



# POLICY BRIEF

## **Learning Online** **An Assessment of Online Public Education Programs**



by Liv Finne  
Director, Center for Education

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*“My teachers are all very encouraging. They help me set goals. They...make sure I’m not getting confused with anything, not getting behind.”*

-Online education student.<sup>1</sup>

*“We have everything a bricks-and-mortar school has, except bricks and mortar.”*

-Online education administrator.<sup>2</sup>

### **1. Legislature enacts online public education law**

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 was 97 to zero in the House and 41 to zero in the Senate. Governor Gregoire signed the bill on May 10th.<sup>3</sup>

The law designated online learning as a qualified Alternative Learning Experience (ALEs) under Washington law. ALEs must comply with the requirements of the Washington Administrative Code and all the other rules and standards governing public education.<sup>4</sup> These laws include instruction standards, civil rights protections, oversight of student learning by certificated teachers, and state-mandated tests.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Why Insight,” video presentation at [Insightschools.net](http://Insightschools.net), accessed January 4, 2008, [www.insightschools.net/insight-video-mov.asp](http://www.insightschools.net/insight-video-mov.asp).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Revised Code of Washington, 28A.150.162.

<sup>4</sup> Washington Administrative Code, 392-121-182.

<sup>5</sup> “Program Implementation Guidelines for Alternative Learning Experiences,” Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), November 1, 2005, page 2.

The legislature passed the bill in order to let students take advantage of emerging internet technologies, and to improve educational opportunities for students who are not well served in a traditional classroom setting.

In Section 1 of the bill, lawmakers described the advantages of online learning and the benefits this flexible approach provides for students:

“The legislature finds that digital learning courses and programs can provide students with opportunities to study subjects that may not otherwise be available within the students’ schools, school districts, or communities.

“These courses can also meet the instructional needs of students who have scheduling conflicts, students who learn best from technology-based instructional methods, and students who have a need to enroll in schools on a part-time basis. Digital learning courses can also meet the needs of students and families seeking nontraditional learning environments.”

During committee hearings, the Washington Education Association (WEA), the state’s powerful teachers’ union, testified in favor of the bill.<sup>6</sup> WEA representatives expressed some minor reservations, which were resolved in the final legislation.

Also in committee, representatives from the Christian Homeschool Network expressed concern that homeschooled students should not be confused with online students, for the reason that students who are home-schooled are not required to take the WASL. Online students, in contrast, are required to take all the tests required of students in traditional public schools, including the WASL. The concerns of homeschool parents were resolved in the final version of the bill.

No group testified in opposition to the bill.

## **2. How online public education works**

Online public education programs are operated by public school districts. Day-to-day instruction is provided by private teaching companies selected and monitored by school district officials.

All state standards and learning requirements that apply to traditional public schools apply equally to online education programs. In addition, there are three further requirements that apply to students enrolled in online education programs. Each student must have:

- A parent or guardian at home to work with the student;
- A computer connected to the internet;
- A letter of permission from the student’s home public school district.

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<sup>6</sup> Senate Bill Report for SB 5828, page 3, enacted May 10, 2005.

Online education programs cover all subjects normally covered in traditional schools, including math, English, history, American government, science, art, music appreciation, health, and physical education courses. The physical education requirements are met by requiring students to provide weekly reports regarding assigned physical activities to their online teacher. Foreign language courses, French, Spanish, even Mandarin Chinese, are also available from online high schools.

At the beginning of the school year, each online student receives a number of boxes containing the year's curriculum materials, including a microscope for science class. Students in one online program also receive a free laptop computer and printer. Each student is tested to assess his grade level in various subjects. Online teachers are able to tailor the program to the individual learning needs of each student.

In practice, each student has two teachers: a state-certified teacher and a parent. A teacher is available online to answer questions and provide guidance. The law requires students and teachers to communicate a least once a week by phone or e-mail. In practice, they communicate much more frequently, usually on a daily basis.

The teacher corrects homework assignments and gives the student an assessment test at the completion of each lesson, study unit and semester. Teachers use online educational resources to help with oversight of student work.

Parents of younger children help lead and organize the daily effort. With guidance, children as young as kindergarten age can use the internet effectively. As a student advances to the high school level, the student himself leads the effort, with the parent taking the role of coach.

