

K-12 Online Learning Policy

David B. Glick
Glick Consulting, USA

INTRODUCTION

We cannot contort the character of the Internet to suit our familiar notions of regulation; do not dumb down the genius of the Net to match the limited vision of the regulator. (Michael Powell, Chairman, Federal Communications Commission) (Powell, 2004)

The Internet and its applications have challenged policy makers in seemingly all areas of public life, and as one of the applications of the Internet, online learning is no exception. Online learning policy has tentacles throughout education policy, from union politics to technology infrastructure. Perhaps this complexity contributed to the lack of action that led the National Association of State Boards of Education to warn in its now oft-quoted statement:

In the absence of firm policy guidance, the nation is rushing pell-mell toward an ad hoc system of education that exacerbates existing disparities and cannot assure a high standard of education across new modes of instruction. By allowing this policy vacuum to continue, educational leaders are failing to meet their obligation to assure that all students are provided a quality education. (National Association of State Boards of Education, 2001 p. 4)

As the use of online learning in K-12 accelerates, the resolution of the policy issues has become more urgent. Several states, including Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania, are experiencing lawsuits, primarily related to funding and teacher licensure (eSchool News, 2002).

Furthermore, K-12 educators have few places to go for policy guidance. Information services such as the Distance Education Policy Laboratory of the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) focus largely on higher education issues. The North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL) was cre-

ated in September 2003 to address the growing need for program and policy guidance in K-12 online learning, but it is simply too early in the life of that organization to determine the impact it will have on policy issues or policy development.

ORGANIZING THE ISSUES

Several authors have categorized the important policy issues for easier analysis. King's Policy Analysis Framework organizes online learning policy issues into seven categories: academic, governance/administration/fiscal, faculty, legal, support services, technical, and cultural (King, Nugent, Russell, Eich & Lacy, 2000). Although this framework was created primarily for the higher education audience, it overlaps significantly with K-12 issues (Blomeyer, 2002).

However, the challenge of creating policies for learners who range in age from five to 21 and the need for full-time supervision raises additional concerns—and mandates layers of national, state, and local policies to address them. I previously adapted King's framework for K-12 by categorizing the policy issues into 10 areas, outlined in Table 1 (Glick, 2002).

States have had to develop policy approaches much more quickly and in far greater detail than the federal government. Local policy development by school districts necessarily depends on the approach taken by each state. The state-level policy, therefore, becomes the nexus and the leverage point for online learning policy. It is therefore most appropriate to focus on state-level policy development at this point in time.

At the K-12 level, distance education state policy approaches fall into two main overlapping categories. The first approach allows school districts, management companies, or other organizations to create virtual schools, including cyber-charter schools, which cross traditional school district boundaries. The sec-

Table 1. Policy issues for distance learning in K-12 schools

Funding formulas and ADM/ADA payments	Public vs. non-public schools Residents and non-residents of states or districts School district and other geopolitical boundaries
Online learning and learner options	Post-secondary enrollment options Open enrollment Independent study Homebound/hospital-bound students Flexible calendar options
Equity of access	Digital divide issues, including the possible need to supply computers and Internet access to students
Special-needs populations	Compliance with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act (Americans with Disabilities Act) Delivery of special education services to online students Differentiation of instruction
Quality criteria and course review/creation	Accreditation Performance evaluation
Teacher licensure and contracts	Class size and course load limits Class day, calendar, and scheduling Intellectual property
Statewide coordination	Program evaluation Support for research and development Statewide coordination/virtual school models Return on investment (ROI)
District policy issues	Student support services Student selection, self-selection, and drop-out rates Interactivity requirements Transcripts, transferability, and awarding of credit
Cyber-charter schools	Home vs. cyber charter schools Funding levels Teacher licensure and contact time
Technical issues	Infrastructure Internet filtering Hardware and software Technical support

ond approach aims to create a statewide virtual school or network of schools to allow school districts and students to participate in centralized online course offerings. Some states allow both types of online learning to occur (Table 2).

The contrasts between the approaches of Florida, Minnesota, and states with clearinghouse models are instructive.

FLORIDA

Florida provides perhaps the best known and strongest example of the approach whereby a state creates a statewide virtual school to provide online courses to

all students in the state. The Florida Virtual High School was launched in 1997 through a \$1.3 million appropriation from the Florida State Legislature. Since then, the program has expanded to include students in grades 7-12, as well as adult GED students, thus encouraging a name change from Florida Virtual High School to Florida Virtual School (FVS). Enrollments have risen dramatically from a mere 77 in the 1996-1997 school year to currently over 10,000 (Florida Virtual School, 2003).

Since the initial launch, the legislation enabling FVS evolved in two major steps—first in 2000, then again in 2002. The 2002 legislation expanded the mission of the school to provide “technology-based educational opportunities [serving] any student in the

Table 2. States identified by distance learning policies (Education Week, 2002)

Statewide virtual schools exist or are in progress (*also allows cyber-charter schools)	AR, AL, FL*, HI*, ID*, IL*, KY, LA*, MD, MI, MS, ND, NM*, OK*, TX*, UT*, WV
Allows virtual schools and cyber-charter schools	CA, OR, NV, AZ, WY, CO, KS, MN, WI, MO, OH, PA, VA, NC, SC

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