Maryland Policy Report

EXPANDING ACCESS TO ONLINE LEARNING OPTIONS FOR MARYLAND STUDENTS

BY LINDSEY M. BURKE

ACROSS THE COUNTRY, more than 1.5 million middle and high school students are taking courses online. This online revolution in K-12 education is being seen across the country, from large cities to rural school districts, except in Maryland. Just a fraction of the estimated one million students taking courses online last year were Marylanders.

THE ONLINE LEARNING LANDSCAPE FROM COAST TO COAST

Access to online learning varies significantly from state to state. For students living in a state with robust online learning opportunities, this can mean access to a wide array of Advanced Placement courses, the flexibility to take courses that do not fit in the school schedule, remedial coursework, the freedom to learn at students' own pace and time, and the ability to take courses not offered at the local public or private school. Access to online learning liberates students from the confines of geography and time, and helps create a customized education best suited to a student's unique needs. As Clayton Christensen, author of *Disrupting Class*, writes:

> *Student-centric learning is the escape hatch from the temporal, lateral, physical, and hierarchical cells of standardization…Student-centric learning opens the door for students to learn in ways that match their intelligence types in the places and at the paces they prefer by combining content in customized sequences. …teachers can serve as professional learning coaches and content architects to help individual students progress — and they can be a guide on the side, not a sage on the stage.[1]*

Variation in online learning options can determine the quality of education available to a student in a state. A student who resides in Florida has access to the nation's largest online learning school, the Florida Virtual School (FVS), which had more than 220,000 course enrollments in the 2009-2010 school year. By contrast, just 633 course enrollments were registered through the Maryland Virtual School that same year.[2]

Policies governing access and funding are the primary reasons for the large discrepancy in online learning opportunities available to students in Maryland. While all Florida students, for example, have access to the FVS, a supplemental online learning program operating across Florida, students in Maryland must receive permission from their local public school to enroll in the limited course offerings at the Maryland Virtual School.[3]

Maryland has taken the first steps in creating online learning opportunities for students. But much more needs to be done to ensure every student has access to a customized education that is flexible, through online learning, to best meet their needs. Notably, Maryland has close to the fewest students taking online classes out of the 31 states that have state-led or statewide virtual schools.[4]

Across the county, the rapidly-growing online learning landscape illustrates what is possible for K-12 education in Maryland. As of 2011, full-time virtual schools exist in 27 states and Washington, D.C. Some 200,000 students attend full-time online schools, which allow students to take all or nearly all of their courses online. State-led virtual schools now exist in 39 states, and accounted for more than 450,000 course enrollments during the 2010-2011 school year. And approximately half of all school districts offer or are planning to offer online learning courses for students.[5]

There is an array of reforms Maryland policymakers should implement in order to move the Old Line State into the digital learning age. Maryland students should have expanded access to the Maryland Virtual School, the opportunity to enroll in an online charter school, and more options to supplement their existing school experience with online

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courses. If students in Florida, Kansas, Nevada, and North Carolina—along with hundreds of thousands of students in other states throughout the county—can have a customized K-12 education, there is no reason for Maryland families to expect any less.

MARYLAND'S EXISTING ONLINE LEARNING OPTIONS

The Maryland Virtual School. Since 2003, students in the Old Line State have been able to enroll in online courses through Maryland Virtual Learning Opportunities, which operates the Maryland Virtual School, a state-run, statewide online learning program.

Operated by the Maryland State Department of Education, the Maryland Virtual School is a supplemental online learning program that offers public school students in grades 6-12 the opportunity to take online courses not offered by their local public school. During the 2009-2010 school year, MVS had 633 course enrollments.[6]

While the Maryland Virtual School does not offer a high school degree, students who take courses online through MVS do receive high school credit. Once a student has received permission from their local school system and school principal to enroll in an MVS class, course credit for completed online classes is entered into the student's academic transcript at their public high school.[7] The cost of taking a course through the MVS varies, ranging between $450 and $600 on average, and is borne by the local school district.[8]

Policies governing the location from which students may take their online courses vary. While some Maryland Public Schools require students to be physically present in the public school building while taking an online course through the MVS, others permit students to take online courses off-site. Students can enroll in high school courses such as Algebra, biology, computer science, and foreign language classes, as well as SAT preparation courses. Students can also take Advanced Placement courses offered through the MVS.[9] The MVS offers approximately 60 courses, including 22 AP classes.[10]

District Online Learning Options. District online programs are open only to students who reside in the school district. These programs are operated by school districts, and offer varying degrees of access to online courses.

Baltimore County Public Schools operates a district online learning program and provides access to online courses when hiring an instructor is impractical for the limited number of participating students, to expand the type of classes available, or to help students who face scheduling conflicts. Baltimore County's district program has also greatly increased the availability of Advanced Placement courses to students. Twenty-seven schools is Baltimore County offered online courses to students during the 2009-2010 school year, enabling 139 students to choose from nearly 20 different online course offerings.[11]

Students residing in Frederick County, Maryland also have access to the Frederick County Virtual School, and can take online courses not offered at their traditional public school, including Advanced Placement courses. During the fall of the 2010-2011 school year, there were more than 400 course enrollments through the Frederick County Virtual School. In their report *The State of Online Learning in Maryland*, John Watson and Butch Gemin provide an anecdote from local Frederick County school teacher, Buddy Phillips. Phillips writes of the Frederick County Virtual School:

> *We're not constrained by geography or chronology…We do whatever it takes to support the student. One of our students is on the U.S. Junior Olympic team and is taking online courses while training in Lake Placid and even while competing in Russia.*[12]

In addition to Baltimore and Frederick Counties, other Maryland school districts, including Anne Arundel, Montgomery, Washington, and St. Mary's counties offer online learning options.

