

1 Million Public School Students Take Online Courses

As enrollments increase, administrators focus on accountability

Across the country, more administrators are launching online programs at their schools.

The North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL) estimates that more than 1 million K-12 students now participate in online courses, with more than two-thirds of public schools offering some form of online or blended instruction.

As online learning garners national attention, interested administrators know finding a solution requires due diligence, a weighty evaluation and sound decision making. Programs must be effective enough to win over skeptical parents and instructors. They also must mesh well with local, state and federal academic standards and be equipped with enough tools to monitor student progress effectively.

Given the effort it takes to start and successfully run an online program, some educators have questioned whether it's worth the time. But Susan Patrick, NACOL's president and CEO and a former U.S. Department of Education official who has spent the better part of her career championing the benefits of online instruction, says there is a common misconception among educators that online learning is more challenging than a traditional, face-to-face program.

In reality, she says, all courses — traditional and online — should be held to the same standards and accountability. Where it might take extra time to acclimate instructors, parents, students and other stakeholders to the online approach, Patrick says, when it comes to accountability, the best online programs have a leg up on traditional courses.

"Programs like K¹²... have more accountability than traditional schools because they are collecting the data on their students," says Patrick. "The data that's available when students are taking an online course is so much more comprehensive than the data and assessments collected in traditional environments."

All schools collect data on their students. But Patrick says online courses typically boast more "data collection points." Electronic systems give instructors the ability to constantly collect, catalogue and analyze student progress.

Administrators and teachers can see almost instantly how many hours students spend on assignments and what the turnaround time for projects is; they can view e-mail between teachers and students, run automated assessments to gauge student progress, offer immediate feedback and even deliver follow-up assessments to determine whether remediation is having its desired effect.

"There is a much stronger possible accountability environment in online learning than there is in face-to-face learning," says Patrick.

Accountability vs. Oversight

But having the right accountability measures in place does not guarantee success. Schools also have to cultivate oversight.

If, for example, the online program draws students from throughout the state, administrators have to think up front about how students are going to take state assessments at required participation rates so that they can report progress.

Questions of oversight become even more complex when administrators start thinking about how to evaluate part-time and supplemental online and blended-learning courses, says industry consultant John Watson.

Where full-time online learning programs often have the luxury of using student standardized test scores as a gauge for success, supplemental and part-time online learning courses — those most often used inside traditional brick-and-mortar schools — don't have that advantage.

"Putting together an online program is not a very simple thing to do," says Watson, whose Colorado firm, Evergreen Consulting Associates, has authored several nationally recognized reports on the topic.

"It's important for these types of programs to be up front and transparent about what they are doing online, to make sure that they've got quality standards in place and to show that they are meeting them both around course quality and teaching quality," says Watson.



Online programs should be able to demonstrate:

- How online courses meet local and state academic standards;
- That the courses were developed using best practices and established principles for quality online learning;
- How often teachers are in contact with students and parents;
- And what is required in terms of communication and participation.

"It's difficult to make blanket statements about how this will work because there are 50 states with 50 different systems," says Watson. The key for schools is to thoroughly evaluate their options and decide what solution best meets their needs.

A Question of Capacity

"One of the key issues is making sure that the organization responsible for accountability has the capacity to do that," explains Watson.

Administrators considering online learning programs should look to providers with a solid track record of performance and for programs that "have some scale to them," says Watson. "There is concern that any school could say, 'Hey, we can put an online program together' without thinking through all of the issues — the course content design, the instructional design, the teaching method, the way you support students when they are at a distance. All of these elements take a lot of thought, a level of expertise and time and resources."

Schools have to dedicate themselves to that level of commitment, or invest in a provider that has the capacity to do it for them.

"The main thing is ensuring good communication between the school and students and the parents," says Watson, who recommends schools hire a third-party consultant to conduct an independent evaluation of their online programs.

"It could be a full-blown evaluation; it could be surveys of students and parents. But you've got to have some feedback mechanism that's formal — that you can point to and say, 'Here's what students are happy with, here's what students are challenged by and here's how we can change going forward.' "