At the Washington Virtual Academy, discussed further below, children in the elementary grades spend no more than 20% to 25% of their time on the computer, while using the bulk of their learning time with printed text books, workbooks, flash cards, clay, paint, seeds, soil, rock samples, microscopes and other instructional materials.

High school classes offer live classes online, which allow students to discuss the work with the teacher and with other students. Teachers also require students to engage in online discussion boards, which are "chat rooms" teachers organize for discussion of a given assignment.

### **3. Students who benefit from online public education**

Because of its use of technology and program flexibility, a diverse array of students benefit from online learning:

- Students who are pursuing demanding, high-level training in sports, music, dance, acting or modeling and who are unable to attend regular school hours; (Apolo Ohno, the short-

track speed skating champion and two-time Olympic gold medalist, earned his high school diploma from the Federal Way Internet Academy.)

- Students who do not perform well in large, traditional school settings, or do not connect socially in such settings;
- Students who have dropped out of high school or are at risk of doing so;
- Homeschooled children who may want help for advanced classes. (There are more than 17,000 homeschooled children in Washington);
- Gifted students who need more challenging coursework and need to move at an accelerated pace, or slower students who need extra time to master a subject;
- Students who have jobs or have a young child or other family care responsibilities;
- Students who have long-term health conditions or physical handicaps, have limited mobility, or who have psychological or emotional needs that cannot be met in a traditional classroom.

Online learning offers a more personal and individualized learning environment for these students than they would find in a traditional bricks-and-mortar public school.

The interaction between teacher and student is consistent and one-on-one, and the time in a student's day that can be devoted to learning is much more flexible. Students respond to their teachers as their personal tutors, as teacher and student communicate on a regular basis by phone or e-mail.

One online high school administrator described the relationship between student and teacher as, "...personal, supportive, and nurturing, the way school should be."<sup>7</sup>

One online education company, Insight Schools, assigns each student an adviser, or "i-mentors," who help choose courses, apply to college, and other matters.

One school administrator summed up the online education programs this way:

"In over 35 years in the education field as a public school teacher, curriculum designer and proprietary school executive, I would see students every day who either went through or dropped out of the public schools, and who were extremely frustrated by their experiences.

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<sup>7</sup> "Why Insight," video presentation at [Insightschools.net](http://Insightschools.net), accessed January 4, 2008, at [www.insightschools.net/insight-video-mov.asp](http://www.insightschools.net/insight-video-mov.asp).

“They may not have been successful in a standard public school or maybe they had other issues which hindered their success in a traditional school. For many students this [online learning] is the ideal setting for them.”<sup>8</sup>

#### **4. How online programs are funded**

The Washington constitution states that providing an education to all children within its borders is the “...paramount duty of the state.”<sup>9</sup> The constitution does not, however, limit how this education should be provided. While traditional public schools serve most students in Washington, several alternatives exist – like private schools and homeschooling – which meet the paramount duty requirement. Online public education programs are one of these educational alternatives.

Regarding funding, joining an online public education program is the same as enrolling in public school. Parents do not pay direct tuition to the online program. Like other public school programs, they, along with all other state residents, pay for it through their taxes.

The state education funding apportionment for each student is used to pay online program costs. Part of each student’s funding goes to pay for online instruction, materials and teacher salaries, and part of it goes to pay the administrative costs of the sponsoring school district.

For example, for the 2006-07 school year, the state apportionment for each student at the Steilacoom School District was \$4,400.<sup>10</sup> Local levy dollars, federal dollars and other state programs add a further \$2,485, for a total spending per student in this district of \$6,885.75.<sup>11</sup> On a statewide basis, Washington’s 296 school districts spent \$8,836 per student in 2006-7, based on funding from state, local, federal and other sources.<sup>12</sup> These figures do not include construction budgets and capital spending.

Steilacoom District officials competitively selected the private Washington Virtual Academy (WAVA) to provide student instruction through the District’s online program.

The District directly pays the teachers hired by WAVA, deducts its administrative expenses from state funding (several hundred dollars per online student), and pays the contract balance to WAVA to cover its costs of providing the online curriculum, school supplies, books, teacher training, the costs of monitoring student learning, meeting state and district reporting requirements, and other administrative expenses.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Author interview with Dan Day, Executive Director of Insight School of Washington, January 7, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Washington State Constitution, Article IX, Section I.

