

Maryland Policy Report

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ONLINE LEARNING LESSONS FOR MARYLAND

BY LINDSEY M. BURKE

WITH THE EXCEPTION OF AN OASIS HERE AND THERE, such as the Maryland Virtual School and a few district programs, the Old Line State's online learning landscape is barren.

Maryland's online learning environment is restrictive despite the many tangible benefits digital learning and hybrid schooling provide for students. Online learning helps create a customized educational experience for students, meets a wide spectrum of learning needs, ensures access to course content not available in a child's assigned school, and requires less spending per-pupil than in traditional public schools.

Although online learning options are currently limited, state policymakers can look around the country for inspiration to make Maryland a leader in virtual education. A three-part approach could propel Maryland from laggard to leader in the fast-growing online learning movement, by: freeing resources to allow funding to follow a child to the online learning provider of choice; expanding the Maryland Virtual School; and creating a favorable environment for online charter schools.

DEFINING THE ONLINE LEARNING LANDSCAPE

Policymakers should consider innovations unfolding in states and local school districts across the country for inspiration in expanding Maryland's online learning options. Whether through online charter schools, statewide supplemental options, or district programs, online learning transcends geographic barriers to knowledge, democratizing access to content. Maryland has many options for expanding virtual learning, and can take steps to ensure that children

are not confined by their zip code to the courses offered at their nearby public school.

District Online Learning Programs Online learning programs are proliferating across the country. Single district programs, typically run by a school district and open to students who reside within that district, are one of the fastest-growing options in the online learning landscape. The International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) stated that while several years ago most online learning expansion occurred at the state level and among statewide programs, now "the bulk of the activity is at the district level." Programs run by individual school districts often offer blended options, which use online learning supplemented with traditional instruction.¹

Blended or Hybrid Online Learning Options Many school districts now offer blended or hybrid online learning options. Blended programs combine online learning with face-to-face instruction, providing students with the benefit of ongoing accessibility to online content and instruction. For most students, blended learning courses are delivered at home or in school, and are delivered virtually through online lectures or programs. One or two days a week, students typically visit their physical school building and sit with their face-to-face instructor to work through any questions they have about the content they learned online. Often referred to as "flipping," blended learning means students work through new concepts that are delivered virtually, and come into school to work through problems and difficult concepts with their teacher. As iNACOL noted, "Even when the district is providing an online course with a

remote teacher, the local school often provides a computer lab, facilitator, or other on-site resources that may define the course as blended instead of fully online.”²

Online Charter Schools A growing number of students across the country are now enrolled in fully-online charter schools. These charter schools enroll students from across the state where they are located, without the enrollment barriers of traditional district boundaries. Full-time online charters are growing in popularity, and allow a student to complete all coursework online. As a charter school, online charters are public schools, but they operate as semi-autonomous schools that have more control over content, personnel decisions, and financial management than traditional public schools. For the online charter school student, that status means a more flexible learning environment, with self-paced learning options tailored to their unique learning needs.

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Supplemental Courses In contrast to full-time online options and blended programs, students in many states around the U.S. have access to supplemental courses that enable them to augment their traditional school experience or take courses not offered by their local public school. One example of a highly successful supplemental online learning option is offered through the Florida Virtual School (FLVS). FLVS had more than 250,000 course enrollments during the 2011–2012 school year, outpacing any other state virtual school in the country. Supplemental courses like those offered at FLVS allow students to fulfill remedial coursework needs, enroll in Advanced Placement courses not offered by their local school, take extracurricular courses, or otherwise supplement their traditional school experience.

In addition to district online programs, blended options, online charter schools, and supplemental online courses, many students are also taking advantage of statewide initiatives or state-led programs.

State Online Learning and State-led Programs

Through their respective departments of education, some states offer state-sponsored and funded state virtual schools or state-led programs. The largest virtual school in the country, the Florida Virtual School (FVS), is one such example. The state legislature established FVS as an

independent educational entity in 2000, and offers courses to students living anywhere in the Sunshine State. Like the Florida Virtual School, many state-led programs offer courses to students to supplement those offered through the public school system.

