



REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE

Online Learning

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Executive Summary

Online learning plays an important role in the state’s education landscape. Both students and schools benefit from online courses by:

- Allowing students to enroll in courses that are not available at their school;
- Ensuring that students are able to earn credits needed for graduation;
- Providing schools with a wide array of educational options to meet student needs;
- Providing students with an important alternative to traditional classrooms, assisting students who seek remediation or acceleration in their learning;
- Meeting the needs of students with different learning styles.

In school year 2014–15, nearly 31,000 Washington students enrolled in 72,787 semester online courses. The number of students greatly increased (19.3 percent) while the number of enrollments slightly increased from the previous year, indicating more students are taking a smaller number of courses (part-time). Additionally, both the number of districts and schools reporting online enrollments increased.

	2013–14	2014–15	Change
School districts with at least 1 online course enrollment	138*	152	+10.1%
Schools with at least 1 online course enrollment	266*	296	+11.3%
Students who took at least 1 online course	25,958*	30,971	+19.3%

* The methods used to extract enrollment data for the 2014–15 school year revealed these revised numbers for the 2013–14 school year.

In reports submitted in the 2013 and 2014 years, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) highlighted

concerns about student achievement in online courses. Based on the 2014–15 data, there is still cause for concern, however the differences in outcomes between online and non-online course enrollments has narrowed: online courses were successfully completed nearly 80 percent of the time, compared to 91 percent for non-online courses.

In 2014, OSPI made a significant change in the rules that govern the online provider approval process. The previous process focused largely on program “inputs”—policies, and procedures. With the rule revision, providers must now meet student achievement performance targets (“outputs”) to maintain their approved status. 2015 will provide OSPI with the opportunity to hone data reporting and gathering practices and create a baseline of outcomes-based accountability for approved online providers.

OSPI and the State Auditor’s Office will continue to closely monitor Alternative Learning Experiences (ALE) and online learning programs. This will help inform any future policy discussions in this area.

Background

In 2009 the Washington State Legislature created an accountability system for online learning (Substitute Senate Bill 5410, RCW [28A.250.005](#)). The Legislature directed the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to develop an online provider approval system and report annually on the state of online learning in Washington (RCW 28A.250.040) to include but not be limited to student demographics, course enrollment data, aggregated student course completion and passing rates, and activities and outcomes of course and provider approval reviews. This report provides information about online learning for the 2014–15 school year.

As requested, this report covers:

- The provider approval process and results
- Student demographics
- Student achievement (statewide assessment results and course performance)

Definitions

As defined in RCW 28A.250.010, an **online course** is one where:

- More than half of the course content is delivered electronically using the Internet or other computer-based methods, and
- More than half of the teaching is conducted from a remote location through an online course learning management system or other online or electronic tools.
- A certificated teacher has the primary responsibility for the student's instructional interaction. Instructional interaction between the teacher and the student includes, but is not limited to, direct instruction, review of assignments, assessment, testing, progress monitoring, and educational facilitation; and
- Students have access to the teacher synchronously, asynchronously, or both.

An **online school program** is “a school program that offers a sequential set of online courses or grade-level coursework that may be taken in a single school term or throughout the school year in a manner that could provide a full-time basic education program if so desired by the student” (RCW 28A.250.010).

Online course providers offer individual online courses (as defined above) and have the following characteristics:

- Online course providers must supply all of the following: course content, access to a learning management system, and online teachers.
- Online courses can be delivered to students at school as part of the regularly scheduled school day.
- Online courses can be delivered to students, in whole or in part, independently from a regular classroom schedule and must comply with RCW 28A.150.262 to qualify for state basic education funding as an Alternative Learning Experience (ALE) program.

This report uses the following terms to refer to students:

- **Headcount** measures each unique student served.
- A **course enrollment** refers to a single student enrolled in a single course for a single term. For example, a single high school student taking a full load of courses would have 10 (if the district offers five periods a day) or 12 course enrollments (if six periods are offered) for the school year.

Update Status

As of December 1, 2015, there are a total of 106 approved providers, including:

- 20 online course providers, approved via the full review approval pathway,
- 71 single district online school programs offered by 49 districts, and
- 15 multidistrict online school programs approved via the full review or affiliate program approval pathways

For a complete list of approved providers, see <https://digitallearning.k12.wa.us/approval/providers/>.

Online Learning Rule Changes

In October 2014, OSPI made substantial changes to the rules governing the online provider approval process. The previous system relied heavily on inputs-based reviews, as described above. The new system will continue to rely on reviews for *initial* approval, but will shift the focus of maintaining approval to how effectively the provider's courses and programs are serving the educational interests of Washington students.

The previous system's affiliate and single district approval mechanisms, which allow programs to seek OSPI approval without supplying a full review application, will remain, but persistence of all approved providers' approvals will be based on their meeting outcomes-based performance targets.

