

STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

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SUBJECT: **Online Learning in Washington State**

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BACKGROUND:

This brief and the Board meeting presentation will provide Board members with information about the status of online learning in Washington State and related policy issues.

Washington State is one of 42 states that provide supplemental or full-time online learning programs or initiatives. Washington State does not have a state-run online school, as some states have created, but it does have a subsidized non-profit online resource organization that provides services across the state. There are several online schools run by school districts in Washington State, as well. In total, about 14,000 students have been enrolled in online courses for credit in the 2007-2008 school year.

Many states have recently begun trying to address online learning issues. States are analyzing programs more closely all across the country. In Washington State, some of the issues are related to a lack of clarification in law, of the characteristics of online learning and to a scarcity of information about its status in the state. The current focus in online learning's growth is on: assessment, accountability, and finding best practices. Although online learning is still in its infancy, states and private companies are positioning themselves to be ready for future opportunities.



Washington State
Board of Education



Working to Raise Student Achievement Dramatically

Online Learning Policy Issues

Introduction

This brief provides Board members with background information about the status of online learning in Washington State and related policy issues. Currently, local school districts determine whether to provide online learning, how to deliver it, and monitor the quality of that learning to ensure the courses meet the districts' requirements. Online learning is provided on a course-by-course basis in some districts, while in other districts there are full-fledged online schools with extracurricular activities. The State Board of Education does not provide direct oversight of these programs.

Summary of Policy Issues

Washington State students in grades K through 12 have utilized online learning since the late 1990's. In the 2007-2008 school year, 14,000 students (1.4% of enrollment) took online courses for high school credit in Washington State. This figure does not include students taking non-credit courses or using online resources to supplement their classroom experiences. Although the percentage of students earning credit is small, online learning has the potential to grow in use. The state will need to determine what oversight role is necessary.

The lack of a comprehensive definition of online learning creates issues related to reporting, funding, and accountability. Part of the reason for this lack of a definition has to do with the variability of online learning. There are several kinds of online learning programs:

1. **Away from the Classroom Programs-** offer complete courses online to students who fit under the Alternative Learning Experience (ALE) program rules of the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), which were established to allow districts to provide educational opportunities for students not allowed or unable to attend brick and mortar schools.
2. **Contracts-** Programs that exist through contracts with private organizations fits under the laws governing contracts. These programs may also fall under ALE rules.

3. Hybrid and Small Programs- Programs that use online resources to supplement in-classroom learning and programs that serve a small number of students do not really fit under any of these laws or rules.

Another issue is the lack of knowledge of the characteristics of online learning in the state. Since 2001, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) has administered a yearly technology inventory survey to districts but the survey has only had a few questions about online learning. Other data that OSPI receives from districts for basic education funding does not differentiate by type of learning, such as online learning.

Online learning policy issues are interrelated with a variety of broader topics, such as transfer of students between districts, state-wide schools, class-sizes, school accreditation, meeting the needs of special education students and students with 504 plans, and the district's responsibility to administer state-wide assessments.

A small school district's budget can quickly become unbalanced when students leave to participate in another district's online school. The students do not have to physically move their residence in order to transfer to a new district. The district can accept these students as non-resident students. Some of the private organizations contracted by school districts to provide online learning have been advertising statewide in the hopes of encouraging students to transfer into their online schools. Currently, there is no limit to the number of students a district can receive through the transfer process.

Background

Across the United States

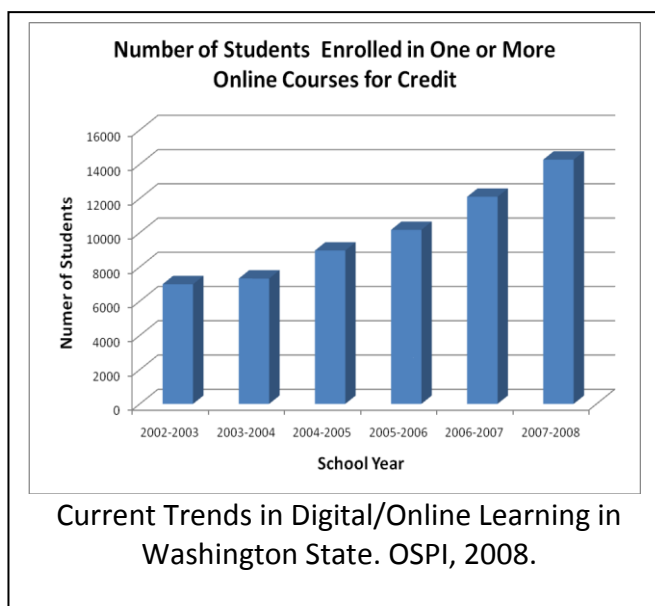
Washington State is one of 42 states that provide supplemental or full-time online learning programs or initiatives. The largest online K-12 school in the country is the Florida Virtual Academy. Last year, the Academy had more than 50,000 students completing more than 90,000 courses.

The largest operator of online schools in the country is K12, Inc., with 27,000 students in 2005, predominately through charter schools. K12's revenue in 2006 was \$117 million and it recently went public.

A survey conducted for a report, entitled *Keeping Pace with K – 12 Online Learning*, found that a fifth of online learning programs reported growth of more than 50% between the 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 school years, and almost half of the programs reported growth of 25% or higher. The reported retention rates of students, however, were in the range of 60% to 95%, with many programs reporting in the 70-85% range.

