

Executive summary

Late 2007 and the first half of 2008 saw the continued growth of online learning, both in terms of new programs being created, existing programs growing, and new legislation being passed to facilitate further growth. As of fall 2008, 44 states offer significant online learning opportunities for students.

- Seventeen states offer significant supplemental and full-time, online options for students. Many of these states have both a state-led program and full-time, online schools.
- Twenty-three states offer significant supplemental opportunities, but not full-time options. Most of these states have state-led programs, such as the Michigan Virtual School, Illinois Virtual School, and Virtual Virginia.
- Four states offer significant full-time opportunities—but not supplemental. These states have extensive charter schools and/or district online programs, but do not have a state-led supplemental program that offers courses to students across the state.

Types of online programs

State-led programs and initiatives continue to be an important online learning option for students in many states. As of fall 2008, 34 states offer state-led programs or initiatives that are designed, in most cases, to work with existing school districts to supplement course offerings for students. Examples of state-led programs (which provide full courses, teachers, and student support) include Florida Virtual School, Illinois Virtual High School, Michigan Virtual School, Idaho Digital Learning Academy, Georgia Virtual School, Kentucky Virtual Schools, and the Missouri Virtual Instruction Program. Examples of state-led initiatives, which provide online resources, or serve as a central clearinghouse for online courses, include the Washington Digital Learning Commons, Wyoming Switchboard Network, Texas Virtual School Network, and Oregon Virtual School District. Most state-led programs are:

- High school level, with some middle school,
- Supplemental—providing one or more courses to students enrolled elsewhere, and
- Funded primarily by separate state appropriations rather than the per-pupil funding formula.

Full-time online schools are a second common online learning option. As of fall 2008 there are 21 states that have these types of schools. They are often charter schools, although there are also some non-charter, district-run programs that are available to students across the state.

Online learning policy developments

Late 2007 and the first half of 2008 saw many new policy developments related to online learning. Among the most notable were:

- In Florida, the state legislature passed a new law that requires school districts to provide virtual learning programs “to make online and distance learning instruction available to full-time virtual students in grades kindergarten through grade 8 by 2009-2010.” Florida Virtual School continued its rapid growth, reaching over 120,000 course registrations in 2007-2008.
- Alabama became the second state in the country after Michigan to create an online learning requirement, when the state board of education passed a resolution that “beginning with the ninth-grade class of 2009-2010 (graduating class of 2012-2013), students shall be required to take and receive a passing grade in one on-line/technology enhanced course in either a core course (mathematics, science, social studies, or English) or an elective with waivers being possible for students with a justifiable reason(s).”
- Wisconsin gained national attention when an appeals court ruled in December 2007 that the Wisconsin Virtual Academy (WIVA) violated state laws and was not eligible for state funding. To prevent online charter schools across the state from being denied funding and closing, the legislature responded by enacting Act 222, which makes changes to charter school, open enrollment, and teacher licensing laws to allow virtual charter schools in Wisconsin to operate with public funding.
- South Carolina clarified the law passed in 2007 that had led to confusion as to whether full-time online schools were allowed in the state. In fall 2008 the first three online charter schools are opening, joining the South Carolina Virtual School Program (the state-led, supplemental online program).
- Hawaii and Wyoming both established task forces to research online learning options for their states. Both reported to their respective state legislatures, which in 2008 passed legislation supportive of the task force recommendations. Wyoming created the Wyoming Switchboard Network to create and oversee online and other distance learning courses, while Hawaii’s legislation supports both a state-led supplemental program and full-time online schools.

There have been a few exceptions to the pattern of consistent growth in online programs.

Both Connecticut and Delaware established state-led online programs in the past year, but budget cuts did not allow either program to grow nearly as large or as quickly as planned. Both are going forward with online courses in fall 2008, but with small numbers of students and courses. The experiences of the state-led programs in these states reflect concerns of such programs in other states that are dependent on yearly appropriations from the legislature and therefore also reliant on the health of state budgets and economies.

Growth of online programs

Many supplemental programs are continuing to grow rapidly, with nearly one-third reporting increases in number of course registrations of more than 50%. Full-time online schools are growing as well, but much of the growth in student numbers in full-time online

schools represents new schools, instead of the growth of existing schools. When programs were asked if they were satisfied with their size and growth rate, they were split about evenly: 47% responded that they are satisfied, while 53% said they would like to grow more quickly. Of those who said they would like to grow more quickly, the most common reasons for slow growth was lack of funding (66%) and legislative restrictions (43%). Of the programs that cited lack of funding as a factor limiting growth, over three-quarters (79%) were supplemental programs. This suggests that the programs receiving public education FTE funds are more likely to be satisfied with funding than the programs that are dependent on other funding sources.

Conclusion

Online learning has the capacity to grow, and the early results demonstrate the benefits of students and parents being given the choice of a variety of learning options, from fully online courses at a distance, to classroom-based courses, with blended learning options in between. However, in many states today—despite the rapid growth so far—a real or potential barrier exists for students who seek an online course. These barriers are sometimes on the student side (related to access to online courses or the willingness of their school to grant credit for online courses they do take), or on the school side (related to funding or other limiting policies).

Funding is clearly one of the keys to the growth of online learning—perhaps the most important single factor. In addition to funding, one of the challenges in developing online learning policy is that the term “online learning” has different meanings for different people. Different online learning courses and programs can have very different levels of teacher involvement, computer technology (such as diagnostic assessments), real-time and asynchronous interaction, and face-to-face elements, making the development of appropriate policy prescriptions challenging. Policies to facilitate an increase in online options for students include:

- Ensuring that students and parents are free to choose online courses and schools.
- Encouraging schools of education to incorporate online instruction as part of the curriculum for future teachers, to include pre-service training in teaching online, and creating additional professional development options for certified teachers.
- Allowing teachers to teach across state lines by encouraging reciprocity of recognition of teaching credentials.
- Creating true national content standards so online content does not need to demonstrate alignment with countless different content frameworks.
- Revising accounting standards for funding to get away from count dates, seat time, and other measures that don't apply to the online environment.
- Establishing some standard metrics for basic quality assurance and measurements, such as consistent measures for course completions.

Online learning is growing rapidly, but continued growth requires specific policy and funding changes, including and in addition to those suggested above. These policy changes should focus on increasing educational choices and opportunities while ensuring quality and improved student achievement.