<sup>10</sup> “Budget Summary 2007-8,” Steilacoom Historical School District No. 1, page 12, at [www.steilacoom.k12.wa.us/do/pdf/budget\\_review\\_0708.pdf](http://www.steilacoom.k12.wa.us/do/pdf/budget_review_0708.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, calculations based on 4,105 students.

<sup>12</sup> “A 2008 Citizen’s Guide to Washington State K-12 Finance,” by Senate Ways and Means Committee, Washington State Legislature, 2008, page 15.

<sup>13</sup> Author interview with Susan P. Stewart, Chief Administrative Officer, Washington Virtual Academy (WAVA), January 4, 2008.

The online education program at the Steilacoom District represents the typical funding arrangement used by other school districts. Further details on the program are provided in the next section.

## **5. Examples of online public school programs**

### **The Steilacoom School District**

Shortly after the law allowing online programs passed, the Steilacoom School District selected the Washington Virtual Academy (WAVA) to provide a kindergarten through 8th grade online education program beginning in September 2006. The family of any student in the state may apply to the Steilacoom program, after obtaining a letter of permission from his home school district. Steilacoom officials expected perhaps 300 to 500 students might be interested. Instead, 1,500 students applied.

At that time, only 806 students could be accommodated in the program, taught by 16 teachers. A few months later, school officials hired more certified teachers and created hundreds of additional openings. All of these openings were soon filled by new students. By the end of the 2006-07 school year, 1,504 students were enrolled in the online education program, taught by 26 teachers.<sup>14</sup>

The Steilacoom program has succeeded in persuading families to return to the public school system, as shown by enrollment figures:

- 35% of the District's online students had previously been homeschooled;
- 10% of the District's online student had previously attended private schools.<sup>15</sup>

The Steilacoom program provides parents with free information sessions and coaching tips, help with lesson plans, social events (coffee socials, pizza nights, ice skating nights), educational field trips and outdoor adventures for their students, along with other learning support.

Altogether, almost half, 45%, of Steilacoom's online students were not previously attending public schools. Steilacoom education officials use the online program to attract a large number of students from families who would not otherwise be attending public school at all.

### **The Quillayute School District**

For the 2006-07 school year, the Quillayute School District selected Insight Schools, Inc. to operate an online public education program for the district. Officials at first expected the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

program might interest the parents of perhaps 200 students. Instead, more than 600 families enrolled at the high school level, grades nine through twelve.<sup>16</sup>

Word about the new program spread fast among parents. For the 2008-09 school year, enrollment applications increased five-fold, to 3,000 students. The program was expanded, allowing 1,300 students to be accommodated that year, leaving unmet demand from about 1,700 families.

Like the Steilacoom program, the Quillayute Schools online program is successful in reaching students who previously were not attending public schools. Of the 1,300 newly-enrolled high-schoolers:

- 22% had previously dropped out of public school;
- 13% students had previously been home-schooled;
- 3% had been in private schools.

Thus more than one third of the new students in the Quillayute online program, 38%, had not been enrolled in public schools until the District officials offered them this online learning program.<sup>17</sup>

The Quillayute District program provides a support team for each student to aid in successful learning. The individualized team includes a mentor, who also acts as a student adviser, and a team of instructors.

The team helps the student identify his individual learning strengths and weaknesses, helps decide what courses to take, and monitors the student's progress. The team also provides the student with other support, such as career planning and a successful transition to college or to life after school. School officials are working on new curricula for many of the high school courses, to be offered to students beginning in September of 2009.

In addition, the Quillayute program provides online students with opportunities to spend time with young people their own age, through clubs, social events, discussion boards, student government, year-end prom, and graduation ceremonies.

## **Federal Way School District**

The Federal Way School District has been operating an Internet Academy since 1996, with an enrollment of 1,232 students in the 2005-06 school year.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> "Over 1,300 Students Log On to Start the 2007-08 School Year at Online High School," Insight School News, August 29, 2007, at [www.go2ischool.net/press\\_detail.aspx?id=22](http://www.go2ischool.net/press_detail.aspx?id=22).

<sup>17</sup> Author interview with Karla Pollich, Marketing Director for Insight Schools of Washington, January 4, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> "Current Trends in Digital/Online Learning in Washington State," by Martin Mueller, Dennis Small, both of the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Ron Mayberry, Federal Way Internet Academy, and Judy Margrath-Huge, Digital Learning Commons, OSPI, 2007.