Statewide Initiatives Thirty states and Washington, D.C. offer statewide online learning programs.³ While statewide online options can be offered through a variety of sources, many are offered through online charter schools that operate statewide. As EdisonLearning founder and online learning expert John Chubb noted, states should be careful to ensure they are fostering competitive education markets as they work to expand virtual learning opportunities for students.

*Once states provide students the right to choose online education, whether full- or part- time, they face a new major obligation. Policymakers will need to determine who is eligible to provide online education. In making this determination, these leaders should be mindful of the importance of creating competitive markets for quality online education. In particular, that means ensuring that the markets guard against monopoly power. School districts should not control who competes for ‘their’ students. Nor should any new entity, such as a state-run virtual school—which states may want to support as one, among many, statewide providers... About half of the states that permit charter schools also allow them to offer education online, to varying portions of a state’s students. About 217,000 students now attend online charter schools, and provide at least a decade of evidence of what works and what doesn’t. The charter sector has also produced many of the more innovative models of blended instruction.*⁴

In all, millions of students across the country are being served by full-time and supplemental online learning options. States not offering robust online learning options are failing to harness the power of technology to increase educational opportunities for students. As the International Association for K-12 Online Learning noted, “the fact that tens of thousands of students are choosing a fully online school in the states that allow unfettered access to such schools suggests that states without such schools are not fully meeting the needs of their students.”⁵

EXAMINING SUCCESSFUL STATE AND LOCAL INITIATIVES AROUND THE COUNTRY

What are the states with the best online learning climates doing? For the leaders in the online learning movement, like Florida, Idaho, and Utah, expanding access to online learning means making education funding portable and encouraging expansion in all online sectors.

Florida The Sunshine State has authorized the operation of full-time online charter schools, and also requires

school districts to offer full-time and supplementary online options. Connections Academy and K12, Inc. also operate full-time state online schools in Florida, and during the 2010–2011 school year, the Florida Virtual School had more than 250,000 course enrollments.

The Florida Virtual School is unique because its state funding allocation is based on a “performance-based, demand-driven model.”⁶ FVS, which provides supplemental courses to public school, charter, private, and home-schooled students, receives state funding only after a student has completed a course. The Florida Virtual School was not designed to compete directly with traditional public schools. “Instead of offering a full-time program that drew students away from traditional settings, the program focused on filling curricular gaps and expanding access to additional courses and learning opportunities,” said Florida Virtual School chief executive officer Julie Young.⁷

The Florida Virtual School, in combination with the Sunshine State’s full-time online charter schools, district programs, and supplemental options provides an array of online learning opportunities for K-12 students. Online learning is one of the reasons the state has shot from the bottom of the academic achievement ladder to close to the top in a matter of a decade.⁸

Idaho Created in 2002, the Idaho Digital Learning Academy provides supplemental courses to students across the state. The academy partners with groups including the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), Boise State University, North Idaho College, and Blackboard to provide high quality course content to Idaho students.

Beginning in 2013, Idaho will also begin an ambitious project to create a 1:1 student-to-computer ratio, in which local school districts have flexibility to determine how the computers are used in the classroom and the policies that govern student use. The Idaho Department of Education notes that a laptop or mobile device “becomes the textbook in every classroom, the research tool in science, the word processor in English, and a way to engage students in learning like never before.”⁹

Utah In 2011, Utah passed a Statewide Online Education Program, which was quickly heralded as one of the most innovative in the country. Similar to the Florida Virtual School, state funding flows to online learning options based largely on successful course completion, rather than on seat time. Students can choose from public schools with online classes or online charter schools, and there is no cap on participation in the state.¹⁰ Up to 40 percent of state funding can be withheld from a provider until a student has completed a course.¹¹ Online learning expert Tom Vander Ark recently reported on a panel featuring students from Utah’s Open High School, the statewide virtual school. The students mentioned 10 major benefits of online learning:

- 1) I can work ahead if I’m able to.
- 2) I get nearly instant responses from my teachers.
- 3) I get personalized support when I need it.
- 4) My teachers are just as excited about online learning as I am.
- 5) I can do all my math for the week on one day if I want to.
- 6) I know how I’m doing; my grades are right on the screen.
- 7) My parents can see my work and grades.
- 8) My courses are more challenging.
- 9) I can keep up with my work when my family travels.
- 10) I can work around a busy schedule.¹²

Utah’s innovative Statewide Online Education Program makes state education funding portable, flowing to any school district or charter school across the state that offers online learning options. For students, this option means completely opening up access to a variety of content providers, ensuring access to coursework not offered at their tradi-

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tional high school, and the ability to enroll in any Advanced Placement course, remedial class, foreign language course, or STEM content they might need. In combination with the state-led Open High School, Utah has become a leader in providing online learning options to customize a student’s educational experience.

In addition to states, innovative school districts are also taking the lead on providing online learning options to students.

Aurora Public Schools, Aurora, Colorado Amid pressure from outside online learning programs, the Aurora, Colorado public school district began its own district online learning program in 2010. The school, which uses a self-paced model with curriculum content provided by online provider Education2020 (e2020),¹³ has grown from 50 to 230 full-time students. And twice a week, students are required to come into school to get academic help from teachers, in person. According to Randy Wood, principal of Aurora Public Schools (APS) Online:¹⁴

We have students coming to us for a variety of reasons. Whether it’s kids that just want to accelerate their high school learning, kids who are working full time to support their families or themselves, or students with medical conditions... Our teachers become more like counselors and mentors to these kids.¹⁵

Hillsboro Online Academy Other districts, such as the Hillsboro School District in Oregon, are gearing up to establish significant district online learning programs. “We knew we needed to meet the needs of our students. Students are changing, life is changing, and technology is much different than it was even a short time ago,”¹⁶ said Linda Harrington, the principal of the budding virtual school. According to *Education Week*, Hillsboro Online Academy has been working with the Portland and Beaverton school districts, which are also establishing online learning options, to pool resources to purchase curricula. Harrington notes that starting a district online learning program is completely “doable,” and is just a matter of “how fast you get it up and running.”¹⁷

SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL MODELS: CARPE DIEM, KHAN ACADEMY, AND ROCKETSHIP

Across the country, successful online learning models are taking root and proliferating, offering yet more successful models for Maryland policymakers

Carpe Diem Carpe Diem is a hybrid online charter school based in Yuma Arizona that includes a companion fully-online option. The public charter school utilizes a hybrid online model: computer-assisted instruction coupled with onsite coaches (teachers). Student learning is self-paced, with a focus on “subject mastery, not course completion.”¹⁸ Carpe Diem also offers a fully-online option that serves students in grades 7–12. Students complete all coursework online “anytime, anywhere,” and can access support centers located across the Arizona.

The Carpe Diem Campus enrolls 240 students in grades 6–12, and has become one of the top-performing schools in Arizona. Education researcher Matthew Ladner has tracked the progress of Carpe Diem, and noted:

A value added analysis of test scores found that they have the biggest gains in the state of Arizona. Their math results are really off the chart, with some grades averaging at the 98th percentile on Terra Nova.

Carpe Diem is a hybrid model school, rotating kids between self-paced instruction on the computer and classroom instruction. Their building is laid out with one large computer lab, with classroom space in the back. They had 240 students working on computers when I walked in, and you could have heard a pin drop. . . . Carpe Diem has successfully substituted technology for labor. . . . One math teacher, seven grade levels, 240 students, best value-added gains in the state, 90th plus percentile ranking, diverse student body. Check, check, check, check, and check!¹⁹

Khan Academy Students anywhere in the world have access to cutting-edge online lectures provided through Khan Academy, which provides “a free world-class education to anyone, anywhere.” Used by school districts, charter

schools, and individual classrooms, the Khan Academy connects teachers and students with an extensive video library, exercises, and assessments from any computer with an Internet connection.

Khan Academy houses more than 2,500 instructional videos on math, science, humanities, history, and even finance, breaking down concepts into “digestible chunks” that are approximately 10 minutes in length.

