Online Learning: Virtual Schools Accountability Issues Brief

Online learning has become an integral part of the K-12 educational landscape. Demand for online learning and blended learning continues to grow across the nation. *i*NACOL supports each K-12 students' right to choose an online or blended learning course or program that meets their needs to prepare them for college and careers.

Research shows that many students do not have a full range of course options:
1) Online learning expands options;
2) All of the research shows it is "as good or better" than traditional face-to-face when based on student achievement;
3) Online learning "Improves teaching;" This is consistent with findings in higher education faculty doing online learning. When the same instructor teaches face-to-face and is trained to teach online; the teacher is given a whole new set of skills, a new instructional model, and using online resources to collaborate, individualize instruction and better meet students' needs. One study shows the largest correlation of positive increases in student achievement is when the same teacher who already knows the content teaches the same class online.

Virtual schools are complete educational organizations that deliver online courses and provide teachers to deliver instruction and assessment. The course content must be aligned to the Virginia Standards of Learning and virtual schools follow the same accountability provisions as public schools in each state.

Better Assurance of Quality and Accountability

As online learning continues to expand, we see a need for stronger accountability and better indicators to demonstrate quality in online learning and virtual schools. K-12 education has addressed quality issues mostly via inputs. Inputs provide helpful criteria and indicate critical success factors in instructional design and managing programs—but they don't tell us what works and is effective based on outcomes.

Examples of inputs-based quality assurance include policymakers requiring courses meet state content standards, textbooks going through extensive reviews, and requiring teachers to have licenses and receive professional

development. However, the problem is that in many cases these inputs have not been correlated with improved student outcomes. In October 2012, iNACOL published, *Measuring Quality From Inputs to Outcomes: Creating Student Learning Performance Metrics and Quality Assurance for Online Schools.* This report looks at how Virtual Schools would collect additional performance indicators to monitor progress and determine competency. We suggest virtual schools collect transparent data using five student outcomes indicators – baseline proficiency, monitor specific competency on individual student growth, calculate graduation rates, assess career-college readiness, and close the achievement gap. These multiple outcomes-based measures should be explored more closely when moving toward quality assurance and evaluations of virtual schools.

These recommendations present a holistic set of metrics creating and implementing outcomes-based performance measures for online schools. Implementation would involve the following critical success factors:

- Individual student performance should be measured and reported transparently based on standards in virtual schools.
  - Baseline levels of student knowledge needs to be assessed upon entry and exit to programs; measuring individual student growth is key to holding virtual school programs accountable for meeting their missions.
- Online schools must be provided student performance data and prior student records on academic history from the school the student previously attended, in a timely manner.
- Data systems must be upgraded and better aligned to meet the challenge of collecting, reporting, and passing data between schools and the state.
- Online school data should be disaggregated separately from other schools or districts to assure accurate data.
- Student fidelity toward academic goals, and reasons for mobility, must be addressed in data systems for virtual schools.

We recommend new "systems of assessment" as a holistic model should provide multiple measures at multiple points in the year, including measurement of academic standards, complex skills and dispositions for virtual schools:

- Baseline data upon entry through adaptive assessments showing gaps or mastery of proficiency across the K-12 continuum;
- Ongoing performance-based assessments where students demonstrate mastery exhibited in their work products;
- Formative assessments reflecting student proficiency and skills; and
- Summative "end of unit" or "end of course" validating assessments to provide a comprehensive set of data and information to understand student learning outcomes and growth trajectories.

These are recommendations we believe state education leaders should consider for outcomes-based quality assurance and to improve accountability for full-time online schools.

Important Issues to Consider in Creating Student-Centered Learning and Improved Accountability

ISSUE 1: Move Away from Seat-Time to Competency-Based Learning.

Our students are not served well by a system that assumes all students learn at the same pace and in the same way. Some students need additional time to master content and complete a course; others can successfully accelerate through certain courses and learning progressions. Digital learning allows teachers to personalize instruction using engaging content resources, supports students in progressions at their own pace as they demonstrate mastery and provide technology tools to enhance instruction.

Competency-based learning is the foundation of top performing educational systems around the world; yet, large parts of the U.S. K-12 educational system fund schools and award credit based upon the amount of time a student sits, enabling less than proficient students to continue to advance (180 days is a norm). Focusing on competency education is an important foundation of transforming the system around student-centered learning and personalization.

Seat-time regulations are a barrier for online and blended learning programs that seek to enable any time, any place, any pace learning. Competency-based learning is critical for changing from a time-based system to a learner-centered system. Competency-based learning requires a redesign of the educational system around learning, and also enables customized learning for students.

