

SREB

*Educational Technology
Cooperative*

Increasing Online Learning Options for K-12 Students:

The Role of School Districts

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Increasing Online Learning Options for K-12 Students:

The Role of School Districts

In many SREB states today, local public school districts are taking the lead in providing online learning options for their students. This is a new trend for districts and indicates that online learning enrollments are likely to continue to climb in the years ahead. Although the growth of online learning in SREB states was championed largely by state-run virtual schools, the popularity of online options among students and their parents has encouraged more than half of the public school districts in SREB states to offer their own online options.

Projections from the results of a survey conducted by SREB's Educational Technology Cooperative suggest that as many as three-quarters of all districts in the SREB region will offer online learning options by 2015. This report reveals the survey results and looks at the potential implications for SREB states and districts in the future.

What drives districts to offer online learning options? _____

Districts are using online learning as a way to compete for funding, attract and produce students who achieve at higher levels, and adapt to increasingly demanding state and federal mandates. When managed at the district level, online learning allows districts to:

- retain their local students and the associated funding rather than sending them to other schools, including state-run schools;
- support equity of access to instruction to ensure that even place-bound students and students in resource-challenged districts (such as small rural ones) can take a more challenging, rigorous and higher-quality curriculum;
- supplement their offerings to include credit recovery, remediation, student retention, Advanced Placement and dual enrollment college courses, and thereby promote better academic performance; and
- provide a non-traditional learning environment for students who have difficulty learning in a traditional face-to-face school or on a traditional schedule — for example, students in alternative schools or student athletes.

Details and Key Definitions of the Survey

Who participated? In summer 2011, SREB worked with representatives of its Educational Technology Cooperative, who come from the region's state departments of education and higher education agencies, to survey approximately 3,150 public school districts in the 16 SREB states. The purpose was to substantiate the growing anecdotal evidence that district-level online learning is increasing. (Charter schools and districts were not included in the survey.) Fifteen percent, or 476 districts, responded.

What is distance education? As quoted in the 2011 survey, the National Center for Education Statistics defined distance education courses as those “offered to elementary and secondary school students regularly enrolled in your district that [are] ... credit-granting; ... technology-delivered via audio, video (live or prerecorded), the Internet, or other computer-based technology (e.g., via district network); and have either (a) the instructor in a different location than the students and/or (b) the course content developed in, or delivered from, a different location than that of the students.”

What is online learning? Online learning is teacher-led education in which instruction and content are delivered primarily (or entirely) over the Internet.

What is blended learning? According to the Innosight Institute, learning is considered “blended” any time a student learns at least in part at a supervised, brick-and-mortar location away from home and at least in part through online delivery, with some element of student control over time, place, path and/or pace.

How many districts have online learning options? _____

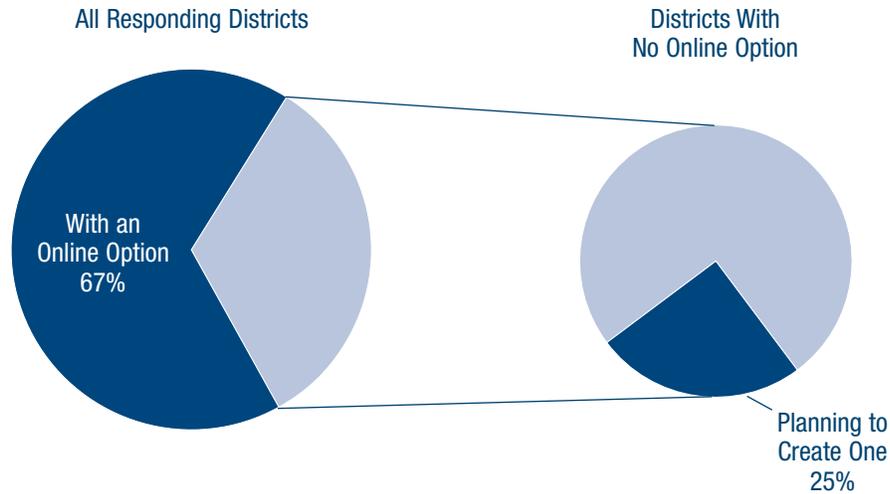
For the 2010-2011 school year, 320 of the 476 districts in SREB states that responded to the survey — or 67 percent — reported that they coordinated or provided online learning options of some type for their students. The range of options varied widely, from a select number of courses to fully online schools. The percentage of districts in SREB states engaged in online learning is higher than the national average: In November 2011, the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that just over half of districts nationwide — 55 percent — had students enrolled in distance education courses in the 2010-2011 school year. (Distance education includes online learning and a range of other instructional options. See the Box above for details.) Thus, survey responses indicate that district-level activity in online learning is high in SREB states, where state-level activity in online education has led the nation for some time.

