



POLICY BRIEF

Online Learning in the Five Largest School Districts in Washington State

by Liv Finne
Director, WPC's Center for Education

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Washington state has passed several laws to increase student access to online learning, as lawmakers recognize the potential of online courses to increase student learning, to improve instruction, and to provide students with more educational options. A national effort, Digital Learning Now, has launched a campaign to achieve the same goal. This study assesses the progress of online learning in Washington state and reports on the number of students enrolled in online courses in the five largest school districts in the state.

Washington Policy Center research indicates that the following policy recommendations, if adopted, would improve the quality of public education for all students.¹

1. The Legislature should lift the ban on charter public schools and allow innovations in online learning to emerge, and bring needed competition to the regional district monopolies that currently operate Washington schools.
2. The Legislature should discard the arbitrary staff-to-student ratio funding model,² and instead allow the funding to which students are entitled follow the student to the school or online learning course of the family's choice.
3. The Legislature should require local school officials to give students access to all available online learning courses, without conditions or limitations.
4. Students should be encouraged to take at least one online course in high school, so students can demonstrate at least a minimal familiarity with online learning technology.
5. The Legislature should prohibit class sizes from being subject to collective bargaining negotiations, so education officials are not barred from adopting flexible staffing models that integrate blended online learning into traditional classrooms.

¹ "Eight Practical Ways to Reverse the Decline of Public Schools," by Liv Finne, Policy Brief, Washington Policy Center, December 2008, available at www.washingtonpolicy.org/publications/brief/wpcs-education-reform-plan-eight-practical-ways-reverse-decline-public-schools. See also "An Option for Learning: An Assessment of Student Achievement at Charter Public Schools," by Liv Finne, Policy Brief, Washington Policy Center, January 2011, available at www.washingtonpolicy.org/publications/brief/option-learning-assessment-student-achievement-charter-public-schools, and "Lifting the State Ban on Charter Schools," by Liv Finne, Policy Note, Washington Policy Center, February 2012, available at www.washingtonpolicy.org/publications/legislative/lifting-state-ban-charter-schools.

² Revised Code of Washington 28A.150.260: "Enrollment calculation."

6. The Legislature should restore full funding to online programs, the alternative learning experiences, to remove the 15% disincentive to providers of online learning programs.
7. School districts should give their school principals and teachers the budget authority to buy a high-quality interactive computer programs, such as Dream Box, Curriculum Associations, ST Math and ALEKS, that have proven successful in engaging students in charter public schools across the nation.

Policy Background

Online learning opportunities for students continue to grow nationwide. Some reports show that in 2011 over 50% or more of all districts across the country have at least one student taking an online course. Full-time, multi-district schools in 30 states now enroll an estimated total of 250,000 students in school year 2010–11, an annual increase of 25%. Forty states have state virtual schools or similar state-led initiatives, accounting for 536,000 course enrollments (one student taking one semester-long course) in SY 2010–11, an annual increase of 19%.³

Over the last ten years, Washington state lawmakers have been working to introduce and expand online learning options for students. In 2002, Governor Locke established the Digital Learning Commons, a online library of over 600 high-quality courses.⁴ In 2005, the Legislature passed a bill allowing students to enroll in full-time online schools.

In 2009, the Legislature created a process for the approval of online course providers by the state Digital Learning Department. Lawmakers also required all school districts to develop online learning policies that set rules for student eligibility, earning of credit and sources of funding.

In 2010, the Legislature cut state funding to students who choose to attend a full-time online school by 15%. The 2010 bill also required school districts to give students credit for the online courses they take.⁵

Digital Learning Now is a national effort led by former governors Ed Wise (D-W. Va.) and Jeb Bush (R-Fla.) to increase student access to online learning. Digital Learning Now seeks to modernize state laws and end policies that block school officials from using many of the high-quality online learning tools now available.

