

Research and Reports: Technology and Online Learning

Online courses have become a staple of many postsecondary institutions during the past 10 years. More and more states and districts are considering and designing online learning opportunities for high school students. Online high school courses provide students with the opportunity to take (or to retake) core classes necessary for graduation, to take advanced classes that may not be offered at local high schools, and to work toward graduation when circumstances may prevent attending school on a traditional schedule.

The following three resources are summarized:

- *Keeping Pace With K–12 Online Learning: A Review of State-Level Policy and Practice*
- *Connecting Students to Advanced Courses Online: Innovations in Education*
- *Evaluating Online Learning: Challenges and Strategies for Success*

Keeping Pace With K–12 Online Learning: A Review of State-Level Policy and Practice

Watson, J., & Ryan, J. (2007). *Keeping pace with K–12 online learning: A review of state-level policy and practice*. Vienna, VA: North American Council for Online Learning. Retrieved September 8, 2008, from <http://www.nacol.org/docs/KeepingPace07-color.pdf>

This annual report, currently published by the North American Council for Online Learning, provides an overview of online learning programs in the 42 states. It presents data on existing programs and state law, which were gathered through online surveys, Internet research, review of state laws, interviews with state education agency personnel, and information previously gathered for the 2006 report. The authors indicate that online learning is increasing, in the number of programs and the number of students enrolled.

Online learning programs vary based on the following characteristics:

- Type of program
- Method of governance
- Method of funding
- Types of classes offered
- Types of students targeted
- Geographic reach of the program

Oversight of online learning varies, depending on the type of program and what state it serves. Because there is sometimes a lack of data and a lack of transparency, stronger regulation and evaluation of online learning may become important policy issues.

The report profiles 25 different programs, including state programs, state initiatives, district programs, consortium or network programs, and charter schools. Each of the 25 program profiles includes the following:

- Program background
- Student information
- Student demographics
- Information on courses and teachers

The report concludes with a state-by-state summary that discusses the following:

- State online learning programs
- Other online learning programs offered in the state
- State policies concerning funding
- Teaching and curriculum
- Governance and tracking
- Accountability for student achievement

Connecting Students to Advanced Courses Online: Innovations in Education

Office of Innovation and Improvement. (2007). *Connecting students to advanced courses online: Innovations in education*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved September 8, 2008, from <http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/academic/advanced/index.html>

This report, commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education, examines how online learning can give students the opportunity to take advanced courses, providing them with more options than are offered at their traditional high school. It describes the benefits of online learning for advanced study and discusses how districts and schools can plan and implement online courses. In addition, the report provides summaries of six established online learning programs. It indicates that districts often are unable to provide higher level courses to students because of the following reasons:

- Low student interest in a particular course
- Lack of qualified teachers
- Lack of funding
- Scheduling conflicts

Online courses can solve these problems, allowing students with diverse interests to pursue advanced coursework, better preparing them for college, and reducing the need for first-year remediation courses in college. The report recommends that high schools pair up with an online service provider and clearly delineate the roles for each party. In addition, it discusses the following considerations for implementation:

- Technology needs
- Student preparation
- Instructor training
- System and student evaluation and monitoring

This report does not focus on using online learning to provide core courses or to provide credit recovery.

Evaluating Online Learning: Challenges and Strategies for Success

Office of Innovation and Improvement. (2008). *Evaluating online learning: Challenges and strategies for success*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved September 8, 2008, from <http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/academic/evalonline/evalonline.pdf>

This report uses an inclusive definition of online learning that consists of distance learning courses, virtual schools (which offer a complete range of educational services online), and educational websites that provide resources to teachers and students. It provides advice on addressing the unique challenges evaluating online learning.

The report focuses on seven large-scale online learning programs that underwent rigorous evaluations and discusses the limitations of those evaluations so that readers can learn from and improve upon these methodologies. The programs discussed include the following: Connecting Classrooms, Educators, & Students Statewide (ACCESS) distance learning (Alabama); Algebra I Online (Louisiana); Appleton eSchool (Wisconsin); Arizona Virtual Academy; Chicago Public Schools Virtual High School; Digital Learning Commons (Washington); and Thinkport (Maryland Public Television and Johns Hopkins University Center for Technology in Education).