ONLINE CHARTER SCHOOLS—AN IMPORTANT STEP IN MARYLAND'S ONLINE FUTURE

Maryland's charter school law ranks 35th out of 41 states that allow charter schools to operate, earning the state a grade of "D" from the Center for Education Reform.[13] Part of the reason for the poor ranking is the approval process

for aspiring charter schools. School boards approve charter school applications, creating district-only authorizers, which leaves school districts with discretion as to whether or not to authorize competition for the traditional public schools. The Center for Education Reform reports that few charter schools currently operate outside of Baltimore City due to these limitations.

Once authorized, charter schools must also adhere to teachers' union requirements, which can conflict with a charter's mission or operating schedule that might include weekend classes or extended school days. Moreover, charter

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school teachers are required to join the education union or pay union dues, and are bound by the collective bargaining contract of the school district.[14]

While some 40 charter schools now operate throughout the state, the growth in charter schools in Maryland has not included the creation of online or virtual charter schools, as state law currently prohibits online charter schools from operating. A provision in Maryland charter school law that requires students to be physically present in school effectively excludes the creation of online charter schools.

"Seat Time" Regulations in the Old Line State. As former state schools superintendent Nancy S. Grasmick has noted, online learning allows students to learn "unconstrained by time and place."[15] Yet in most states, funding formulas used to allocate resources to public schools are determined in part by "seat time" regulations. Seat time funding formulas do not account for this geographical flexibility, and, as a result, can indirectly limit the operation of online charter schools. States like Florida have begun restructuring school funding formulas to be based on course completion, rather than seat time. Funding schools based on completion rather than seat time enables students to complete courses at their own pace while freeing online schools from the constraints of seat time requirements.[16]

GROWING ONLINE LEARNING IN MARYLAND

Maryland should strive to ensure every child in grades K-12 has access to full-time online learning options and supplemental coursework. The following reforms should be pursued to make Maryland a leader in providing online learning opportunities to students.

Expand Access to the Maryland Virtual School 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 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.

Permit Online Charters 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.

Make Funding Portable School funding formulas in Maryland operate the same as formulas in many other states—formulas direct funding to physical school buildings, instead of funding students. While many states still allocate resources through funding formulas that favor the old brick-and-mortar model of schooling, many others have begun to rethink how they fund education. In fact, the *Wall Street Journal* deemed 2011 "The Year of School

Money should follow a child to the school of their choice—public, private, charter, virtual or otherwise.

Choice" because 12 states and the District of Columbia either expanded or created entirely new school choice programs for students. At the heart of this seismic shift toward school choice is the idea that state education dollars should fund children instead of physical school buildings; money should follow a child to the school of their choice—public, private, charter, virtual or otherwise.

Maryland's funding formulas could be revised in several ways. First, 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.[17] During the 2008-2009 school year, Baltimore

implemented "Fair Student Funding," creating a weighted student formula that allows dollars to follow a child to the public school of their choice. Other districts throughout Maryland should follow Baltimore's lead and implement a weighted student formula to give students greater access to online learning options.

Utah recently passed a law permitting money to follow a child to the online provider—either public or private – of their choice. Utah has monetized educational services

Education savings accounts (ESAs) are one of the most innovative school choice options in use today.

at the course level, enabling high school students to take online courses while remaining enrolled in their local public school.[18]

Another option for expanding access to online learning, including private online learning providers, would be the creation of tuition tax credits for families. Personal-use tax credits allow parents to receive credits for education-related expenses, including private school tuition and other educational expenses, such as textbooks and transportation. Creating a personal-use tax credit option in Maryland would allow parents the opportunity to receive credits for the cost of online learning expenses, and would be a particular benefit to parents choosing a private online learning provider.

Education savings accounts (ESAs) are one of the most innovative school choice options in use today. ESAs, recently adopted in Arizona and under consideration in several other states across the country, can significantly facilitate access to online learning.

In Arizona, parents with special needs children who decide to remove their child from the public school system receive 90 percent of what the state would have spent on the child in the public school. That funding is deposited into the parents' education savings account, which parents can then use to pay for private school tuition, online learning, special education services and a variety of other education-related expenses. Notably, in Arizona, unused ESA funds can be rolled over from year to year, and can even be rolled into a 529 college savings account in the future. The flexibility to use funding from an ESA for a variety of

educational expenses makes this school choice option ideal for facilitating the growth of online learning and expanding access for Maryland students.

End Seat Time Regulations In most states, funding formulas used to allocate resources to public schools are determined by "seat time" regulations. Unfortunately, these seat time funding formulas do not account for the geographical flexibility of online learning. Maryland should follow the lead of states like Florida, which have begun restructuring school funding formulas to be based on course completion, rather than seat time.

CONCLUSION

The *Wall Street Journal* recently dubbed 2011 "The Year of School Choice." There is no reason Maryland students should be left behind. The seismic shift toward school choice – particularly toward online learning – represents a shift toward what has been deemed the democratization of access to content. Online learning empowers families to choose the best educational option for their child and to customize their child's educational experience to meet the child's unique learning needs. It can provide students with access to the best teachers in a field, teaching a wide variety of subjects. And most important, it ensures every child has the same chance at a bright educational future.

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