## Monroe School District

For the 2008-09 academic year, Monroe School District officials selected WAVA to teach 9th and 10th grade through an online program. The total number of students enrolled in all grades, K-10, and learning through WAVA's online program is 2,573, taught by 39 certificated school teachers.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to the public school programs described here, other school districts offering online learning programs are Marysville, Kittitas, Kent and a dozen other districts.<sup>20</sup>

## 6. Number of students enrolled in online public education programs

In the current academic year, about 6,600 students are enrolled in school district online public education programs. While this is not a large number compared to the broader public education system – it is about 0.6% of the 1,026,682 public schools students in the state – the online option is meeting the unique learning needs of the students enrolled in these programs.<sup>21</sup>

In addition, in the 2006-07 school year, 12,097 other students were enrolled in one or more online classrooms through their local public school district, as described below.<sup>22</sup>

## Washington State and the Digital Learning Commons

To make online courses easily available to students and their schools, in 2002 Governor Gary Locke initiated the Digital Learning Commons (DLC). The DLC provides 300 courses from seven private teaching companies. The high-quality courses include a wide variety of online classes, digital library resources, teaching resources, college and career planning tools, student cyber tutors, student focus groups and other digital tools.

These online programs are effective. In 2004-05, fully one-third, 33%, of the 115 seniors completing Digital Learning Commons courses at 17 schools would not have graduated without these courses. More than three-quarters, 76%, of the online courses offered were Advanced Placement (AP) courses or other electives not offered in the local traditional high school.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> The Marysville School District's online education program is called Move Up. Kittitas education officials selected the Christa McAuliffe Academy to operate their online program for K-12 students. The program is called ACHIEVE. Kent School District officials have created an online program called the KentPhoenix Academy. Other school districts offering online education include Battleground, Colville, Curlew, Deer Park, Freeman, Inchelium, Orient, Spokane, Sumner, Valley, Waterville, West Valley.

<sup>21</sup> "Washington State Report Card, 2006-7 WASL Results," Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, at [www.reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/summary.aspx?year=2006-07](http://www.reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/summary.aspx?year=2006-07).

<sup>22</sup> "Online Curriculum Information and Resources," Online Curriculum Overview of the Education Technology Support Center (ETSC) program, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, at [www.k12.wa.us/EdTech/OnlineCurriculum.aspx](http://www.k12.wa.us/EdTech/OnlineCurriculum.aspx).

<sup>23</sup> "Current Trends in Digital/Online Learning in Washington State," by Martin Mueller and Dennis Small, both of the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Ron Mayberry, Federal Way Internet Academy, and Judy Margrath-Huge, Digital Learning Commons, OSPI, 2007.

The average cost of taking an online course through DLC is \$255. The families of students taking AP or college-level courses through DLC are required to pay the full cost for the course. Some public schools pay for courses which do not duplicate classes taught at the traditional school. Other schools do not restrict which courses students may take. Some schools require families to pay part of the cost. Public school officials often offer to provide \$100 to low-income families with students taking DLC courses.

In contrast, families of students enrolled in full-time online public education programs operated by private education companies, like those described above, are not required to pay any additional money, beyond taxes, for participating in online education.

## 7. Students enrolled across the United States

An overview of online programs nationally shows that through September 2006, 38 states either had state-led K-12 online learning programs, or significant policies regulating this online education, or both.<sup>24</sup>

One example is the Florida Virtual School (FLVS), which in 1997 opened with 77 students enrolled in five courses. In 2007, 113,900 students take one or more of the 90 courses now offered online. Significantly higher percentages of FLVS students scored between three and five on the 2006 AP tests, out of a possible top score of five, compared to the generally lower scores of students enrolled in Florida's traditional bricks-and-mortar schools, after controlling for ethnicity.<sup>25</sup>

FLVS is the only public school in Florida where funding is tied directly to student completion in order to for school officials to receive public funds. The cost of educating a student through the FLVS program in 2007 was \$1,000 less than educating a student in a traditional Florida public school.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> "Final Report: A Comprehensive Assessment of Florida Virtual School," by Florida TaxWatch Center for Educational Performance and Accountability, 2007.