Digital Learning Now has developed 72 recommendations for increasing student access to online learning.⁶ Digital Learning Now has reviewed Washington state’s digital learning policies. Of the 72 recommendations,

³ “Keeping Pace With K–12 Online Learning, An Annual Review of Policy and Practice,” by John Watson, Amy Murin, Lauren Vashaw, Butch Gemin, Chris Rapp, Evergreen Education Group, 2011, available at kpk12.com/cms/wp-content/uploads/KeepingPace2011.pdf.

⁴ These courses are currently available to school districts across the state through the Digital Learning Department at the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.

⁵ “How to Improve Student Access to Online Learning in Washington State,” by Liv Finne, Policy Brief, Washington Policy Center, November 2011, available at www.washingtonpolicy.org/publications/brief/how-improve-access-online-learning-washington-state.

⁶ “Roadmap for Reform,” Digital Learning Now!, 2011, available at digitallearningnow.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Roadmap-for-Reform-.pdf.

Digital Learning Now found that Washington state complies with only 46 recommendations, and partially complies with five.⁷

Digital Learning Now seeks to increase student access to individual online courses and to “blended online learning.” In blended online learning, students study a subject using an interactive computer program that allows the teacher to explain concepts and to provide extra help to students who need it. One of the greatest advantages of blended online learning is students are able to exercise a certain amount of control over the time, place and pace of their own learning progress.⁸

The following are policy changes recommended by Digital Learning Now which would have the greatest benefit to student learning in Washington:

1. Lift the state ban on charter public schools
2. Require that all school districts give students access to individual online courses
3. Prohibit school officials from erecting artificial barriers to online courses
4. Remove arbitrary seat time requirements for earning online credit
5. Encourage all students to take at least one online course in high school.

The state ban on charter public schools is a serious impediment to increasing access to online learning in Washington. In 2011–12, 41 states and the District of Columbia allow charters. Nationwide two million students attend over 5,600 charter schools.⁹ Charter public schools are popular with parents, allow extensive local innovation, and have demonstrated what works and what doesn’t in public education.

Charter public schools allow educational entrepreneurs to experiment with new ways to organize schools and deliver instruction to students. As a result, a wide range of high-performing charter public school models have emerged, including the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), Green Dot, Rocketship, Aspire, Harlem Success Academy, Preuss Academy and many others.

Lifting the state ban on charter schools would allow many schools to adopt blended online learning model to deliver instruction to students. One example of this successful model is a charter public school in Yuma, Arizona, Carpe Diem Collegiate High School and Middle School (CDCHM).¹⁰ At the heart of this school is a learning center with 300 computer cubicles.

Students learn for 55 minutes at the computer using highly engaging and interactive programs. They then move to a lecture-style classroom to continue lessons through traditional face-to-face instruction by a teacher. Later, students

⁷ “Washington State’s Digital Learning Now Report Card,” by Digital Learning Now, 2011, available at digitallearningnow.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Washington.pdf.

⁸ This definition has been developed by the Innosight Institute. See “The Rise of K–12 Blended Learning; Profiles of Emerging Models,” by Heather Staker, Innosight Institute, May 2011, pages 38–41, available at www.innosightinstitute.org/blended_learning_models/.

⁹ “The Public Charter School Dashboard, Schools Overview, 2011–12 National,” National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, available at dashboard.publiccharters.org/dashboard/schools/page/overview/year/2012.

¹⁰ “The Rise of K–12 Blended Learning; Profiles of Emerging Models,” by Heather Staker, Innosight Institute, May 2011, pages 38–41, available at www.innosightinstitute.org/blended_learning_models/. Carpe Diem’s new building includes only five traditional classrooms, which is fewer than half as many as a traditional school requires for a similar enrollment level. A traditional school built close to Carpe Diem is 2.5 times more expensive per student.

rotate back to the digital learning center for additional lessons, resulting in a longer school day, from 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. with Fridays off.

Carpe Diem's digital learning model provides higher-quality instruction at less cost than traditional public schools. Carpe Diem's staff-to-student ratio is 20 to 1,¹¹ about half that of Washington state schools,¹² delivering a high-quality education for just \$5,300 per student,¹³ or about half of Washington's per-student average of \$10,237.¹⁴

Under current law, the flexible digital learning model is not permitted in Washington state schools. School principals and teachers in Washington are restrained by central bureaucratic rule-making and narrow collective bargaining restrictions. Under these policies, school principals are allowed little autonomy over their programs or budgets, and cannot purchase innovative new tools for learning now available on the web. Principals and teachers cannot try out new school models or staffing strategies now possible with computer-aided instruction.