One of the keys to Khan Academy’s success is its use of data to generate instant feedback on student performance. Those data are used to motivate students, who earn badges for becoming proficient in a concept (determined by answering 10 questions correctly in a row). The badges give students “a sense of accomplishment and progress,” and provide instant feedback to students.²⁰

Teachers are provided real-time feedback on individual student performance as lessons progress, and students in the classroom use the data to identify peer “coaches.” According to June Kronholz, contributing editor at the journal *Education Next*, school districts across the country “are clamoring to include Khan Academy in their math curriculum.”²¹ Kronholz visited Khan and reported on her findings:

As youngsters completed one lesson, an online ‘knowledge map’ helped them plot their next step: finish the module on adding decimals, for example, and the map suggests moving next to place values, or to rounding whole numbers, or to any of four other options. . . . The classroom buzzed with activity, and amazingly, all the buzz was about math.²²

Rocketship Education Rocketship is a “national, non-profit elementary charter school network” that pioneered the hybrid online learning model. Rocketship online charter schools provide a full-time online learning experience for children in grades K-5.²³ Geared toward low-income children, Rocketship uses a combination of teacher coaches and online learning to create a customized learning experience for children. Rocketship utilizes learning labs and small group tutoring to create individualized instruction that is highly differentiated to meet the needs of each student.

Across the country, innovative states, school districts, and independent online learning start-ups are quickly moving to reframe the terms of educational opportunity. These advancements, and changes to state policy that make education funding portable, are freeing students from the geographic boundaries that once dictated their access to knowledge, and the quality of the course content they received. Maryland policymakers should take immediate steps to ensure today’s students have access to the endless educational opportunities that can be provided through online learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MARYLAND POLICYMAKERS

Create a favorable environment for online charter schools. On the whole, Maryland students are currently

unable to benefit from virtual charter schools, due to the state's prohibition against cyber-charter schools. While charter schools are permitted in Maryland, with more than 40 in operation throughout the state, the prohibition against cyber-charters means students do not have the opportunity to attend a full-time virtual school. Policymakers should overturn the prohibition against cyber charter schools to ensure students have the full spectrum of online learning options available to them.

Allow portability of funding. Following the lead of Baltimore, which implemented “Fair Student Funding” in 2008, Maryland policymakers should revise funding formulas to create backpack funding, allowing dollars to follow a child to any virtual school of their choice. Backpack funding, also known as weighted student funding, creates a decentralized system whereby funds are “attached” to students who can then take their share of education dollars directly to a public school of their choice.

Expand access to the Maryland Virtual School. Maryland policymakers should expand access to the Maryland Virtual School to include students in grades K–5 (in addition to students in grades 6–12 who are already served). Moreover, access to the Maryland Virtual School is currently limited to those students who can obtain the permission, and funding, of their assigned public school. The school board, along with the student's public school, determines whether the student's tuition at the MVS will be covered. Instead of hoping that a local public

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school will agree to allocate dollars to fund enrollment in the Maryland Virtual School, a request that creates an inherent conflict with the public school because it costs the school money, Maryland policymakers should change the funding formula so that state funding follows the student to the school of his or her choice, including the Maryland Virtual School.

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CONCLUSION

Maryland taxpayers currently spend \$13,700 per-pupil across the state. By contrast, the current average per-pupil expenditure for a student enrolled in an online charter school is \$6,400. Blended models inch closer to \$9,000 per pupil, but both models are far below that of what Maryland spends per-pupil in a traditional brick-and-mortar public school.²⁴

Maryland students have waited too long for greater access to school choice options, in particular to online learning. Access to a wide variety of Advanced Placement courses, remedial coursework for those students who need it, and the capacity to tailor a child's educational experience are among the many benefits of expanding access to online education. Through commonsense reforms, Maryland can not only improve the state's online learning environment, but also be a leader in the growing movement toward educational customization through online learning and school choice.

LINDSEY M. BURKE is a visiting fellow at the Maryland Public Policy Institute, and the Will Skillman Fellow in Education Policy at The Heritage Foundation, www.heritage.org.

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