The SREB survey also found that the number of districts offering online options is likely to increase in the coming years. Of the 156 districts reporting that they did not currently offer any online learning options, 40 said they were planning to do so. (See Figure 1.) If these responses accurately predict future offerings in the region, three out of four public school districts in SREB states will offer online learning options by 2015.

Figure 1

Percent of Responding Districts in SREB States With an Online Learning Option or Plans to Develop One, 2011

Of the 1/3 of responding districts without an online option, 1/4 reported plans to develop one.



Source: SREB survey of public school districts, 2011.

What school levels do districts serve with their online learning options? _____

Online options are available at all school levels in SREB states, but the survey responses indicated that the options are unevenly distributed — more than doubling as school level increases. Nearly one out of five districts reported offering online options for elementary students, just over two out of five offered them in the middle grades, and more than four out of five in high school. (See Figure 2.)

Of the 320 districts reporting online learning options:

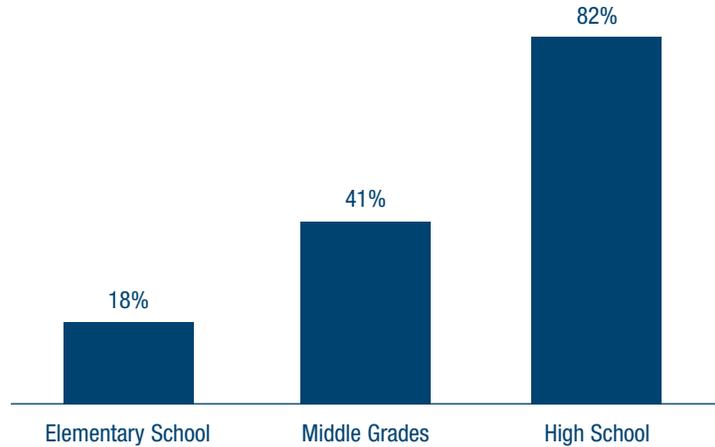
- 56 had an option at the elementary school level;
- 130 had an option at the middle grades level;
- 262 had an option at the high school level; and
- 51 districts (16 percent) had options at all three levels.

The fact that nearly 20 percent of districts reported having an online option available at the elementary school level is important, but it does not reveal the entire breadth of online learning in elementary school. Many other districts pointed out that some of their elementary schools are using online learning as a supplement to face-to-face instruction, an instructional strategy known

Figure 2

Percent of Responding Districts in SREB States With Online Learning Options, by School Level, 2011

More than 4/5 of the districts that responded that they have an online option had one at the high school level, while less than 1/5 had an option at the elementary school level.



Note: Percentages do not add to 100 percent because some districts offer online options at more than one school level.
Source: SREB survey of public school districts, 2011.

as blended learning, or for online field trips and other events. (See Box on Page 2 for more on blended learning.) The use of blended learning improves familiarity and experience with online learning. It also increases the potential demand for more online options in the future.

What types of online options do districts provide? _____

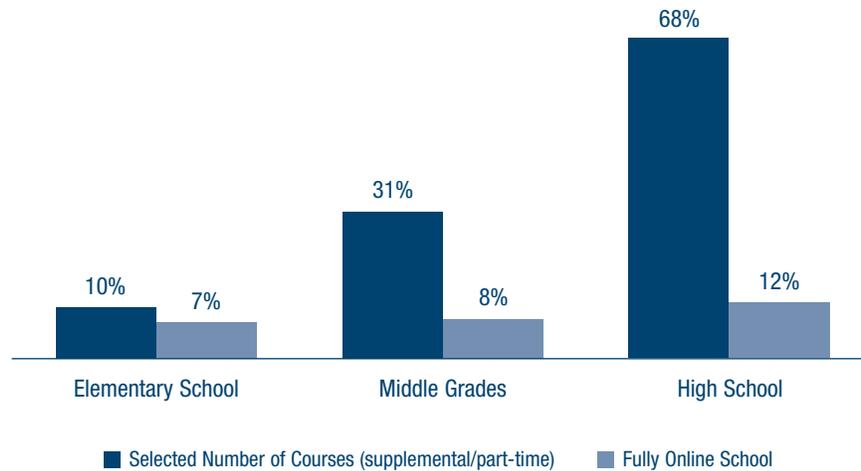
In general, online learning options fall into two major groups: part-time programs in which students enroll in selected online courses as supplemental courses; and full-time programs. The majority of district offerings are part-time, supplementary online options for students. (See Figure 3.) Such programs are less expensive and time-consuming for districts to implement and manage, compared with full-time programs.

