



Getting Students More Learning Time Online

Distance Education in Support of Expanded Learning Time in K-12 Schools

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Executive summary and introduction

Internal and external forces are simultaneously transforming elementary and secondary education. Complementary changes within the K-12 education community are sweeping schools in the form of one-to-one computing, online learning for students and teachers, and differentiated instruction. Students can choose from among schools, courses, and powerful educational tools and resources that never before existed. As a result, education for many students today bears little resemblance to their parents' education. This transformation is a positive change when students are connected with the tools and opportunities that meet their individual needs.

Local and national economic conditions, increasing ethnic and cultural diversity, and global forces are among the new and growing external pressures on American elementary and secondary schools. Schools alongside families form the foundation for successful participation in communities, the workforce, and our democracy, and their job has therefore grown more complex and challenging. American schools, when compared to other developed nations, appear to need new approaches that increase their capacity to prepare students academically.

Glossary of terms

Distance education: A broad term that encompasses forms of electronically mediated teaching and learning where instructors and students learn at different times and/or places through video, radio, web, and combination formats.

Online education: Teaching that occurs through digital, rather than analog, communication.

Virtual schools: Web-based distance education programs for K-12 students. These are also called cyber schools, cybercharters, electronic schools, and e-schools. Virtual schools offer full-time or supplemental programs, and in some cases both.

Blended learning: Courses or programs that combine face-to-face and distance experiences.

Policymakers and educators alike have proposed using expanded learning time in schools as a means to improve student academic performance. Expanded learning time seeks to increase student learning by lengthening the school day and/or year, or by supplementing class time with extracurricular activities for students schoolwide. Early demonstrations of expanded learning time initiatives show success in raising student achievement, but can pose challenges to families and community stakeholders by requiring increased investment in spending and resources.

Distance education can offer an approach to expanding school learning time that allows for more flexible and individualized learning through the application of new technologies.

Distance education changes the meaning of learning time by putting the learners themselves in control. Distance courses in effect “macromanage” time by specifying broad timelines for the course and its activities. Students become the micromanagers who make the specific decisions about how much time to spend on each activity and usually when to spend the time, as well. The self-managed, just-in-time nature of learning in a distance course enables learners to expand their learning as needed throughout the duration of the course with the teacher’s support and within his or her parameters.

Self-paced courses allow students who learn quickly to complete courses at a pace that remains engaging and avoids boredom before they move on to the next course. Flexible courses give students who need more time and practice to accomplish course objectives the built-in opportunity to take the time without the stigma of asking for an exception to a rigid calendar. Millions of K-12 students have taken control of their learning time in distance courses.¹ Distance education, as a learner-centered approach to education, is an efficient learning environment that focuses the teacher’s attention on the specific performance of individual students, guiding them as needed to achieve success.² The student-teacher relationship is immediate and personal.

Interest in K-12 distance education is undeniable. The number of elementary and secondary students taking online courses increased tenfold between 2001 and 2007, from about 200,000 to almost 2 million, and could easily reach several million by 2012.³ As of 2008, 44 states have either significant supplemental online learning programs, which are designed to add courses to the offerings available to students in their face-to-face schools, significant full-time programs in which students take most or all of their courses online, or both. Several of the states that do not have established K-12 online learning programs are in the planning stages of creating them.⁴

Online courses have also attracted teachers at a time when teacher retention in the profession is a critical national concern. Virtual schools regularly receive thousands of applications for each online teaching position. University teacher education programs have begun to respond to the inevitability of K-12 distance education by including online teaching competencies in their teacher education programs.⁵ States such as Georgia and Wisconsin have added online teaching requirements to their teacher certification systems.

Research and evaluation studies support the effectiveness of K-12 distance learning. Comprehensive reviews of research published in 2001 and 2005 showed that student academic performance in well-designed online courses is on average equivalent to performance in high-quality classroom-based courses.⁶ And course design, teaching and student outcomes all continue to improve. Virtual schools show that their students achieve academic standards on state achievement tests on a regular basis. In many cases, students who failed their required high school courses in traditional schools passed online courses based on the same standards.⁷ A study of algebra courses taught by state-certified teachers using the state curriculum in public traditional and virtual schools showed, for example, that students in both schools achieved at equivalent levels on a nationally normed exam.⁸

Virtual schools have developed online course designs that effectively educate students who have needs ranging from acceleration to credit recovery,⁹ including students with physical and learning disabilities.¹⁰ Leading virtual schools have documented Advanced Placement-taking rates and passing rates (scores of 3 or higher) that greatly exceed the state and national averages.¹¹ Virtual schools have helped students performing below basic level on prior state tests get back on track, moving from basic to proficient or advanced levels. And virtual school participation has been seen to narrow the state testing achievement gap for those in economically disadvantaged subgroups.¹²

Distance education also supports visions of 21st-century schooling. In an era of increased complexity of information, careers, and global relationships, groups such as the Partnership for 21st Century Skills advocate for new school and curriculum designs.¹³ These models emphasize skills focused on creative problem-solving, synthesizing, and integrating information; use of networks and workgroups; the importance of understanding multiple perspectives; and the ability to communicate effectively in multiple media. This vision requires both physical and virtual learning environments that focus on learner needs, essential skills, and community relationships in ways that are synergistic with distance education.

Online courses increase equitable access to quality educational opportunities by bringing flexibility to the course calendar, expanding the course catalog, and offering individualized instruction. Distance education for students who choose supplementary online courses is already a form of expanding learning time. Yet because these programs have been selectively deployed by state and local education agencies, it is available only to students who live in select areas; have access to the technology needed for online learning; and have the time, space, and instructional support needed to succeed in a relatively independent learning experience.

This report outlines the rationale for and steps toward making distance education courses uniformly available to expand school learning time. It also outlines some of the urgent needs in American education today and explains how school districts and educators can use K-12 distance education to address them.

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