<sup>25</sup> Author interview with Necati Aydin, Ph.D., Senior Research Analyst, Florida TaxWatch Research Institute, February 28, 2008. Dr. Aydin supplied AP scores of Florida Virtual School students, disaggregated by ethnicity, from data collected for report cited in footnote 24 above. AP scores for students in Florida bricks-and-mortar schools were obtained from the Florida Department of Education website, at <http://www.fldoe.org/evaluation/xls/apcores3to5dist07.xls>. For example, 39.8% of African American FLVS students received between 3 and 5 on the 2005-6 AP tests, as compared with 23.6% of African American students enrolled in traditional schools. For whites, these numbers are 61.8% for FLVS students and 48.3% for traditional schools. For Asians, these numbers are 70.1% for FLVS students and 49.5% for students in traditional schools. For Hispanics, these numbers are 51.8% for FLVS students and 47.4% for students in traditional schools.

<sup>26</sup> "Final Report: A Comprehensive Assessment of Florida Virtual School," by Florida TaxWatch Center for Educational Performance and Accountability, 2007, page 79.

## **Total number of online students**

A 2001 estimate of the number of students nationwide engaged in distance learning at the K-12 level was 40,000 to 50,000. In 2002-2003, a National Center for Education Statistics survey reported that 327,670 K-12 students were enrolled in distance learning.<sup>27</sup>

By 2005-2006, the number of K-12 students taking online courses had ballooned to 700,000.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the number of K-12 students taking online courses has increased more than tenfold in only six years.

In addition, officials in 72% of public school districts offering distance learning programs reported they plan to expand their online courses in the future in response to growing demand from families in their area.<sup>29</sup>

The explosive growth of online learning nationwide demonstrates the desire of many families to choose this form of learning for their children. At the same time, these 700,000 students, while a large student population in itself, represents a tiny percentage of the 48.6 million students attending public schools across the country.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, online learning offers an important public education option for many families, especially those whose children would not otherwise be attending public school, but it is unlikely to become the primary way the majority of students receive their education.

## **8. Assessing the quality of the online curriculum**

### **National Assessments of the Quality of Online Learning**

A large number of academic studies have attempted to compare the performance of online students to students educated in a traditional classroom. The bulk of the studies conclude that the learning outcomes for students using technology at a distance are similar to those of students who participate in conventional classroom instruction.<sup>31</sup>

The “no significant difference” finding has become accepted as an academic consensus, even though the political debate over online learning continues. The most recent analysis of 19

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<sup>27</sup> “Selected Findings, Distance Education Courses for Public Elementary and Secondary School Students: 2002-03,” National Center for Education Statistics, 2005, Table 5.

<sup>28</sup> “K-12 Online Learning: A Survey of U.S. School District Administrators,” by Anthony Picciano and Jeff Seaman, The Sloan Consortium, 2007, page 17.

<sup>29</sup> “Distance Education Courses for Public Elementary and Secondary School Students: 2002-03, Selected Findings,” National Center for Education Statistics, 2005, page 7.

<sup>30</sup> “Public Elementary and Secondary School Student Enrollment, High School Completions, and Staff From the Common Core of Data: School Year 2005-06,” National Center for Education Statistics, 2007, Table 2.

<sup>31</sup> “Final Report: A Comprehensive Assessment of Florida Virtual School,” by Florida TaxWatch Center for Educational Performance and Accountability, 2007, page 87, citing “What’s the Difference? Outcomes of Distance vs. Traditional Classroom-Based Learning,” by Jamie P. Merisotis and Ronald A. Phipps, *Change*, Volume 31, No. 3, pages 12-17, May/June 1999.

studies conducted by education researcher Catherine Cavanaugh found no significant difference in the educational effectiveness of online learning compared to face-to-face classroom learning.<sup>32</sup>

## 9. The learning advantage of parental choice

All the online public education programs operated by school districts in Washington have one thing in common: 100% of the families involved are there by choice.

Because participation is voluntary, school officials operating online public education programs must strive for excellence in order to attract students. If program managers failed to impress parents with the quality of the education their children are receiving, parents would transfer their children to other programs, or possibly out of public education altogether, and online programs would be cut back or closed.

Thus, voluntary parental choice provides a strong incentive for public education officials, and the private education companies they select, to ensure that students are learning.

In contrast, traditional school programs receive full funding from the state and from local levies whether students are learning effectively or not. In fact, about 30% of public education students drop out before completing high school, with no impact on the level of funding the program that failed to teach them receives.