School leaders operating in this top-down environment can only layer new technology on top of the current conventional classroom structure. They cannot employ educational technology to individualize and customize instruction for students. They also cannot control the school day to maximize the benefits of online learning for students.

Online Course Enrollment in the Five Largest School Districts

Seattle

The Seattle School District is the largest in Washington, with 46,648 students and 93 schools. It is also the wealthiest district in the state, spending \$12,385 per student in 2011–12, not counting capital costs, with an annual operating budget of \$577 million.¹⁵

In August of 2011, the Seattle School District issued procedures for delivering online learning to its students.¹⁶ By late 2011, the state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction shows only 60 students were enrolled in an

¹¹ Carpe Diem's student to staff ratio is 15 staff to 300 students, or 20 to one. Author learned this information by listening to April 16, 2012 presentation by Rick Ogston, CEO for Carpe Diem Schools.com, at Center for Reinventing Public Education Event, University of Washington.

¹² Washington's student to staff ratio is 9.7. See "K–12 Workload/Staffing/Finance State Summary, 2011–12," Office of Financial Management, available at fiscal.wa.gov/FRViewer.aspx?Rpt=K12WSFSW.

¹³ Author learned this information by listening to April 16, 2012 presentation by Rick Ogston, CEO for Carpe Diem Schools.com, at Center for Reinventing Public Education Event, University of Washington.

¹⁴ "K–12 Workload/Staffing/Finance, Statewide Summary Report, District Budgeted 2011–12," Office of Financial Management, available at fiscal.wa.gov/FRViewer.aspx?Rpt=K12WSFSW.

¹⁵ "K–12 Workload/Staffing/Finance, District Detail Report, Seattle School District, District Budgeted 2011–12," Office of Financial Management, available at fiscal.wa.gov/FRViewer.aspx?Rpt=K12WSFSW.

¹⁶ "Superintendent Procedure C57.00SP, Online Learning," Approved by Superintendent Susan Enfield, Seattle Public Schools, August 29, 2011 available at www.seattleschools.org/modules/groups/homepagefiles/cms/1583136/File/Procedures/C/C57.00SP.pdf?sessionid=.

online course for credit, or 0.12% of total student enrollment.¹⁷

Seattle does not offer its own online program of study. State law allows students to cross school district lines to access other online programs, so while this option is technically available to Seattle children, school officials do not encourage students to take advantage of it.

Spokane

The Spokane School District is the second-largest in the state, with 28,380 students, 45 schools and seven alternative programs. Its operating budget is \$313 million in 2011–12, providing \$11,040 per student.¹⁸ One of the district's seven alternative programs offers students access to online courses through the Spokane Virtual Academy. In the fall of 2011, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction reports that only 339 students were enrolled in online course for credit in Spokane, or 1.19% of total student enrollment.¹⁹

Tacoma

The Tacoma School District is the third-largest in the state, with 27,738 students. Tacoma has 37 elementary schools, nine middle schools, five comprehensive high schools and 14 alternative learning sites. Its operating budget is \$337 million in 2011–12, providing \$12,165 per student.²⁰

The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction reports that only one student in Tacoma is enrolled in a full-time online course.²¹ In 2011, however, Tacoma officials entered into a partnership with the Spokane School District to provide Tacoma students with access to Spokane's online program, so this number is likely to increase.

Kent

The Kent School District is the fourth-largest in the state, with 25,985 students attending 40 schools, an operating budget of \$253 million in 2011–12, providing \$9,761 per student.²² The Office of Superintendent of Public

¹⁷ "Report to the Legislature, Online Learning Annual Report, 2010–11, Appendix G, Online Student Demographics from CEDARS," by Karl Nelson, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, page 101, available at www.k12.wa.us/LegisGov/2011documents/OnlineLearningReport_2010-11.pdf. Email dated April 20, 2012 to author from Karl Nelson reports that 60 Seattle students were enrolled in a course from the Digital Learning Department catalogue. Mr. Nelson has reported to the Legislature on issues with data quality from the districts.

