

2013

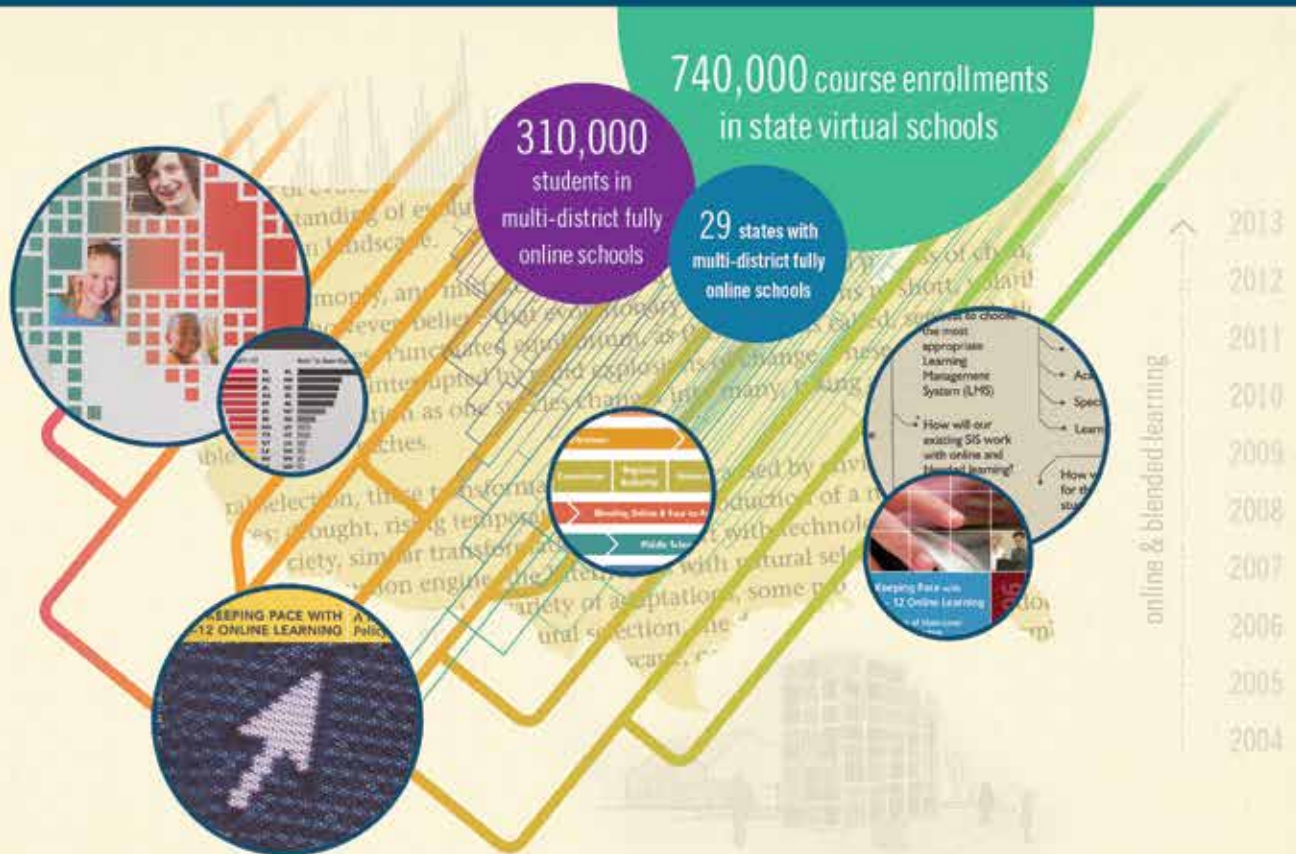
10 YEAR ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

# KEEPING PACE

WITH K-12  
ONLINE &  
BLENDED

LEARNING

An Annual Review of Policy and Practice



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## Private / Independent schools

Private schools, whether independent or associated with another organization, are beginning to adopt online and blended courses, and some online and blended private school consortia are being created as well. Although *Keeping Pace* has in the past been focused primarily on public schools, the ways in which private schools are embracing online and blended learning is increasingly of interest, and we believe that the private and public sectors can learn from one another.

