered within a set timeframe.

The growing demand for virtual schools stems largely from the desire for flexibility to accommodate a variety of needs, especially among students suffering from physical disabilities or medical conditions, those seeking to avoid bullying, families residing in remote areas, or students with caretaker or financial responsibilities at home. Virtual school also helps students pursuing careers in athletics or the arts, whose schedules make it difficult to attend daily classes.

Full-time online schools exist in 30 states and the District of Columbia. They enroll over 200,000 students, and enrollment is increasing at a rate of 25 percent each year. California has 16 virtual schools.

A Boise State University study concluded that K-12 online learning increased from 50,000 enrollments in 2000 to more than two million enrollments in 2009. States such as Michigan and Alabama require that students complete at least one online class to graduate from high school.

Massachusetts lags behind other states in providing digital learning opportunities. It has just one state-wide virtual school, the Massachusetts Virtual Academy (MVA) at Greenfield, which was authorized by 2010 education reform legislation. MVA planned to educate 1,500 students in grades K-12, but was capped at 500 students by the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

The report describes practical problems that arose during of the Greenfield school's first year, such as the process of admitting special education students, billing other districts, MCAS administration, and student attendance.

In May 2011, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education endorsed a plan that would place virtual schools under the charter school program. If approved by the legislature, the plan would give the Board a stronger role in authorizing schools, provide quality control, and enable other virtual schools to open beginning in September 2012.

Julie Young was the winner of Pioneer's 2008 Better Government Competition for the Florida Virtual School. Last month, the Institute hosted Sal Khan, founder of the online Khan Academy.

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[Pioneer Institute](#) is an independent, non-partisan, privately funded research organization that seeks to improve the quality of life in Massachusetts through civic discourse and intellectually rigorous, data-driven public policy solutions based on free market principles, individual liberty and responsibility, and the ideal of effective, limited and accountable government.