¹⁸ "K–12 Workload/Staffing/Finance, District Detail Report, State Summary, Spokane School District, District Budgeted 2011–12," Office of Financial Management, available at fiscal.wa.gov/FRViewer.aspx?Rpt=K12WSFSW.

¹⁹ "Report to the Legislature, Online Learning Annual Report, 2010–11, Appendix G, Online Student Demographics from CEDARS," by Karl Nelson, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, page 101, accessible at http://www.k12.wa.us/LegisGov/2011documents/OnlineLearningReport_2010-11.pdf.

²⁰ "K–12 Workload/Staffing/Finance, District Detail Report, Tacoma School District, District Budgeted 2011–12," Office of Financial Management, available at fiscal.wa.gov/FRViewer.aspx?Rpt=K12WSFSW.

²¹ "Report to the Legislature, Online Learning Annual Report, 2010–11, Appendix G, Online Student Demographics from CEDARS," by Karl Nelson, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, page 101, available at www.k12.wa.us/LegisGov/2011documents/OnlineLearningReport_2010-11.pdf.

²² "K–12 Workload/Staffing/Finance, District Detail Report, Kent School District, District Budgeted 2011–12," Office of Financial Management, available at fiscal.wa.gov/FRViewer.aspx?Rpt=K12WSFSW.

Instruction reports that 352 Kent students are taking an online course, or 1.35 % of total student enrollment.²³ Kent officials make online courses available to students through the Kent-Meridian Technology Academy.

Though this study is designed to report student enrollment in online courses, it is worth noting that in the fall of 2011 the Kent School District delivered 6,700 laptop computers to every seventh, eighth, and ninth grader, and is fully rewiring school buildings to provide wireless access to the internet.

Evergreen (Clark County)

The Evergreen School District is the fifth largest in the state with 25,714 students attending 32 schools, and a \$239 million operating budget in 2011–12, providing \$9,309 per student.²⁴ The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction reports that 1,404 Evergreen students are taking online courses, or 5.46% of student enrollment.²⁵ Evergreen offers a number of online programs, including IQ Academy and others.

Policy Analysis

Despite ten years of legislative effort, Washington policymakers have not succeeded in delivering high-quality online learning tools to more than a tiny percentage of public school students. As the figures above show, out of 154,465 students in these five districts, only 2,156 students, or 1.4%, are enrolled in an online course. In 2010–11, out of a total student population 991,502 students, 18,932 or 1.9%, were enrolled in an online course.²⁶ These low numbers indicate that, despite ample legal authority and encouragement from state leaders, local school officials are not encouraging students to take advantage of online learning opportunities.

The Legislature has found that some districts are actually blocking students from enrolling in online learning courses. For example, though lawmakers hoped to increase student access to online learning in 2009 by requiring districts to develop policies for doing so, the response of the Seattle School District is revealing.

Seattle issued its online learning policy directive in August of 2011.²⁷ This directive claims to increase student enrollment in individual online learning courses, but it allows school administrators to deny students access if they feel the student does not “possess the academic level needed to function effectively in an online learning environment.”

²³ “Report to the Legislature, Online Learning Annual Report, 2010–11, Appendix G, Online Student Demographics from CEDARS,” by Karl Nelson, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, page 101, available at www.k12.wa.us/LegisGov/2011documents/OnlineLearningReport_2010-11.pdf.

²⁴ “K–12 Workload/Staffing/Finance State Summary, District Detail Report, Evergreen (Clark) School District, District Budgeted 2011–12,” Office of Financial Management, available at fiscal.wa.gov/FRViewer.aspx?Rpt=K12WSFSW.

