

POLICY ISSUE BRIEF: ONLINE LEARNING

Issue at a Glance

Today's students have more online learning options than ever before, especially in high school. In the 2022–23 school year, approximately 5.2% of U.S. K–12 students (ages 5–17) received education at home through virtual schooling or homeschooling, an increase from 3.7% in 2018–19. Full virtual enrollment has fluctuated post-pandemic, but it remains a popular option for families, with about 2.5% of students in full-time virtual education and 3% taking all courses virtually, according to the Institute of Education Sciences.

Approximately 36 to 40 states have established full-time, tuition-free, publicly funded online schools open to students statewide, particularly following a significant increase in demand and policy support for virtual education. These virtual schools, often chartered, enable K–12 students to enroll regardless of their local school district.

School leaders recognize the advantages that online learning provides. The most commonly cited is an abundance of course options for students in remote areas where schools often lack the capacity to provide courses in limited demand. Students also cite the flexibility to complete coursework, allowing for after-school jobs and extracurricular activities.

Those advantages are accompanied by drawbacks. Ironically, course opportunities are often stymied in the smallest districts for the students most in need because of internet bandwidth constraints. And, unfortunately, when the student takes an online course, the school they would otherwise be attending suffers a budget reduction as a portion of a district's per-pupil expenditure flows to the provider of the online course. The school leader's most common and consistent concern, however, is their inability to lead the learning opportunities of students engaged in online courses outside the principal's purview. Instructional leaders seek a measure of oversight over content and process to ensure alignment with local curricula guidelines.

This concern has been addressed in recent years by the advent of blended learning models in which students engage in a combination of online and face-to-face learning opportunities throughout their coursework. Blended learning assumes a variety of forms, but all are motivated by a desire to optimize the efficiencies and advantages of online delivery and the mandate to renew genuine personalization in the context of online learning.

National Principals Association Position

- National Principals Association believes schools must continually seek to make learning personal by building better relationships within the school, opening the door to learning, and helping students build a more productive and profound relationship with ideas.
- Educational equity must be continually pursued and preserved, so no student lacks educational opportunity because of location or demography.
- Options for online learning are appropriate within the public school system as long as equal opportunity and access are ensured without discrimination on the basis of race, gender, socioeconomic status, or disability, and as long as accountability requirements are consistently applied.
- Technology-enhanced instruction has the capacity to engage students deeply in their work, connect them with countless resources, and allow them to collaborate across time and space.
- Student data should be used only for the purpose of informing education policy, practice, and research, and delivering educational services to students. Yet data privacy concerns should not preclude the adoption of online and blended learning.
- National Principals Association has separate policy issue briefs on [Artificial Intelligence](#) and [Digital Equity](#) with more specific recommendations and resources on related issues.

Recommendations for Federal Policymakers

- Support independent research and evaluation of virtual schools, particularly related to their ongoing performance, teacher quality, preparation, and professional development, in addition to how the for-profit schooling business model affects the quality of online learning experiences.
- Expand the Lifeline program and Universal Service Fund administered by the Federal Communications Commission to allow recipients to pay for broadband services and Wi-Fi connections in homes, buses, and libraries to address equitable accessibility and the “homework gap.”

Recommendations for State Policymakers

- Support independent research and evaluation of virtual schools, particularly related to their ongoing performance, teacher quality, preparation, and professional development, in addition to how the for-profit schooling business model affects the quality of online learning experiences.
- Expand the Lifeline program and Universal Service Fund administered by the Federal Communications Commission to allow recipients to pay for broadband services and Wi-Fi connections in homes, buses, and libraries to address equitable accessibility and the “homework gap.”

Recommendations for District Leaders

- Create funding systems that do not reduce a school's per-pupil funding when a student takes an online course.
- Use Title IV funding under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to support the effective use of technology, including professional learning opportunities for principals and teachers, efforts to build technological capacity and broadband infrastructure, blended learning projects, and distance learning programs.

Recommendations for School Leaders

- Familiarize yourself with the various models of blended learning and their potential to maximize learning opportunities.
- Audit your school's current course limitations and explore online learning options to fill curricular gaps and enhance existing offerings.
- Seek out National Principals Association's professional learning resources and Leadership Networks to build your understanding of what currently works in schools using online and blended learning.