

Chapter 9

Online Learning in Illinois High Schools: The Voices of Principals!

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the role that online learning plays in addressing the thoughts, concerns, and issues facing Illinois high school principals. Data were collected from a sample of high school principals who were members of the Illinois Principals Association with respect to the extent, nature, and reasons for participating in online learning programs. An important aspect of this study was to compare the findings in Illinois to those collected from a national sample of high school principals. It concludes that online learning and blended learning are making inroads into the high schools in Illinois comparably to those in other parts of the country. The results of this study indicate that online and blended learning are becoming integral to a number of high school reform efforts, especially with regard to improving graduation rates, credit recovery, building connections for students to their future college careers, and differentiating instruction.

INTRODUCTION

On April 24, 2011, an article in the *Chicago Tribune* entitled, *Online Learning for Illinois High Schoolers Inspires Praise and Suspicion*, appeared that provided a brief overview of the state of online

learning in Illinois high schools. As the title suggests, there were the positives and negatives, the yeas and the nays, that typically arise whenever the use of the latest technology is suggested for changing the way children are educated in this country. Online learning, however, has elicited more than

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its fair share of proponents and detractors. In the opening paragraphs, this article covered well the state of the debate:

[Online learning] ‘can personalize for each student and have incredible rigor,’ said Michael Horn of the Innosight Institute...

It’s a data-rich environment. You can constantly see what does and doesn’t work.

Critics say the trend is more about saving money than improving education, and that the effectiveness of online courses remains unproven.

‘We have yet to see a vendor who has made the case that students who lack the motivation to do homework, to engage in class, to manage their time efficiently... will be more successful in online learning,’ said Samantha Dolen of Palatine-based District 211 (Keilman, 2011).

This debate is being played out throughout the country as state policymakers and school administrators try to find solutions to improve education especially during severe budgetary times. Newspaper and other media reporters who cover this issue frequently will develop their stories around several individuals (students, teachers, union representatives, principals) who are happy to provide opinions for and against the use of online learning.

The *Chicago Tribune* article goes on to describe that while the state of Illinois introduced a virtual high school initiative in 2001, enrollments and enthusiasm have been modest at best. However, as more and more states move forward with apparently successful virtual schools (i.e., The Florida Virtual School), state and local policymakers are reconsidering this mode of learning. The data nationally are mixed with only a handful of studies (see Picciano & Seaman 2007, 2009, 2010) examining the big picture. Surely, more research is needed at the local school level.

BACKGROUND

The Role of Online Learning in American High School Reform

In the past several years, there has been a growing interest in the role that online learning can play in American high school reform efforts. Education policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels have all begun to examine how online learning can improve academic programs, to improve graduation rates, and to provide more options to students. By the same token, these same policymakers have expressed concerns about the viability and efficacy of online learning to make substantial improvements in the American high school. A study by Picciano & Seaman (2010) examining these issues was conducted based on a national survey of high school principals. A summary of the results of this study serves as an appropriate backdrop for the study of online learning in Illinois high schools.

ISSUES, CONTROVERSIES, PROBLEMS

Improving Graduation Rates and Credit Recovery

Improving the graduation rate is perhaps the most important aspect of many high school reform initiatives. The term “credit recovery” refers to courses and other activities that students take to make up courses that they need to graduate. While the need for these courses varies, the primary motive for offering these online courses relates to students having not completed required coursework earlier in their high school careers due to illness, scheduling conflicts, academic failure, and etc. Students needing such courses make up a significant portion of the high school student population that subsequently drops out or are late in graduating. The findings in the Picciano and

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