The new process incorporates corrective action plans in the event a provider does not meet the approval thresholds on their outcome data. The corrective action plans are intended to allow the provider to continue to serve students while making specific monitored plans for programmatic improvements.

In July 2015, OSPI filed a rule change to postpone the performance target accounting for online student outcomes on the state assessments from September 1, 2015 to September 1, 2016. In the interim year, the Digital Learning Department (DLD) will be working with the office of Assessment to better align these targets to outcomes anticipated from the Smarter Balanced assessments.

While providers are being held accountable to student success rate outcome data beginning in the 2015–16 school year, the DLD is working with online school programs, online course providers, student information and assessment teams to hone data reporting. It is

important to ensure the data considered in outcomes-based targets is accurate and consistently reported within state systems prior to any providers' being rescinded for failure to meet performance targets.

For more information about the approval performance targets, see http://digitalllearning.k12.wa.us/approval/process/performance_targets.php.

Rule Changes Affecting Next Year's Approval Processes

In the summer of 2015, Superintendent Dorn put forward a rule change that removed the accreditation requirement for district online school programs. Accreditation, while a valuable exercise in continuous self-improvement, has proven to be a financial barrier to some districts' compliance with online learning approval requirements. An emergency rule change was put into effect prior to the beginning of the school year; a permanent rule change went forward in October. Accreditation remains a prerequisite approval requirement for all private and district-run multidistrict online course providers participating in the full review approval process.

For more information about the approval system, see <http://digitalllearning.k12.wa.us/approval/process/>

Student and Course Totals

Districts report enrollment and course grade data to OSPI through CEDARS, and we query CEDARS for information about students who have taken online courses. The methods used to extract enrollment data for the 2014–15 school year revealed revised numbers for enrollment data for the 2013–14 school year.

According to district data submitted to the CEDARS DistrictStudent, SchoolStudent, StudentSchedule, CourseCatalog, StudentRace, and StudentPrograms tables, 30,971 students took at least one online course in 2014–15. This is a significant increase of 19.3 percent higher than the revised 2013–14 count of 25,958 students. In both cases, we are using a statewide total whereby a student is only counted once, even if the student was enrolled in multiple districts throughout the year.

Looking at the data in the StudentSchedule and CourseCatalog tables within CEDARS, students took approximately 75,381 K–12 online courses in 2014–15, a 3.6 percent increase from the 72,787 enrollments in the previous year. Note that students in Grades K–8 frequently have their courses reported in a single entry such as “third grade” or “elementary curriculum” rather than multiple courses broken out by subject area. A full-time elementary enrollment would show up in the data as a single course.

A total of 296 schools in 152 districts reported at least one online course enrollment, an 11.3 and 10.1 percent increase, respectively, over the revised 2013–14 figures of 266 schools in 138 districts.

See Table 2 for this data.

Table 2: CEDARS Online Activity by School Year

	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
Districts	123	130	138	152
Schools	215	227	266	296
Student Headcount	19,891	23,466	25,958	30,971
Course Enrollments	66,048	72,203	72,787	75,381

Student Demographics

Gender

Female students continue to be slightly over-represented among students taking online courses, as compared to the population of non-online K-12 students in the state. Female students made up 52.7 percent of the online student population in 2014-15 (from CEDARS), compared to 47.9 percent of the non-online student population.

The gender ratio had been moving closer to the state average throughout the four years prior to 2013-14. However, 2013-14 and 2014-15 both saw about a 1% increase over the prior year in the percentage of female students in online courses.

Ethnicity

As compared to the non-online student population, White students continue to be over-represented (at 69.3 percent) and Hispanic/Latino and Asian students continue to be under-represented (at 13.7 percent) amongst online students. Online students who are American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian, Black, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander and students attributed to two or more ethnicity groups are generally equally represented when compared to non-online students.

Transitional Bilingual

Of the 25,958 students listed in CEDARS as participating in an online course, 1.7 percent were marked as transitional bilingual students. This represents a slight decrease over the 2013-14 rate of 1.9 percent of transitional bilingual online students.

Special Education

Of the 25,958 students listed in CEDARS as participating in an online course, 8.2 percent were reported as students in special education. This figure is lower than the 14.9 percent of non-online students listed in special education, and lower than the 2013-14 rate of 9.4 percent of online students listed in special education. While the rates of increase and decrease over the last three years result in little overall change, the percent of special education students in online courses has grown since 2009-10.

Part-time Homeschooled Students

Students can enroll part-time in a public school district and can be homeschooled for the other part of their education. Parents who intend to home school their children must file a declaration of intent to provide home-based instruction. This is a distinct category apart from students who may have been homeschooled in the past, but are now enrolled full-

time in an online program, or from students who are enrolled full-time in an ALE program, yet complete their school work at home. The part-time homeschoolers discussed here are those who were, during the 2014–15 school year, involved in *both* an online course and a homeschool experience.