While many school districts offer parents limited choice among public schools, final school assignment decisions are made by district officials, not by parents.

A strong public benefit of involving private teaching companies in the provision of online education is that these companies must operate in a competitive business environment, which rewards excellence, innovation and continuing improvement.

These educational companies can only succeed if they demonstrate measurable student-improvement results that impress parents. Accordingly, company managers spend a great deal of time and effort developing the best curricula possible. This consistent drive for excellence accounts for much of the success of online educational programs, and helps explain why the programs remain popular with parents.

The Washington Virtual Academy, for example, uses the K12 Inc. online curriculum, which has earned the approval of parents. Opinion surveys show that 92% of parents are “very satisfied” with the program, while a further 5% report being “satisfied.”<sup>33</sup>

The K12 Inc. curriculum uses the latest research findings in cognitive science to determine how children learn best, then focuses on the basics to develop mastery through practice. This curriculum is based upon the Core Knowledge approach developed by nationally-

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<sup>32</sup> “The Effectiveness of Interactive Distance Education Technologies in K-12 Learning: A Meta-Analysis,” by Catherine Cavanaugh, *International Journal of Educational Telecommunications* (2001) 7(1), pages 73-88.

<sup>33</sup> K12 website, accessed February 15, 2008 at [http://www.k12.com/results/results\\_\\_parent\\_curriculum/index.html](http://www.k12.com/results/results__parent_curriculum/index.html).

recognized educator Dr. E.D. Hirsch.<sup>34</sup> The online curriculum takes advantage of computer animations, hands-on lesson plans and high-quality illustrations to bring otherwise dry study topics to life.

Innovative software applications allow students to interact with their lessons, bringing a great deal of excitement to the virtual classroom. Online learning provides continuous feedback for students, by immediately recognizing and rewarding correct answers, while spotting errors in learning and quickly guiding students back on to the right path.

This dynamic, interactive approach to education is not possible with traditional printed textbooks. For many children and teens who have lived with computer technology their whole lives, and who excel at digital gaming and using the internet, this is the perfect approach to learning.

Another advantage of online learning programs is they can be quickly amended and improved on short notice, immediately providing a better learning experience for students.

While it can take years for a traditional publisher to issue a revised edition of a science textbook, the software managers of an online course can add the same updates in days or weeks. One online course designer explains it this way:



“We make the practice of learning and the adventure of learning fun and interesting not only for the student, but for the teacher and parents who use it... We are constantly in touch with the students, the parents and teachers who use our programs and we take their feedback and we constantly envelope it into the product.

“That’s the difference between what we do and what a static textbook publisher would do. We have the ability to turn on a dime and to make improvements, updates and add new features to our products.”<sup>35</sup>

The curricula used by online education programs meet, and sometimes exceed, Washington state learning standards, with the added benefits of interactive learning and continuous improvement as describe above.

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<sup>34</sup> “Cultural Literacy,” by E.D. Hirsch Jr., First Vintage Books Edition, May 1988. The Core Knowledge curriculum was developed through a long process of research and consensus-building to create a blueprint of what children need to know in all subjects, with content carefully sequenced to systematically build on the foundation of what has come before, with no repetitions or gaps.

<sup>35</sup> Tom Digiovanni, Senior Director for Instructional Design, K12 Inc, from “The Gym of the Mind,” video, K12 Inc. 2006, at [www.k12.com/collections/gym\\_of\\_the\\_mind\\_experts/index.html](http://www.k12.com/collections/gym_of_the_mind_experts/index.html).

## 10. Assessing criticisms of online public education

A number of common criticisms are made against online public education programs. This section summarizes the main arguments against online programs and assesses them in a brief response section.

**Criticism:** Online programs drain money away from traditional public school programs.<sup>36</sup>

**Response:** There are two analytical responses to this claim. First, online education is public education, funded with tax dollars, just like a traditional bricks-and-mortar public school. Online programs are created, regulated and managed by public school officials, who select private educational companies to provide instruction. This is similar to the way officials hire individual teachers to provide instruction in school classrooms. The School Districts' administrative arrangements with these private companies can be altered, extended or terminated at any time by school officials.

