Research Brief

Online Courses

Question: What are examples of policies about online courses? What should be considered when developing such policies?

Summary of Findings:

School districts in the United States are more frequently incorporating online courses in their high school program. For many districts the use of online courses is one way to supplement their curricular offerings and provide a rich set of curricular choices for students, particularly in a time of stable or diminishing resources.

A study funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation (2006) (http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/survey/K-12_06) found that:
- Almost 2/3 of school districts offered online courses;
- Over 60% of districts anticipate that online enrollment will grow;
- Online learning met the needs of a range of students including those who need extra help and those who want to take more advanced courses;
- Online offerings typically include multiple formats including fully online or a blended courses (part online, part face-to-face);
- Small rural school districts were most supportive of online courses and often are at the forefront of online course development;
- Concerns about the quality of online courses, funding and teacher development for working in an online environment were expressed.
- Some states, notably Florida and Michigan, include online courses in recently adopted school reform policies. Michigan requires every high school graduate to complete one online course.

Types of Online Courses

There are several types of online courses available to students:

Fully Online – There are many fully online courses available from a variety of vendors. Several states created virtual high schools that provide a rich selection of courses. Such schools are often free to residents but charge non-residents tuition. Some districts have begun to provide online courses within their own district in order to offer a course at several sites where limited enrollment might have led to cancellation of the course.

Blended Courses – These courses have a mix of online and face-to-face instruction. Typically, they are housed within a single district, or even a single high school.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Courses

As with most initiatives, online courses have both advantages and disadvantages. Those cited most frequently include:

Advantages
- Students can work at their own pace, taking time when needed or moving more quickly.
- Students have greater flexibility in their schedule and can arrange courses around other responsibilities.
- Students often have access to courses and opportunities that may not be available in their own school.
- Some students may be able to complete graduation requirements earlier than in a traditional setting.
- Online courses incorporate greater variety of media and respond to a variety of learning styles.

Disadvantages
- There is evidence that some courses (writing and math) may be more difficult without the ability to readily interact with a teacher.
- Taking too many online courses may limit a student's interaction with other students and access to school activities.
- Taking courses from schools that are not accredited may impede students' ability to get into college.
- Some people find the flexibility challenging and struggle to complete work when there isn't an actual teacher to provide daily encouragement.
- Teachers who teach online or blended courses require professional development on ways to mange the online environment.
- If districts design their own courses, they require personnel skilled in online course development and the pedagogy of online learning.

Considerations When Developing a Policy About Online Courses

A review of the policies from several school districts identified the following considerations when developing a policy about online courses.

- Establish guidelines for participation
- Identify the types of courses that are acceptable and under what circumstances, including number of credits that may be earned.
- Include an "Acceptable Use Policy" about use of technology.
- Identify acceptable district-approved courses.
- Assure that acceptable courses come from accredited online high schools.
- Be clear about the application and approval process.
- Assure clarity about grading scales and how grades will be included in student grade point averages and class rank.
- Identify other district policies (e.g., academic honesty, school calendars) that apply.
- Also identify policies that may not apply (e.g., compulsory attendance).

Examples of District Policies on Online Courses

Several districts provide information on their policies and processes about the use of online courses.

Traverse City Area Public Schools (MI) - www.tcaps.net/StudentPrograms/OnlinePrograms/tabid/792/Default.aspx

Pleasant Valley (PA) School District (Policy 118.1) – www.psba.org/districts_policies/p/484/plea-contents.asp#100

Riverside Unified School District (CA) (Virtual High School) - www.rusd.k12.ca.us/schools/SchoolIntro.aspx?sub=ss&cl=455

Menominee Area Schools (WI) - http://msd.k12.wi.us/node/124

Unified School District of Antigo (WI) - http://www.antigo.k12.wi.us/virtualschool/usda_virtual_school_policy2.html

Examples of Vendors of Online High School Courses

Public Online High Schools – Many states provide public online high schools. These schools are generally tuition free for residents of the state and generally meet basic state school requirements. Most are regionally accredited.

Private Online High Schools – These schools are private and vary in terms of quality. Courses from private online high schools are typically the most expensive option. Many private schools are regionally accredited. Students pay tuition for enrolling in courses.

Online Charter Schools – Charter schools provide an option in many states. Depending on the charter, they may only accept students within the school's boundaries. Some Online Charter Schools focus on particular demographics (e.g., dropouts or gifted students). Because these charter schools are state schools they often do not charge tuition for residents. As with other types of online schools it is important to check on the accreditation status of the school.

High Quality Online High Schools

A study of "quality" online high school programs (Roblyer, 2006) identified five schools with better than average pass rates and very low drop-out rates. They include:

- Florida Virtual School (www.flvs.net)
- Idaho Digital Learning Academy (http://idla.blackboard.com)
- Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy (www.ivhs.org)
- Michigan Virtual High School (www.mivhs.org)
- Virtual High School, Inc. (www.govhs.org) - The Virtual High School, Inc. is a non-profit virtual high school that provides on-line courses to high schools across the country.

Other Relevant Research Briefs:

Virtual High Schools (available at www.principalspartnership.com)

Research Brief

Online Resources:

National Conference of State Legislatures (2007). El-Learning is everywhere. Retrieved February 6, 2009 from
http://www.bookrags.com/highbeam/e-learning-is-everywheretrends-and-hb/

New students are logging in to virtual schools.(2006). *T.H.E. Journal (Technology Horizons in Education*), 33.17, 8.
http://www.thejournal.com/the/magazine/archives/

Sloan Consortium (2006). K–12 Online Learning: A Survey of U.S. School District Administrators
http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/survey/K-12_06

Stone, A. (2008). The holistic model for blended learning: A new model for K – 12 district-level cyber schools. *International Journal of Information and Communication Technology Education, 4.*. Retrieved February 2, 2009 from
http://www.infosci-online.com/downloadPDF/pdf/ITJ3992_3hdJKC9eQb.pdf