Public K-12 education has generally been slower than post-secondary institutions to embrace online and blended learning. In addition, different states and regions of the country have tended to adopt online and blended learning faster than others, with the south and west generally moving more quickly into online learning than the Middle Atlantic and New England states. Private schools appear generally to have been slower to adopt than many public schools, with interest and adoptions now expanding rapidly, but from a base that is perhaps five years behind the public sector.

We believe that there are several reasons why private schools have generally been slower than public schools to embrace blended and online learning. First is the perceived need, or a lack of it. We believe that public schools in the middle Atlantic and New England states have been slower to adopt blended and online learning than the southern states, in part, because student performance in the northern states has generally been better. States with poorer performance were more likely to experiment than states that were generally satisfied with their outcomes. This dynamic likely extends to private schools. Many private schools have felt that students and parents were largely satisfied with their schools, so pressure to innovate and experiment was light.

Second, some online programs in public schools have evolved from distance education offerings, particularly in Midwestern and Western states. These include, for example, the North Dakota Center for Distance Education and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, which has a program for high school students. Private schools have not typically had such distance education programs to build from.

Third, in many private schools, and especially independent schools, parents and students place a particularly high value on the personal connection between teachers and students, and between the school and the family. The perception that online courses lack the same level of personal connection has slowed their acceptance, and online learning pioneers have had to demonstrate high levels of teacher involvement in online courses—much as they have done in the public school sector.

The slow move into online and blended learning is changing, as more students and families are coming to accept, and expect, online and blended learning options. In some cases the adoptions have come recently and rapidly, and in other cases they have been building for several years. Examples and characteristics of these developments include the following:

- The National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) is reporting on its member schools' digital learning options, with case studies on blended learning, flipped classrooms, the use of Khan Academy, and other examples.<sup>19</sup> As is the case with public schools, some of these examples are perhaps better termed web-enhanced or technology-rich classrooms and schools instead of true blended learning, but other cases are certainly blended or online learning. A conference that was offered for the first time in early 2013, the Online Education Symposium for Independent Schools (OESIS), attracted hundreds of attendees and in SY 2013-14 is now offering two conferences, split between the east and west coasts.
- *The 2013-2014 Trendbook Overview*,<sup>20</sup> published by NAIS, says this about the “education technology outlook:”

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.nais.org/Articles/SiteAssets/Pages/Stories-of-Excellence/NAIS-Excellence-Booklet-0924.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.nais.org/Bookstore/Documents/2013TrendbookExcerpt.pdf>

- “Ubiquitous access to mobile devices is creating new opportunities for schools.
- Students in online courses report improved learning outcomes.
- Students report high levels of engagement with flipped learning.
- Teachers have been integrating new material into lessons with “augmented reality,” using handheld devices to layer information about a specific location with information or data from virtual resources.”

The first three of these statements have been made about many public schools as well as private.