Of the 25,958 students listed in CEDARS as participating in an online course, 3.2 percent were reported as being enrolled part-time in a public school district in addition to being homeschooled, a 1 percent increase from part-time homeschool participation in 2013–14. In comparison, only 0.4 percent of non-online students were part-time homeschooled and part-time enrolled in the public school system.

Non-Resident Students

Based on the non-resident district data submitted to CEDARS, a total headcount of 11,056 students enrolled in an online course in a district other than their resident district. To do this, some students completely transferred to a non-resident district. In other cases, a student’s resident district contracted with a non-resident district to allow the student to split their coursework between two districts.

Seventy eight districts reported online enrollments of non-resident students in CEDARS. The bulk of the non-resident students (91.6 percent) were enrolled in the twelve districts reporting more than 100 non-resident online students; two districts reported more than 2000 non-resident online students.

In other words, a few districts with large programs—including Insight School of Washington, the WAVA programs, and Federal Way Internet Academy—accounted for the vast majority of non-resident online students.

Course Enrollment Patterns

Grade Level

Most online learning is happening at the high school level; high school students make up 78.4 percent of the online student population, up from 73 percent in 2013–14, and more in line with the 81.1 percent reported in 2012–13. K–8 students made up 21.6 percent, slightly up from the 20.7 percent of the online students reported in 2013–14. K–5 students, who tend to be full-time online learning students, made up 9 percent of the online student population, just down from 9.6 percent in 2013–14. Because CEDARS only tracks course enrollment patterns for high school students, we need to identify K–8 online students based on attendance in an online school. As a result, this method could undercount the number of K–8 online students.

Part-time and Full-time Course Enrollment Patterns

Most online students do not take all of their coursework online. Of the high school students who took online courses during the 2014–15 school year, 72.5 percent took fewer than five online courses, down from 74.0 percent in the 2013–14 school year. Only 11.96 percent of students took enough courses (10 or more) to be considered full-time for the entire school

year, down slightly from 12.1 percent in 2013–14 school year. This data is limited to high school students for which we have a grade history in CEDARS (22,940 students in total).

A **course** in this context refers to a single semester-long enrollment; year-long courses (Algebra 1, for example) are reported as two courses. The analysis of part-time and full-time enrollment is scoped to high school students only. Each high school course is reported in CEDARS as a distinct course. Full-time high school students take five or six courses per semester, or 10 or 12 courses for the school year. Students in Grades K–8, however, are likely to have their courses reported in a single entry (e.g., “elementary curriculum”). A full-time elementary enrollment would show up in the data as a single course. Examining only high school courses, we are better able to identify course-taking patterns.

Number of High School Online Courses Taken, 2014–15

Since 2010–11, the trend has been for more and more students to take fewer than 5 online courses per year. In 2014–15, 2744 students took 10 or more courses. This rate has held steady since 2010-11 when 2515 students took 10 or more courses. In other words, the growth in online learning has occurred largely amongst students taking only a handful of online courses per year.

Subjects

Of the 75,340 online course enrollments for which we have CEDARS subject area data in 2014–15, 15.1 percent were English Language Arts courses, 13.8 percent were math courses, 12.4 percent were physical, health and safety education courses, 10.6 percent were history courses, and 10 percent were science courses.

Student Achievement: Course Success Rates and Grades

CEDARS provides data on course completions and grades through “grade history” data submitted by school districts to OSPI. Grade histories are only submitted for students in grades 9–12, so course-based achievement data is not available for students in grades K–8.

In previous years, we have reported two statistics from this data set: a course completion rate and a course pass rate. Beginning with the 2013–14 school year, we will report a single number: a course success rate. Course success rate is one of the metrics that will be used to evaluate online providers as a part of the new OSPI provider approval monitoring process.

As defined in WAC 392-502-010:

“Course success rate” is the percentage of online enrollments where the student earned one of the following grades for the course: A, A-, B+, B, B-, C+, C, C-, D+, D, P, CR, S. Courses marked E, F, N, NC, U, or W are not considered successful outcomes.

The course success rate offers several advantages over the course completion and passing rates that were reported in previous years:

- We have noticed variations among school districts in the use of the F, NC, and W grades. This lack of consistency made it difficult to determine if a given course

should be considered “completed” or not. By considering all three outcomes to be unsuccessful, the success rate helps to clarify overall student performance.

- Due to reporting variations, programs with similar student outcomes could have had very different completion and pass rates. For example, a program could have a high completion rate and lower pass rates, because students who dropped a course were coded with an “F”, not a “W”. Meanwhile, another program could have a lower completion rate and higher pass rate, because those same students were coded with an “F” (a completed course). Using a single metric, it is more straightforward to compare programs.

