



K-12 Online Learning

Project Description

March 2011

BACKGROUND

The Minnesota Legislature approved online learning for kindergarten through twelfth-grade public school students in 2003. Online courses deliver interactive instruction from a teacher to a student by computer and may be combined with more traditional delivery methods such as frequent assessments and face-to-face instruction. Online learning allows students to continue or enhance their education through increased scheduling flexibility and access to course offerings beyond those available at students' local schools. Online courses offered through certified providers must be taught by Minnesota licensed teachers and meet or exceed state academic standards.

Minnesota public school students can enroll in online learning programs full or part time. Students enrolled full time in a "comprehensive" online learning school graduate with a diploma from that online school. Students may also enroll in selected online courses while still attending their local school at least half time. In this arrangement, known as "supplemental" online learning, students continue to attend classes and receive student services from the local school and ultimately graduate with a diploma from the local school.

As of December 2010, there were 24 online learning providers approved by the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE). Certified online learning providers include school districts, charter schools, and learning consortia or intermediate school districts. A school district need not be certified if it offers online courses only to its own enrolled students.

Enrollment in certified online learning programs increased from about 4,600 students in fiscal year 2007 to nearly 11,900 students in fiscal year 2010.

EVALUATION ISSUES

1. What online programs and courses are available to K-12 students and how are they offered?

2. What types of students enroll in online learning programs and courses? Why do they enroll in online programs, and are their expectations fulfilled?
3. To what extent does MDE ensure that online programs provide high quality and adequately rigorous courses? What is known about the effectiveness of online learning programs?
4. How do other states oversee online learning?

DISCUSSION

Our evaluation will focus on MDE's oversight of online learning programs. While we will not independently evaluate the curricula of online programs, we will use existing studies, interviews, and file reviews to assess the reasonableness of MDE's approval and curriculum review processes. We will also conduct a variety of surveys, including surveys of certified online learning providers and teachers, students currently enrolled in certified online programs (or their parents), and school district superintendents and charter school directors. To the extent possible, we will supplement these qualitative methods with analyses of state- and program-level data.

Our ability to analyze student demographics and academic performance will be hampered by MDE's data practices. While students enrolled full time in certified online learning programs can be identified as online learners, students attending certain types of supplemental programs cannot be isolated using MDE data. Consequently, our analysis of student records will be of a subset of online learning students that may not be representative of the entire population.

We plan to issue a report in July 2011. For more information, please contact Jo Vos, evaluation manager, at 651-296-1233 or jo.vos@state.mn.us.