- The Global Online Academy is a consortium of 10 founding independent schools, and more than 20 member schools, that create and share online courses. Most courses are electives, and the consortium model is similar to the approach used by the VHS Collaborative—which also has dozens of private schools.
- The Virtual Independent School Network (VISNET) is a consortium of schools in North Carolina, Virginia, California, Florida, and elsewhere, designed to provide member schools with affordable resources, tools, and professional development opportunities to support innovative teaching and learning.
- Schools affiliated with religious institutions, such as Jewish Day Schools and Catholic schools, are looking to online and blended learning as a way to increase their course offerings and cut costs. For example, BOLD Day Schools, a cooperative project of the AJE Project, The AVI CHAI Foundation, and the Kohelet Foundation, aims to create demonstration proofs of successful blended learning in Jewish day schools. The Phaedrus Initiative seeks to “use technology to halt the disappearance of urban Catholic schools.”<sup>21</sup> Success is defined, in part, on reducing instructional costs.
- The fully online private schools that were begun by companies such as Connections and K12 Inc. are gaining traction. Examples of these are schools include the International Connections Academy and K12 International Academy, and also schools that use Connections and K12 Inc. content and technology in partnership with another organization, such as The Keystone School. In the early days of these schools it appeared that parents were generally less willing to pay for a private fully online school than for a private onsite school, but as online learning is increasingly accepted more parents see a private online school as a worthwhile opportunity, particularly for students who live in states that don’t allow fully online public schools.
- Because private schools are often smaller than their public counterparts, their course options may be limited compared to larger public schools. They may look to online courses to expand course offerings, and to blended learning to more efficiently manage teachers.

A few fully blended private schools have been created, and they are often using the same providers for courses and learning technologies as their public counterparts. For example, Cambridge Prep Academy in Florida is a small school with students in grades 6-12 who use courses from Florida Virtual School and teachers from both FLVS and Cambridge.

One of the key issues of interest to educators in private schools, particularly in parochial schools, is whether private school students are eligible to take any publicly funded online courses. Almost all students can take online courses by becoming public school students,<sup>22</sup> either as part-time or full-time public schools students, and nuance exists in the mechanisms by which states allow access to publicly funded courses or schools for private or homeschooled students. In Montana, for example, a student could enroll as a part-time student in a school district and take a Montana Digital Academy course. In doing so, however, the student would be

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.setonpartners.org/phaedrus-initiative-a2985>

<sup>22</sup> In the past some states had imposed a “prior public” requirement on students entering online schools, mandating that students entering online schools had been in the public school system previously, but most states that had this requirement have done away with it.



considered a public school student, and would be included in state reporting, making it difficult to quantify the number of private or homeschooled students taking publicly funded courses.

Further, some public programs provide online courses to students who are primarily non-public school students—but the courses are available only if parents pay for them. These become, effectively, private-pay options for non-public school students.

Still, there are a few states that explicitly allow private school students to take publicly funded online courses or otherwise subsidize online course options. These include:

- iLearnOhio authorizes courses and providers for K-12 students. Although most courses require a fee, there is limited funding for a one-time tuition waiver for Advanced Placement courses that is available to all students in Ohio, including private school and homeschooled students.
- Utah's Statewide Online Education Program makes online courses from multiple providers available to private school and homeschooled students free of charge.
- South Carolina's Virtual School Program makes supplemental online courses available for free to students in public and private schools, and homeschooled students.
- Florida allows students at most grade levels to take online courses for free if they are Florida residents, and they retain private school/student status.
- Georgia Virtual School received a funding allotment from the state for private and homeschooled students. Once the appropriation is exhausted students may pay \$250 per semester course. Vermont's state-supported supplemental courses are also available to private school students, although availability is limited.
- Alabama ACCESS, the state virtual school, makes supplemental online courses available to private school students as of SY 2013-14, but the student must pay for the courses.
- The Texas Virtual School Network allows students who attend private schools to enroll in online courses through their district of residence. These students must pay for TXVSN courses and they continue to be considered non-public school students.

In contrast, a few states, including Oklahoma and Nevada, explicitly deny students attending private schools the opportunity to take publicly funded online courses.

States, therefore, fall into one of three categories in terms of options for private and homeschooled students:

1. 21 states do not offer state-supported supplemental online courses for any students through either a state virtual school or a course choice program, so there are no public options for private and homeschooled students.
2. 8 states that offer state-supported supplemental online courses and explicitly make them available to private and homeschooled students.
3. The remaining states have some state-supported online course options and often have some mechanism by which private and homeschooled students can pay for online courses, but the mechanisms are based on specific schools or programs instead of on state policy.

These attributes of individual states are reviewed in each state profile.

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