While the percentage of districts offering fully online schools is small compared with those offering supplemental courses, it is relatively equal across all levels. Clearly, students at all school levels appear to desire fully online programs.

Figure 3

Percent of Responding Districts in SREB States Offering Selected Online Courses vs. Fully Online Schools, by School Level, 2011

More than twice as many high schools offered supplemental online learning options as middle grades schools.



Note: Percentages do not add to 100 percent because some districts offer online options at more than one school level.
Source: SREB survey of public school districts, 2011.

How do districts manage their online learning options?

The 67 percent of school districts that manage their own online learning options provide them in different ways. Just over one-third of districts administer their online learning options in-house, using either district or school personnel. Of 86 districts that contract for their online learning options through other online programs, most do so with the state-run virtual school in their state — but some do so with a virtual school in another state. As an example, some districts in Delaware (which does not have a state-run virtual school) contract with the Florida Virtual School (FLVS). Florida’s arrangement with Delaware is not unusual; the FLVS has such arrangements with many districts throughout the United States and even internationally.

In addition, 40 districts indicated that they have more than one arrangement for managing their online learning options, and 24 contract with a nonprofit or for-profit entity. Of those that contract with a nonprofit or for-profit entity, eight different companies were identified, including Apex and K12 (both for-profit), which manage 14 of the options identified by the districts. Finally, two districts indicated they are part of a consortium or network of districts that offers online instruction, and three said they partner with a local college or university.

What geographic types of districts offer online learning options? _____

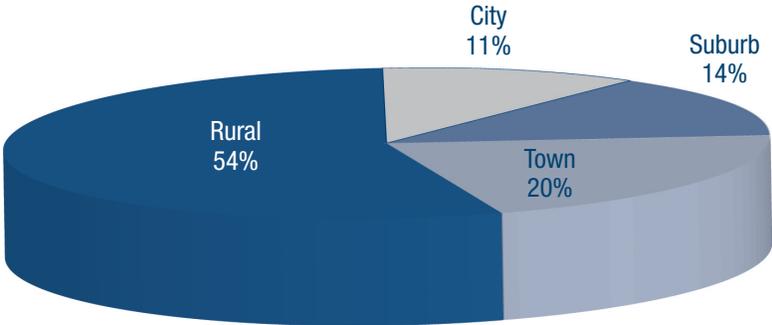
Looking at the distribution of online learning among the responding districts by geographic type (rural, town, suburb and city), more than 50 percent of districts offering online learning options were in rural areas, and 11 percent were in cities. (See Figure 4.) The data make it appear that rural districts may be ahead of others in offering online learning options. Yet this distribution of the responding districts is similar to the overall distribution of all districts in the region. The online options available are distributed geographically in the same ratio as districts are distributed throughout the SREB region. This indicates that online learning serves a broad and diverse range of districts, and it serves needs beyond simply providing courses to resource-challenged districts, regardless of their geographic locales.

While rural districts responded to the survey in greater numbers, the data show that a large percentage of city and suburban districts are providing online learning options. For example, while only 14 percent of all districts offering online learning are suburban, 77 percent of the suburban districts offer an online learning option. (See Figure 5.) It is noteworthy that two-thirds of rural schools make online options available to their students, even though they generally have smaller enrollments.

Figure 4

Geographic Distribution of Responding Districts in SREB States With Online Learning Options, 2011

About 3/4 of districts with online learning options were outside of urban/suburban areas.