Some states, like Washington State, offer online courses through state-led initiatives. The Digital Learning Commons (DLC) is a non-profit organization that is subsidized by Washington State to provide online learning resources to schools. Massachusetts provides a similar state-led initiative, the Massachusetts Online Network for Education. Some other states provide a state-wide online school, such as Florida, Illinois, Michigan, and Idaho. There are other means of delivery of online learning, as well, such as charter schools, parent partnerships, consortium programs, and district-level contracts. Charter schools are the only one of the mentioned delivery methods not present in Washington State.

Recently, many states have begun trying to address online learning issues. A new law in Colorado created a small online division within the Colorado Department of Education that will oversee online programs. It also created quality standards for online programs, distinguished between multi-district online programs and single-district programs, and added a requirement that all online programs report annually to the state.



Other states are creating laws to embed online learning into the K-12 system. Michigan recently set a new graduation requirement that all students must have an “online learning experience.”

In Washington State

In 2005, Governor Gregoire signed SB 5828, expanding the definition of a full-time student to allow districts to claim funding for students receiving instruction through digital programs, which includes online learning. Some school districts used this broader definition to expand or create their own online learning program, while other districts contracted out services.

Online schools and resources in Washington State

Program	Operating District	Number of WA Students	Operating Model
Digital Learning Commons	NA	67,000 (potential students)	Non-profit, state-subsidized online resource provider
Washington Learning Source	NA	NA	Broker of online courses and resources
Federal Way Internet Academy	Federal Way	299	District run program
Washington Virtual Academy	Steilacoom and Monroe Districts	2233	District contract with K12, Inc.
Everett Online High School	Everett	700	District run program;
Evergreen Internet Academy	Evergreen	75	District run program
Insight School of Washington	Quillayute Valley	1137	District contract with Insight Schools
Columbia Valley Virtual Academy	Valley	364	Consortium of district-level program in eleven districts
Spokane Virtual Learning	Spokane	300	District run program
Achieve Online	Kittitas and Marysville Districts	156	District contract with Advanced Academics

In 2001, OSPI began surveying districts about the number of students enrolled in online courses for credit (primarily high school students) as part of a technology inventory. In 2001, there were a total of 1,730 students enrolled in online courses for credit. Within seven years the number of K-12 students enrolled in online courses for credit grew to 14,266, a growth of 700%.

The Digital Learning Commons (DLC) started in 2003 with support from the Legislature and private organizations. The DLC does not award course credit or diplomas, nor does it have its own courses or teachers. It is a broker of courses and puts together resources, such as teachers and curricula, and provides some quality control. The DLC allows public schools to join for a subsidized rate of \$6.00 per student. Private schools and private programs can join at \$8.00 per student.

Through the DLD, students can access resources, such as college and career planning and tutoring. However, there is an additional charge, ranging from \$120 to \$350, for students to enroll in online courses. The fee can be paid by school districts with state funds if the students are enrolled in the district and the school or contractor providing the course is accredited through the regional accreditation program.

Washington State Laws & Rules

In Washington State, online programs must be accredited through a regional accreditation program and meet Basic Education Act (BEA) requirements. Some online programs, though, must also follow Alternative Learning Experience (ALE) program rules¹. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) establishes rules for Alternative Learning Experience programs².

All ALE students must be supervised, monitored, assessed, and evaluated by Washington State certificated instructional staff. The academic progress of ALE students must be reviewed at least monthly and assessed annually and a Student Learning Plan must be developed. In addition, students must have direct personal contact with school staff at weekly, which can be achieved through face-to-face meetings, telephone calls, e-mail, instant messaging, interactive video communication, or other means of digital communication³.

ALE rules provide a framework for school districts to establish a programs that are accessible to all students, supports the district's overall goals and objectives for

Digital Learning Commons Online Course Offerings	
Subject	Number of Courses
Arts	33
Business	28
CTE	7
ESL	6
Foreign Language	109
Interdisciplinary	3
Language Arts	128
Life Skills-Health	17
Mathematics	129
Occupational Credit Qualified	2
Science	124
Social Studies	113
Technology	32

¹ RCW 28A.150.305; WAC 392-121-182

² WAC 392-121-182

³ WAC 392-121-182

student academic achievement, and meets the State Board of Education's requirements for courses of study and equivalencies, and high school graduation requirements.

All online learning programs that exist through contract between a school district and a third-party organization must follow the “instruction provided under contract” laws and rules⁴. If the contractor is not a state institution of higher education and more than 25 students (at least .0025 percent of the district’s students) are enrolled, then the district must report the contractor’s certificated instructional employees to the state as a part of its annual reporting⁵. High School diplomas are not issued by a contracted online school but by the district or one of its high schools.

Some school districts that do not offer online learning programs have experienced reductions in enrollment due to student transfers to online learning programs. According to the choice law, students may transfer to schools within a district or between districts at any time of the year⁶. Districts must develop transfer policies and assist with the process. A district may refuse to comply with a transfer request if the transfer would create substantive difficulties for the district and families may appeal a denial to OSPI. Some online learning programs rely heavily on transfer students and may end up with 30% or more of their students residing outside of the district.

The Future

Online learning programs are now being analyzed more closely all across the country. The focus is on assessment, accountability, and finding best practices. States and private companies are positioning themselves to be ready for future opportunities. It is unknown how big or influential online learning will become in the next few years.

⁴ RCW 28A.320.015; WAC 392-121-188

⁵ WAC 392-121-188

⁶ RCW 28A.225.220

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