²⁵ “Report to the Legislature, Online Learning Annual Report, 2010–11, Appendix G, Online Student Demographics from CEDARS,” by Karl Nelson, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, page 101, available at www.k12.wa.us/LegisGov/2011documents/OnlineLearningReport_2010-11.pdf.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ “Superintendent Procedure C57.00SP, Online Learning,” Approved by Superintendent Susan Enfield, Seattle Public Schools, August 29, 2011 available at www.seattleschools.org/modules/groups/homepagefiles/cms/1583136/File/Procedures/C/C57.00SP.pdf?sessionid=.

Another example of school districts circumventing the intent of the Legislature occurred when some school districts would not give students course credit for taking an online course. In response, the Legislature acted in 2010 to require school districts to grant students credit when they successfully complete an online course.²⁸

Conclusion

Providing students access to online learning tools is an important element of preparing students to compete in the global economy. Washington lawmakers can continue to write rules and regulations that encourage school officials to increase student access to online learning programs, but these are no more likely to be successful than efforts of the past. Under current law, school districts have no meaningful incentive to change the traditional way they provide instruction. Public schools receive funding year after year, usually with increases, regardless of their ability to raise actual student achievement or to improve graduation rates. Education officials have no incentive to change. On the contrary, school districts have a strong financial incentive to avoid signing students up for online courses because it would mean that fewer teachers are necessary.

Public school districts in Washington are government-sanctioned regional monopolies. They operate without parental choice, tax-free scholarships, charter schools or other proven alternatives that would create a competitive incentive to improve. At a minimum, allowing parents the option to choose a charter public school or an online course over a traditional district-run school would reduce the power and influence of the central monopoly, and allow new ideas and approaches emerge and thrive. In the near term, allowing parents to choose a charter public school would be the most effective way lawmakers could increase student access to online learning and improving public education in Washington.

Policy Recommendations

Washington Policy Center research indicates the following policy recommendations, if adopted, would improve the quality of public education for all students.²⁹

1. The Legislature should lift the ban on charter public schools and allow innovations in online learning to emerge, and bring needed competition to the regional district monopolies that currently operate Washington schools.

²⁸ Revised Code of Washington 28A.250.050 (2): “Development of local or regional online learning programs.”

²⁹ “Eight Practical Ways to Reverse the Decline of Public Schools,” by Liv Finne, Policy Brief, Washington Policy Center, December 2008, available at www.washingtonpolicy.org/publications/brief/wpcc-education-reform-plan-eight-practical-ways-reverse-decline-public-schools. See also “An Option for Learning: An Assessment of Student Achievement at Charter Public Schools,” by Liv Finne, Policy Brief, Washington Policy Center, January 2011, available at www.washingtonpolicy.org/publications/brief/option-learning-assessment-student-achievement-charter-public-schools, and “Lifting the State Ban on Charter Schools,” by Liv Finne, Policy Note, Washington Policy Center, February 2012, available at www.washingtonpolicy.org/publications/legislative/lifting-state-ban-charter-schools.

2. The Legislature should discard the arbitrary staff-to-student ratio funding model,³⁰ and instead allow the funding to which students are entitled follow the student to the school or online learning course of the family's choice.
3. The Legislature should require local school officials to give students access to all available online learning courses, without conditions or limitations.
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7. School districts should give their school principals and teachers the budget authority to buy a high-quality interactive computer programs, such as Dream Box, Curriculum Associations, ST Math and ALEKS, that have proven successful in engaging students in charter public schools across the nation.

³⁰ Revised Code of Washington 28A.150.260: "Enrollment calculation."

About the Author

Liv Finne is Director of the Center for Education at Washington Policy Center. She is the author of numerous studies on education reform, including “Washington Policy Center’s Education Reform Plan: Eight Practical Ways to Reverse the Decline of Public Schools,” “An Option for Learning: An Assessment of Student Achievement in Charter Public Schools,” “An Overview of Public School Funding in Washington,” “Early Learning Proposals in Washington State,” and “Reviewing the Research on Universal Preschool and All-Day Kindergarten.” Liv holds a law degree from Boston University School of Law and a Bachelor of Arts degree from Wellesley College. She retired from civil litigation practice to raise two children and work as the business partner for Finne Architects, a small business she owns with her husband.



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