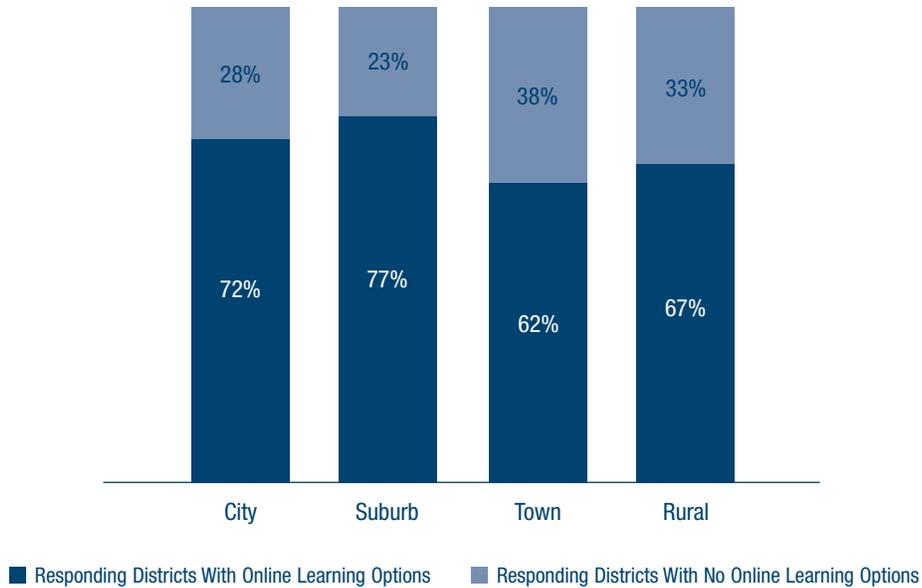


Note: Percentages do not add to 100 percent because some districts offer online options at more than one school level.
Source: SREB survey of public school districts, 2011.

Figure 5

Percent of Responding Districts in SREB States With and Without Online Learning Options, by Locale, 2011

A greater percentage of suburban districts provided online learning options to their students, compared with other geographic areas.



Sources: SREB survey of public school districts, 2011; and NCES, 2009-2010 school year.

State response to change and implications

Online learning enrollments will continue to grow, whether the options are administered by the state or the district. With tremendous enrollment growth in online learning over the past few years, district-level online learning may have become necessary because funding for many state-run virtual schools has not kept pace with demand and enrollment.

Increasingly, districts are the ones better able to respond to demand from students and parents for more and broader online learning options. The future growth of online learning enrollments will likely be in the elementary and the middle grades as students begin to take online courses earlier and at the high school level as districts and states begin to require online learning to earn a high school diploma.

New trends in education reform and changes in technology will have an effect on online learning growth as well. Implementation of the Common Core State Standards and other rigorous state standards, new assessment frameworks and tools, rapid innovation of tablet computers and textbook models, and increases in Internet access all mean that students, parents, teachers, administrators and policy-makers will need to monitor and manage policy and practice continuously over the next three to five years.

Even as public school districts in SREB states increasingly provide their own online learning options, they are doing so with little oversight or guidance from their state departments of education. The shift from state to district-level growth necessitates new roles for state-run virtual schools, state departments of education and districts. Some state-run virtual schools are now less often direct providers of online learning — and more often franchisors to and partners with districts.

To ensure that online learning is delivered in the most effective and efficient manner, state policy-makers need to address several issues:

- Recognize increased activity and administration at the district level.
- Adopt statewide policies and processes that support the increased demand for and provision of online options.
- Refine existing policy and develop new policy.

In addition to (or in lieu of) offering online options directly, state departments of education and/or state-run virtual schools may better serve their districts in other ways. This could include coordinating review and authorization of curricula and/or providers, negotiating volume pricing discounts, providing a quality course review process, and creating and maintaining a catalogue of online courses offered by districts in their state.

Conclusion

The results of this survey confirm that engagement in online learning is widespread and robust across all geographic and educational sectors of public K-12 education in the SREB region. Availability is proportionally distributed across all geographic types of districts, but the greatest use is by districts in cities and suburban locales.

Public school districts also are taking new ownership of their options by choosing to operate them, using their own personnel and resources. While districts are predominantly offering courses at the high school level, the number of districts offering options, including full programs, at the elementary and middle grades levels is noteworthy.

The SREB Educational Technology Cooperative has concluded that growth in district-level online learning is significant enough to warrant a follow-up survey of districts in SREB states in 2012 to monitor changes.

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