Every student in an online program is a public school student, whose education is being funded by the taxpayers of the state. This is part of the state's paramount duty, as provided by the constitution, to make ample provision for the education of all children within its borders.<sup>37</sup>

Online public education programs cannot "drain away" public education funding. The financial impact of online education programs represents a bookkeeping function, in which public education money is devoted to a particular funding account.

Second, online public education programs are reaching students who otherwise would not be attending public schools. As noted, Washington has a little over one million students enrolled in traditional government schools. In 2006-07, an additional 84,141 students attended private schools,<sup>38</sup> and 17,580 students were home-schooled.<sup>39</sup>

More than 100,000 Washington families, for one reason or another, have rejected public schools, even though these parents have already paid for these schools through their

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<sup>36</sup> "Online teaching firms grab state dollars," by Clay Holtzman, *Puget Sound Business Journal*, August 17, 2007, and "Do-over? Online schools need more oversight, lawmaker says," by Clay Holtzman, *Puget Sound Business Journal*, December 14, 2007.

<sup>37</sup> Washington state constitution, Article IX, Section I. The provision states, "It is the paramount duty of the state to make ample provision for the education of all children residing within its borders, without distinction or preference on account of race, color, caste, or sex."

<sup>38</sup> Author interview with Laura Moore, Administrator for Private and Home-Based Education/Navigation 101 for OSPI, January 8, 2008. Ms. Moore prepared "2006-2007 Enrollment Report for Private Schools, 1/08/08," for this interview.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

taxes. School districts' online education programs are drawing some of these families back to public education, and the additional state funding that comes with them.<sup>40</sup>

For example, 45% of the students enrolled in the Steilacoom School District online program had previously been home schooled or enrolled in a private school. The online program has resulted in \$2.98 million in additional state funding to the Steilacoom District, money that otherwise would not have been available to the public education system.

The Quillayute program has seen similar success, particularly in reaching students who were receiving no educational instruction before joining the online program. Twenty-two percent of the students in the Quillayute online program had previously dropped out of school.<sup>41</sup> Another 13% had been home schooled students, and 3% had been in private school. The online program resulted in \$2.17 million more in public education funding for the Quillayute School District.

More important than money, online programs are reaching students who would not otherwise be attending a public school, or who would not be in school at all.

**Criticism:** Online education programs lack oversight and quality control.<sup>42</sup>

**Response:** Online public education programs comply with the Washington Administrative Code and with all the rules that govern public education in Washington state, including privacy and civil rights protections for students.

In addition, every student in an online program must have a Written Student Learning Plan (WSLP), something students in traditional public programs do not have. The WSLP is drafted by a certified teacher and includes regular supervision, monitoring and evaluation of the student's educational progress. It also includes review and pre-approval of all instructional materials and methods, including regular communication between parents, students and teachers.<sup>43</sup>

Regarding the private teaching companies, they are accredited by the Northwest Association of Accredited Schools. Their teachers are individually accredited under the laws of the state and the curriculum they use is generally more rigorous than that found in

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<sup>40</sup> "2008 A Citizen's Guide to Washington State K-12 Finance, 2008" by Senate Ways and Means Committee, 2008, page 4, states that the statewide allocations through the General Apportionment formula is projected at approximately \$4,899 per student in the 2007-08 school year.

<sup>41</sup> Author interview with Karla Pollich, Marketing Director for Insight Schools, Inc., January 4th, 2008.

<sup>42</sup> "Online teaching firms grab state dollars," by Clay Holtzman, *Puget Sound Business Journal*, August 17, 2007, and "Do-over? Online schools need more oversight, lawmaker says," by Clay Holtzman, *Puget Sound Business Journal*, December 14, 2007.

<sup>43</sup> Other requirements of the WSLP include 1) a beginning and end date, an estimate of the average number of hours a week a student will engage in learning activities to meet the requirements of the plan; 2) a description of how weekly contact will occur; 3) a description of the specific learning goals and performance objectives for the student; 4) identification of all instructional materials essential to successful completion of the learning plan, and; 5) a description of how student performance will be evaluated.

most public schools. In addition, private online company teachers typically have as much or more instructional experience than traditional public school teachers.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, online public education programs are subject to the ultimate in oversight – parental choice. Every one of the families involved in online public education is a volunteer, doing what they feel is best for their children. If at any time an online program is not meeting the educational needs of children, the parents have the option of enrolling them in a traditional public school, or returning them to a private school or the home school setting from which many of them came.