Recommendations:

- Develop regulations to provide flexibility and move away from seat-time regulations to enable competency-based education models.

- Update regulations to enable competency education and credit flexibility for all schools (online, blended and traditional).

ISSUE 2: Every student should have access to a full range of online and blended learning opportunities.

Many students lack access to the courses and teachers they need. Students in rural areas and districts often cannot hire and retain qualified teachers, particularly in science and mathematics. Online learning can help address these gaps. School districts regularly utilize online learning opportunities to address gaps in their school offerings, provide course and teacher access not otherwise

available to their students, enable opportunities for students to earn or recover course credits to help students graduate on time.

Numerous barriers are prohibiting some students from having access to the online courses and the programs they need to prepare them for college or careers.

Recommendations:

- Remove rules that deny student access to quality learning opportunities and impede promising online and blended learning models, such as enrollment caps on programs.

ISSUE 3: Provide Equitable and Sustainable Funding to Support Online and Blended Learning.

Funding models should enable students to access online and blended learning opportunities no matter where they live. Funding for education is often disparate depending on where a student lives. This creates inequities and limited access to quality learning opportunities. Inadequate funding can threaten quality programs and models showing real promise in supporting student learning.

While there are some built-in efficiencies associated with online and blended learning, the investments necessary around quality (teaching, student support, content development, technology, program management, quality assurance, to name a few) are real and should not be done "on the cheap."

Online and blended learning allow creation of learning and teaching contexts in which students are able to learn "at any time, any place, any path, and any pace." Funding systems and levels should support student success at levels that are sustainable, fair and reward success.

Online and blended learning allow creation of learning and teaching contexts in which students are able to learn "at any time, any place, any path, and any pace." Funding should reinforce competency-based learning and reward successful models. Florida, for example, reimburses for online courses through the Florida Virtual School using a completion-based funding formula, where a portion of funding is provided upon enrollment and the remaining funding is allocated only upon successful completion of the course and demonstrated competency. In 2011, Utah passed Senate Bill 65, which enacted new policy for funding individual online courses based on completion. A portion of payment is withheld, pending student successful completion. This ensures funding is tied to student learning outcomes.

Recommendations:

- Fund online and blended learning equitably with public educational choices across a state at a sustainable level;
- Enable funding to follow the student to the program and course level; and
- Reward success and consider performance-based funding models with appropriate performance metrics and success indicators.

Issue 4: Design outcomes-based accountability and oversight

The development of transparent data and outcomes-based quality indicators of educational programs is important. Equally important are accountability measures that allow evaluation of the effectiveness of course content, courses, and instructional programs based on student achievement and success. Courses and programs need transparent outcomes data to determine which models and materials are most effective.

Recommendations:

- Focus on outcomes-based accountability for student learning (increasing proficiency, individual student growth trajectories, closing the achievement gap, graduation rates, college and career readiness).

Issue 5: Increase access to excellent, effective teachers.

Districts often have difficulty finding and retaining professionals to lead initiatives in online and blended learning. Administrative leaders and teachers need professional and leadership training experiences and supports that allow them to plan, develop and implement effective online and blended learning environments.

Quality teaching is an invaluable part of student success. The new generation of teachers requires the methods, skills and tools necessary for teaching online and in blended learning environments. They will need to use approaches that support individualized instruction using data, digital content and tools consonant with collaborative, personalized, online, blended, and competency-based learning systems.

Recommendation:

- Support professional development for new learning models using anytime, anywhere online and blended learning.

ISSUE 6: **Ensure Access to Broadband and Improve Technology Infrastructure.**

Background:

Students deserve full access to online and blended learning resources and content to be college/career ready. Reliable and affordable broadband connectivity is critical to assure that access to digital content and tools are in place. Connectivity and access devices must be available to all students, no matter where they live. The United States lags behind many countries across the world in Internet access for all citizens -- technology infrastructure and connectivity are lacking -- especially in underserved communities and rural areas. Reliable broadband access is essential for many students to access quality online and blended learning opportunities.

Recommendations:

- Encourage statewide broadband infrastructure testing through the EducationSuperhighway with a free, broadband test for schools. State and federal policymakers need to understand the gaps and requirements for schools for digital learning and online assessments in broadband technology infrastructure for learning statewide.
- Support and implement recommendations in National Broadband Plan to build out broadband connectivity to enable student-centered, personalized, blended and online learning accessible anytime, anywhere, at school and at home.

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