

Online Learning in the Five Largest School Districts in Washington State

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Washington state lawmakers have recognized the potential of online courses to increase student learning, to improve instruction, and to provide students with more educational options. This summary of a longer study “Online Learning in the Five Largest School Districts in Washington State,” reports on the number of students enrolled in online courses in the five largest school districts in Washington state.

This study also presents seven policy recommendations that would have the greatest benefit to student learning in Washington. These seven recommendations draw on the research and work of Digital Learning Now, a national effort led by former governors Ed Wise (D-W. Va.) and Jeb Bush (R-Fla.).

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. In late 2011, the state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction reported only 60 students were enrolled in an online course for credit in Seattle, or 0.12% of total student enrollment.

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. 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 reported only 339 students were enrolled in online course for credit in Spokane, or 1.19% of total student enrollment.

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. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction reported only one student in Tacoma is enrolled in a full-time online course. 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 and an operating budget of \$253 million in 2011–12, providing \$9,761 per student. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction reported 352 Kent students are taking an online course, or 1.35 % of total student enrollment. Kent officials make online courses available to students through the Kent-Meridian Technology Academy. 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. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction reported 1,404 Evergreen students are taking online courses, or 5.46% of student enrollment. Evergreen offers a number of online programs, including IQ Academy and others.

Policy Analysis and Recommendations

Over the past ten years, Washington policymakers have passed a number of laws to deliver high-quality online learning tools to students. Yet no more than a tiny percentage of public school students are benefiting from this important new tool. As the figures show, out of 154,465 students in the five largest districts in Washington, only 2,156 students, or 1.4%, are enrolled in an online course. Statewide, in 2010–11, out of a total student population of 991,502, only 18,932 students, or 1.9%, were enrolled in an online course. 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.

Washington Policy Center recommends lawmakers adopt the following steps to improve student access to online learning in Washington:

1. 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. Discard the arbitrary staff-to-student ratio funding model, and instead allow the funding to which students are entitled to follow the student to the school or online learning course of the family's choice.
3. Require local school officials to give students access to all available online learning courses, without conditions or limitations.
4. Encourage students to take at least one online course in high school, so students can demonstrate at least a minimal familiarity with online learning technology.
5. 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.
6. Restore full funding to online programs, the alternative learning experiences, to remove the 15% disincentive to providers of online learning programs.
7. Give school principals and teachers the budget authority to buy 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.

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