

Online Learning

New Policies Needed for New Educational Environments

Effective online programs have the ability to improve student achievement by providing individualized instruction that focuses on mastery, providing additional quality course offerings to rural communities, and reducing a portion of overhead costs for schools.¹ Educators and students alike have clearly heard this message: over the last few years, participation in online learning has grown exponentially. Researchers estimate that almost 1.5 million students participated in at least one online learning experience in 2010. This represents nearly 50 percent growth in participation since 2007. In addition, about 250,000 students in 30 states are enrolled in full-time public virtual schools.² However, as online learning programs continue to grow, many states are experiencing unanticipated challenges as state policy is still catching up to current practice.

For example, online learning programs could be subject to various seat-time, accreditation, or attendance tracking requirements because they provide a portion of their instruction in the traditional classroom setting. Conversely, traditional schools could be governed under online learning policies because they provide supplemental instruction online for students. As state and local school boards continue to address these kinds of challenges in their oversight of online learning, the following are some issues to consider when developing comprehensive policies regarding online learning.

Policy Issues to Consider

- *Clearly defining application of online learning policies*—Many online learning programs supplement face-to-face instruction in schools (also called blended learning). As noted above, confusion can arise when it is unclear which set of policies apply to these programs and the schools in which they operate. As online learning opportunities continue to grow, it is vital for policies to be clearly aligned so they correctly apply to schools and online providers. Florida, one of the leading states in online learning,

developed the following language in 2008 to address this issue. The law states that “a provider of digital or online content or curriculum that is used to supplement the instruction of students who are not enrolled in a virtual instruction program... is not required to meet the requirements of (virtual schooling).”³

- *Maintaining Educational Quality in a Virtual Environment*—As more and more students use online learning programs to potentially graduate from high school in a completely virtual environment, it is important to ensure online learning programs provide the same quality education to students that is expected of brick-and-mortar schools. With many states contracting to provide these online programs, states need to establish oversight and certifications for any individual teaching in these programs. Given that the instructors or online administrators could be from any part of the country or world, states need a comprehensive system for determining who can teach these programs and what credentials are needed similar to the licensure system for teachers in traditional education settings.
- *Ensuring student authenticity*—Cheating is a problem that any school, regardless of setting, struggles with. However, in a virtual environment, cheating can be much more difficult to identify and police. It is possible, for example, that students could let other individuals do work for them and take tests for them simply by providing the login information for their account. One case in Colorado found that students were accessing websites that provide solutions to math problems via smartphones while they were taking assessments. To address these issues, a few states require major assessments to be supervised in-person. For instance, legislation that establishes the South Carolina Virtual Schools Program requires that “[s]tudents enrolled in an online course for a unit of credit must be administered final exams and appropriate state assessments in a proctored environment.”

- *Online learning experiences as a graduation requirement*—Online learning develops a student's ability to manage time, conduct independent intellectual inquiry, and gain expertise in the thought processes and digital tools that are already fundamental aspects of many, if not most, careers. Recognizing these and other advantages of online learning, Alabama, Florida, and Michigan require students to participate in at least one online learning experience in order to graduate, while Idaho requires two online courses. In addition, the West Virginia State Board of Education adopted a policy recommending that school districts consider an online learning requirement for graduation. Graduation requirements are one policy lever state and local school boards possess that increases access to and participation in learning opportunities. Once a state has developed a robust online learning environment, making these experiences a graduation requirement will ensure that all students have the opportunity to take advantage of these resources.
- *Providing professional development for teaching online*—Teaching online is more than providing face-to-face instruction in an online setting. Teaching in an online setting requires a number of new-teaching skills and competencies to effectively engage students, such as having an understanding of the software being used, clearly defining appropriate online interactions with students, and assisting struggling students in a virtual setting.⁴ A handful of teacher preparation programs in the country, such as the one at Boise State, offer certifications in online teaching.⁵ However, this is not the norm and states need to develop support for aspiring, new, and current teachers alike in online learning through preparation, professional development, and potentially licensure. Without this kind of comprehensive support, there will continue to be challenges to effectively integrating online learning into the education system.
- *Providing flexibility around seat time requirements*—Digital learning advocates point to Carnegie Units or seat time requirements as being primary obstacles to online education and its potential to move the education system to a more competency-based learning environment. Some states have already moved to provide students more chances to explore non-traditional learning opportunities, including Michigan with its Seat Time Waiver program and Ohio with its Credit Flexibility Policy.

Looking Ahead

The online learning landscape will continue to grow and evolve over the next few years. Mobile internet devices such as smartphones and tablets will change how some online

learning opportunities provide content and instruction to students. Additionally, implementation of the Common Core State Standards will provide opportunities for states to collaborate on course delivery via online programs. As policymakers, it is not only important to develop policies to support current effective online learning practices, but to also be proactive in addressing future issues likely to impact online learning. Ideally, online learning will seamlessly integrate with the education system allowing all students the opportunity to engage in learning anytime, anyplace, anywhere inside or outside the classroom environment.

Resources

Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning is an annual review of policies and practices around online learning. To download a copy of the 2011 *Keeping Pace* and find out more about state-level action in online learning, visit www.kpk12.com.

The iNACOL *National Standards for Quality Online Learning Programs* provides research-based standards for states, districts and online programs regarding instruction, content, support and evaluation. This publication is available at www.inacol.org.

Endnotes

1. Alliance for Excellent Education, *Digital Learning and Technology: Federal Policy Recommendations to Seize the Opportunity—and Promising Practices that Inspire Them* (Washington, DC: author, July 2011): 3-9. Available at www.all4ed.org/files/DigitalLearning.pdf.
2. Matthew Wicks, *A National Primer on K-12 Online Learning: Version 2* (Vienna, VA: International Association for K-12 Online Learning, October, 2010), 13-14. Available at www.inacol.org/research/docs/INCL_NationalPrimerv22010-web.pdf.
3. John Watson and Butch Gemin, *Promising Practices in Online Learning: Policy and Funding Frameworks for Online Learning* (Vienna, VA: International Association for K-12 Online Learning, July 2009): 8. Available at www.inacol.org/research/promisingpractices/NACOL_PP-FundPolicy-lr.pdf.
4. Kerry Rice, Lisa Dawley, Crystal Gasell & Chris Florez, *Going Virtual: Unique Needs and Challenges of K-12 Online Teachers* (Vienna, VA: International Association for K-12 Online Learning, October, 2008): 14. Available at www.inacol.org/research/docs/goingvirtual.pdf.
5. John Watson, Amy Murin, Lauren Vashaw, Butch Gemin, & Chris Rapp, "Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning: An Annual Review of Policy and Practice," (Durango, CO: Evergreen Education Group, 2011), 36-37. Available at kpk12.com/cms/wp-content/uploads/EEG_KeepingPace2011-lr.pdf.