**Criticism:** Online students are not taking the WASL on time.

**Response:** Many students in online programs have not taken the WASL on time, due primarily to the length and timing required for the test. The WASL requires eight consecutive days of testing for one hour a day, at a bricks-and-mortar school location. The WASL cannot be taken online. For students located in remote areas of the state, taking the test under the existing rules is very difficult.

The legislature has created alternative assessments to the WASL, which will help online students take the test. Also, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction is considering changes to how the WASL is given that would better accommodate the needs of online students. In any case, public school managers of online programs realize students' progress must be assessed to insure they are meeting state educational standards.

**Criticism:** Online students have performed poorly on the WASL, compared to students in traditional public education programs.

**Response:** Online students taught through the Insight School high school program and who took the 10<sup>th</sup> grade WASL compared very favorably to their peers in traditional public schools, except in one subject: math. The test results are summarized in the table below.

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<sup>44</sup> WAVA's K-8 teachers have on average 11.4 years of teaching experience (source: Author interview with Susan Stewart, Chief Administrative Officer, WAVA, January 4, 2008) which compares favorably to the average of 12.7 years of experience for public school teachers in Washington State. See "Washington State Report Card," OSPI 2006, at [www.reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/summary.aspx?year=2006-07](http://www.reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/summary.aspx?year=2006-07).

2006-07 WASL Scores <sup>45</sup>		
	Online pass rate (Insight School program)	Washington state pass rate
<b>Reading</b>	82.0%	80.8%
<b>Writing</b>	87.5%	83.9%
<b>Math</b>	38.5%	50.4%
<b>Science</b>	41.9%	36.4%

Insight School officials are reviewing the math curriculum and are making changes to improve instruction. They have every incentive to do so. As a private educational company they might lose their contract. Insight managers know Quillayute public school officials might become dissatisfied and choose another company or cancel the program.

Critics point to the poor initial WASL test results of students in the Steilacoom online program (grades K-9) for the 2006-07 school year.<sup>46</sup> A follow-up investigation of these test scores found that data entry and reconciliation errors had distorted the results. The accurate, reconciled scores show that Steilacoom online students achieved WASL scores that were within one to four percentage points of the statewide average. In 5th and 6th grade reading, Steilacoom online students scored higher than the statewide average.<sup>47</sup>

Overall, the numbers show that when given the same time to prepare, online students perform no worse, and in many cases better, on the WASL test than their peers in traditional public schools.

## 11. Conclusion

Online public education programs are providing a high-quality, rigorous educational program for students who do not fit well in a traditional public school. These programs have proved successful in persuading families that had previously rejected public education to enroll their children in a public education program.

Online public education programs are also successful at teaching students who had previously dropped out, and who otherwise would likely not be attending school at all.

<sup>45</sup> Author interview with Karla Pollich, Marketing Director for Insight Schools, Inc., January 4, 2007. For Washington state 2006-7 WASL pass rates, see “Washington State Report Card, 2006-7 WASL Pass rates,” OSPI 2006, at <http://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/summary.aspx?year=2006-07>.

<sup>46</sup> “Online teaching firms grab state dollars,” by Clay Holtzman, *Puget Sound Business Journal*, August 17, 2007, and “Do-over? Online schools need more oversight, lawmaker says,” by Clay Holtzman, *Puget Sound Business Journal*, December 14, 2007.

<sup>47</sup> Author interview with Susan Stewart, Chief Administrative Officer, Washington Virtual Academy, March 12, 2008. See “WAVA Original vs. Reconciled WASL Scores 2006-07 for Grade Levels 3-8 on Reading Math, Writing and Science,” and “WAVA State vs. Reconciled WASL Scores, 2006-07,” available on request.

Many children have unique learning needs and require a more individualized and responsive educational program than a traditional public school can provide. The data show that online programs are reaching students who otherwise might not have access to a good education.

In addition, online programs have resulted in an increase in state public education funding for school districts that offer families online educational opportunities. The online programs have also resulted in new jobs and greater professional opportunities for certified teachers.

The early reporting shows that online public education programs are academically successful for students, financially sustainable for taxpayers, and popular with parents. As such, online programs are an important part of fulfilling the state's paramount duty to make ample educational provision for all children within its borders.

## 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 “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.” She 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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