

K–12 Schools and Online Learning

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INTRODUCTION

Alternative options to the traditional school setting abound and threaten the survival of some school districts. These alternatives include, but are not limited to, home schooling, charter schools, alternative learning centers, post-secondary options, and online learning. Schools are already addressing this concern by offering their own ALC programs, advanced placement or accelerated courses, independent study courses, or ITV (interactive television) courses. Some schools have created their own online courses to supplement traditional classrooms. Many other school districts are considering offering online courses. Before school districts commit to such a course of action, there are questions to be answered. Is online learning an appropriate delivery method for students in kindergarten through twelfth grade? Should traditional schools offer some of their courses online? If they do enter the online arena, how do they make the program a success?

A look at some of the issues involved with online learning should shed light on these questions. First it is helpful to review the history and present state of online learning in K-12 schools. In considering the suitability of online courses for young students, it is important to reflect on student success factors and the problems unique to the K-12 setting. Additionally, in order to offer a successful online program, schools must address the issues of program design, teacher attributes and training, technology factors, and student needs.

HISTORY AND THE PRESENT STATE OF ONLINE LEARNING

Distance learning has a long history in education. Long before the Internet existed, schools were offering distance courses. Pitman shorthand was taught via correspondence course in England as early as 1840 (Maeroff, 2003). In the 20th century, radio and television were incorporated into one-way instructional opportunities. While serving a purpose, many students

found these options to be less than ideal. By 1972, technological innovations had enabled distance courses to incorporate two-way communication; and during the last half of the 20th century, interactive television courses, videoconferencing courses, and online courses emerged. By 2002, 81% of all US universities offered online learning courses (Allen & Seaman, 2003, p. 2). There were an estimated 1.6 million online students in 2002, with one-third of these students completing their entire program online (Allen & Seaman, 2003).

In the 1990s, the online learning trend spread to elementary and high schools. Today many K-12 online opportunities exist, with everything from single courses to full programs available. According to Mills (2002), 43 states and the District of Columbia offered some type of online school or coursework for K-12 students in 2002 (Data Sources section, paragraph 1). The University of Missouri Center for Distance and Independent Study Outreach Program for high school students started offering courses in 1991. That year the program attracted only 14 enrollments. By 2002, 2,399 enrollments were documented (Maeroff, 2003). It is estimated that by 2006, more than 50% of all students will have taken an online course by the time they graduate (National Education Association, 2002, paragraph 2).

WHO IS TAKING ONLINE COURSES?

Online learning serves the needs of many segments of today's diverse student population. Studies have shown that students enroll in online courses for a number of reasons. Phoenix Special Programs and Academies (Phoenix Special Programs and Academies, 2004) states their purpose as helping students "accelerate, remediate, and graduate" (paragraph 1). For adults who previously dropped out of school, online learning provides a convenient way to pick up where they left off. Those who have failed courses may find it a way to make up credits. For those expelled, incarcerated, or homebound, it may be the most logical method of

completing their education. It also provides a viable alternative for many disabled students. Students who do not fit in, are at risk, or are not successful in traditional schools may find online options better suited to their needs. Students in rural or remote areas often take advantage of online learning to access courses not otherwise available. Scheduling problems in home schools attract many students to online learning. Students in highly mobile families are able to find stability in their education through online options. Thirty-five percent of all online learners in Florida are children being home schooled (Maeroff, 2003, p. 264). Finally, highly motivated students who seek expanded offerings and advanced placement opportunities are one of the largest consumers of online learning.

WHY SHOULD TRADITIONAL SCHOOLS ENTER THE ONLINE MARKET?

Some believe that the traditional classroom is already outmoded and will eventually be obsolete. While it is unlikely that virtual schools will completely replace traditional face-to-face schools in the near future, there is little argument that online learning is an essential delivery method that will endure. One reason for this phenomenon might be our country's transformation from the agricultural foundation on which our school system was based. Karnovsky and Warner (2002) state:

One problem in education is that we educate students in an agricultural timetable in an industrial setting, and we tell kids they live in a digital age. We've always assumed that school is a place...Now, because of technology, the education can travel all the way to where a student is located...Rather than being threatening, it actually makes learning that much richer and more involving for students. It opens up a wide range of opportunities for students who are constrained by just-local resources. (pp. 18-19)

A more pressing reason for schools to offer online courses is the fiscal reality of most schools: they must maintain their student base in order to survive. In our market-driven society, students expect flexibility and are beginning to look for 24/7 availability similar to that in banking or shopping. If the district does not meet their needs, clientele will go elsewhere. This is

becoming increasingly easy because of the multitude of virtual schools and traditional schools already offering choice. By offering alternatives, the school district may be able to keep their home students and also increase their student body numbers by attracting students from outside their local area. However, financial concerns involve more than just maintaining a student base. Overcrowded schools may look to online learning as a way to avoid hiring more teachers or building additional classrooms.

Although financial concerns often outweigh others for a school district, a more important reason to enter the world of online learning is that many students today are experiencing failure in a traditional setting. It is the obligation of a school district to provide appropriate educational opportunities to all its students. School districts that offer online courses will be able to accommodate more of their local students who have unique needs and conditions. The at-risk student, the student making up one or a few courses, the teenage mother, or the student looking for accelerated or unusual coursework might stay at their home school and find success if given options.

SUITABILITY OF ONLINE LEARNING FOR K-12 EDUCATION

Unique Concerns

Online learning, like any other delivery method, is not without its problems. Interviews with online students have pointed to a number of areas of concern. A common complaint is the isolation, loneliness, and sense of detachment felt by online learners. Those who complete their entire diploma online often feel they are sacrificing the social aspects (prom, extracurricular activities, mingling in the cafeteria, etc.) of school in order to learn online. In addition, they miss face-to-face interaction with their classmates. They often complain of not really getting to know their online classmates, and that online interaction is not as personal as face-to-face interaction. While post-secondary students report this phenomenon as well, it is especially important to younger students. As the *Guide to Online Courses* (National Education Association, 2002) reports, high-school-age children have "unique social, educational, and emotional needs" that are difficult to satisfy in an online setting (paragraph 3). The *Guide* further cautions

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