

How to Improve Access to Online Learning in Washington State

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November 2011

Key Findings

1. Washington state does not require all school districts to provide students access to online learning.
2. Students choosing to attend a full-time online school will receive 15% less state funding than students attending traditional schools, a possible violation of the state's constitution.
3. Online learning benefits students seeking to learn above and beyond the traditional school program, students who need to repeat courses, students living in distant rural settings, students in cities seeking individualized learning programs, and students seeking to advance at their own pace.
4. Online learning can benefit teachers, as they learn how to use blended learning tools to deliver curricula and monitor student progress.
5. Online learning gives school budget writers additional ways to improve the delivery of learning tools and resources to the school classroom.
6. Washington's new Innovation School law offers opportunity to expand student access to blended online learning.

Recommendations

1. Require all school districts to offer students access to online courses.
2. Do not reduce the state basic education grant by 15% for students who choose to attend full-time online schools.
3. Require every high school student to take at least one online course as a condition of graduating from high school.
4. Allow students to earn course credits by demonstrating mastery of a subject, instead of by completing seat-time requirements.
5. Allow students who attend traditional "brick and mortar" schools to direct a portion of their state basic education grant to enroll in one or more individual online courses.
6. No limit should be placed upon the number of individual online courses a student chooses to take.

Access to Online Learning

After 10 years of legislative effort to increase access to online learning, only 12,000 to 16,000 students took an online course in 2009–10; less than 2% of the total Washington population of 980,000 public school students.

In 2002, Governor Gary Locke initiated a program to make individual online courses available to public school students and teachers. Today the state's Digital Learning Department provides students with access to over 600 online courses developed by experienced private education companies.

In 2005, the legislature passed a law that allows private companies to offer full-time online programs to public school students in Washington. In 2009–10, 12,554 Washington students were enrolled in full-time online programs. This represents an increase of 90% over the approximately 6,600 students enrolled in 2007–08.

Currently there are 40 full-time online programs offered by school districts which have contracted with private companies or have designed their own courses to offer online lessons to students. In 2009, the legislature enacted SSB 5410, which requires private companies and school districts offering full-time online instruction to gain approval of their program from the Digital Learning Department in the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Not all of Washington's 295 school districts are providing students with access to online learning. Of the 223 districts which have reported their online policies and procedures, 203 are offering online learning courses, but 20 are not.

In 2011, lawmakers passed SSB 5392 to require all school districts in Washington to teach students how to “integrate technology literacy and fluency.” Lawmakers also passed ESHB 2065, which requires school districts to give students high school credit for completing approved online courses, but it also reduces by 15% the state basic education grant for students enrolled in full-time online schools for the 2011–12 and 2012–13 school years. This reduction may violate the state constitution, as students choosing to be educated through online schools will receive less education funding than students choosing traditional schools.

The factors defined by ESHB 2065 for finding 15% in savings focus on the staffing “inputs” of the programs, not upon their “outputs,” or their results for students. Online schools making efficient use of staff and online tools are likely to be penalized, even if their student results are exemplary. Overstaffed programs may be saved from the most severe cuts, even if their student results are poor.

A better method of providing funding to full-time online schools would be to reward those that raise student achievement and penalize those that do not, by making funding based upon demonstrating student achievement growth, rather than upon demonstrating the ability to staff a program.

Charter schools, and a small number of other innovative public schools, are delivering instruction to students by using “blended” and “hybrid” online learning curricula. In 2011 the Legislature enacted ESSHB 1546, the Innovation Schools and Zones Act. This law allows entrepreneurial educators and school communities to restructure school operations to offer blended online learning opportunities to students across Washington.

Digital Learning Now! is a national initiative to advance policies which accelerate student access to digital learning in public education. Led by former governors Jeb Bush (R–Fla.) and Bob Wise (D–W. Va.), this initiative consulted over 50 experts in the field of online education in order to identify “Ten Elements of High Quality Digital Learning.” These Ten Elements are designed to help lawmakers integrate current and future technological innovations into public education.

Washington law already incorporates some of the goals of these Ten Elements, which are listed below. For the complete list of recommended policies and a brief analysis of how closely Washington law meets these goals, see our full Policy Brief.

1. Student Eligibility: All students are digital learners.
2. Student Access: All students have access to high-quality digital content and online courses.
3. Personalized Learning: All students can customize their education using digital content through an approved provider.
4. Advancement: Students progress based on demonstrated competency.
5. Content: Digital content, instructional materials, and online and blended learning courses are high quality.
6. Instruction: Digital instruction and teachers are high quality.
7. Providers: All students have access to multiple high-quality providers.
8. Assessment and Accountability: Student learning is the metric for evaluating the quality of content and instruction.
9. Funding: Funding creates incentives for performance, options and innovation.
10. Delivery: Infrastructure supports digital learning.

Liv Finne is Director of the Center for Education at Washington Policy Center, a non-partisan independent policy research organization in Washington state. Nothing here should be construed as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any legislation before any legislative body.