

Learning Online: An Assessment of Online Public Education Programs

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"We have everything a bricks-and-mortar school has, except bricks and mortar."
-Online education administrator

Online learning increases educational options for students

In May 2005, the legislature unanimously passed SB 5828, a bill to allow public school districts to teach students through online learning programs, and to allow those students to receive their share of state educational funding. The vote on passage was 97 to zero in the House and 41 to zero in the Senate. Governor Gregoire signed the bill on May 10th. During committee hearings, the Washington Education Association (WEA), the state's powerful teachers' union, testified in favor of the bill, as did the Christian Homeschool Network.

Today, 6,600 students in Washington are enrolled in full-time online learning through programs run by local school districts. A further 12,097 public school students are enrolled in one or more online classes for school credit.

Students choosing online public education

Online public education programs meet all academic standards, testing, and other rules which govern traditional bricks-and-mortar schools. In addition, online programs include extra oversight to ensure that students are learning at grade level.

The legislature created these programs to help students who do not fit into the traditional bricks-and-mortar model, and to take advantage of the high-quality educational programs being offered online. Obviously full-time online learning is not for everyone (it comprises less than 1% of public school students), but this option is an

important one for families that have chosen this as the best education alternative for their children.

The students who benefit most include those pursuing demanding, high-level training in sports (Apolo Ohno, the two-time Gold medalist, is a graduate of the Federal Way School District online program), music, dance, acting, or modeling, and are unable to attend regular school hours. Online programs also serve students who have jobs, have children or other personal responsibilities. Online programs are also a good fit for gifted students seeking more challenging work, slower students who need extra time, and students who have physical or emotional handicaps that cannot be addressed in a traditional classroom.

Interestingly, full-time online programs are attracting families who had previously rejected public education, such as students from private schools, homeschoolers, or those who had dropped out altogether. Almost half, 45%, of one district's online students were not previously attending public schools.

How online public education works

Online learning programs are public education programs offered through public school districts. Over a dozen school districts in Washington State offer these programs. School officials typically select a private educational company to provide day-to-day online instruction to students. For example, Quillayute School District officials selected Insight Schools, Inc. to offer online learning to approximately 1,300 high school students, grades 9-12. Thirty-eight percent

of these students had previously dropped out of school, attended private school, or had been homeschooled.

A family selecting an online learning program needs to have; 1) an adult or guardian at home to work with the student, 2) a computer with access to the internet, and 3) a letter from the student's home school district. All online education teachers are certified educators.

In practice, each student has two teachers: a state-certified teacher and a parent. The formal teacher provides instruction and guidance, corrects homework and gives tests. Parents are closely involved with their children's education, tracking daily lessons and helping with homework.

Younger students spend only about one-quarter of their time on a computer. They also work from printed textbooks, workbooks, flash cards and other instructional materials. High school students engage in online "chat rooms" with other students, organized by teachers for discussion of a given assignment. Some high school classes are conducted live online, with students communicating with the teacher and other students by computer. Online programs also include social events, outdoor adventures, field trips and graduation ceremonies.

Strong public benefit from private online education companies

All of the families involved in online public education have chosen this option voluntarily. No school district assigns a student to an online program against the parents' will. As a result, school officials, and the private companies they select, must impress parents with the quality of the education their children are receiving. Otherwise, parents will not choose this option and the program will not receive public school dollars.

By contrast, parents in traditional bricks-and-mortar schools have limited control over school assignments, because of program design and because final assignments are made by administrators, not by parents. In addition, traditional school programs receive full funding whether students are learning or not. In fact, about 30% of public education students drop out,

with no impact on the level of funding for the program that failed to teach them, and no consequences for administrators.

Online programs use adaptive and innovative software. Students interact with their lessons, which brings excitement and fun to the virtual classroom. The software allows program managers to improve the program in response to the needs and performance of individual students.

By contrast, officials at traditional public schools often choose textbooks based on the latest educational fad and are slow to react when student turn in low test scores. As a result, public education gets embroiled in costly, protracted "reading wars" and "math wars" over how best to teach students. Online programs have avoided both controversies successfully and have maintained a consistent focus on student learning.

Conclusion: parental opt-in and competition among online education companies are good for students

The companies providing online learning operate in a competitive business environment, which rewards excellence, innovation and continuing improvement. After less than a year of operation, students studying through Steilacoom School District Washington Virtual Academy program and Quillayute School District's Insight Schools program have performed as well as their peers in traditional bricks-and-mortar schools. Public school officials maintain oversight and control, which allows them to devote resources where online students need them most.

The state constitution says the paramount duty of public school officials is to provide for the education of all children within state borders. Online learning programs, by allowing parents voluntary choice and by tapping excellence in the private education market, are a proven part of fulfilling that duty.

Liv Finne is director of the Center for Education at Washington Policy Center, a non-partisan public policy research organization in Seattle and Olympia. Nothing here should be construed as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any legislation before any legislative body. For more information contact WPC at 206-937-9691 or online at washingtonpolicy.org.