The downside of this metric, and indeed the completion and pass rate metrics, is that they don’t speak to *why* a student did not have a successful outcome.

Of the 85,631 online courses for which we have grade information in 2014–15, students had a successful outcome in 74.7 percent of enrollments. This compares to successful outcomes in 75.1 percent of the enrollments in 2013–14 and 89.2 percent of 3,835,598 non-online courses taken in 2014–15.

Looking back on the previous six years, we see that the online course success rate has made improvements in most years, although the success rate decreased slightly in 2014–15.

Grades

CEDARS provides us with a breakdown of grades earned in online courses. High school students in online courses are more likely to earn a D, F, or a P/CR/S and less likely to earn an A or a B, as compared to students in non-online courses. But, with more than five years of data, we see that fewer students are failing their courses and the rates of passing grades (A, B, C) are rising or holding roughly steady. This suggests that performance in online courses is beginning to mirror performance in non-online courses.

Even with this encouraging trend, we cannot look past the fact that nearly a quarter of online courses end in failure. Online learning programs attract a very diverse student population in terms of prior academic achievement and motivation for using online learning. Many programs specifically target students who are at risk of dropping out, and many students come to online learning programs having had limited academic success in the past. Although programs advertising to this population must be prepared to meet their academic needs, clearly the population served has some effect on overall performance.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Mirroring OSPI’s December 2014 Online Learning Report, we recommend that the Legislature not modify either the ALE or online learning laws in 2016. By maintaining a stable regulatory environment, schools will have the chance to fully implement changes in the laws and rules. And, it will afford OSPI and the State Auditor’s Office more time to collect additional data about ALE and online learning to help inform any future policy discussions in this area.

To ensure that students have access to high-quality online learning options, OSPI will continue to review and monitor online programs. OSPI will also work to implement the new online provider monitoring system, focusing more on student achievement outcomes. Finally, OSPI will continue to provide technical assistance to school districts around the implementation of online learning programs.

Appendices

Appendix A: Data Sources

This report makes use of one main data source: the Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS) where districts report enrollment and high school grading data to OSPI. Online courses are designated as such, so that CEDARS may be queried for information about students who have taken high school-level online courses. Data extracted from the CEDARS StudentGradeHistory table (this includes enrollment counts, and passing and completion rates) are not directly validated with the data extracted from the DistrictStudent, SchoolStudent, StudentSchedule, CourseCatalog, StudentRace, and StudentPrograms; it is possible for a student to be included in GradeHistory data without being reported anywhere else in CEDARS.

The reporting standards required by RCW 28A.250.040 (2), requiring districts to designate online courses, came into effect with the 2010–11 school year. To ensure that we have a more accurate count of online students, we've included both students who were enrolled in courses designed as online *and* students enrolled in schools that are known to be online school programs in the CEDARS data set. To qualify as a “known online school program,” the school must offer only online courses (and not face-to-face courses) and the individual district must report data for the program as a standalone school. As a number of online school programs are combined with other brick-and-mortar programs (such as alternative schools or parent partnerships), some online schools were not included in this method. See Table 1: Known Online School Programs.

When reporting data for all online students in CEDARS, we are counting each student individually. This means that if a student was enrolled in more than one school, the student will be counted only once using the most recent demographic information.

The CEDARS data set used in this report was generated on December 1, 2015.

Appendix B: Online Provider Approval Reviews

Revised Code of Washington (RCW) [28A.250.020](#), as enacted in 2009, directed OSPI to create a set of approval criteria, an approval process, an appeal process, and a monitoring and rescindment process for multidistrict online providers. As a result, OSPI developed [WAC 392-502](#) to outline these criteria and processes. The Online Learning Advisory Committee (OLAC), appointed by Superintendent Randy I. Dorn, assisted and advised throughout this development.

Beginning with the 2013–14 school year, all providers must be approved by OSPI in order for school districts to claim state funding for students enrolled in online courses or programs. OSPI has three approval pathways available for online providers:

- Multidistrict online school programs, in addition to companies and non-profits that contract with multiple districts, must participate in the Full Review Approval Process whereby the provider submits evidence as to how the provider meets the 54 online approval criteria. The evidence is then scored by a team of outside reviewers.
- Online school programs which entirely outsource the content, platform, and instruction of their programs to already approved online course providers are eligible for the Affiliate Program Approval option. Programs choosing this option submit program descriptions and data and must accept the approval assurances.
- Online school programs serving out-of-district students at a rate of less than 10 percent are eligible to seek approval through the Single District Approval option. Like the Affiliate Approval option, this option requires the program to submit program descriptions and data and accept the approval assurances.

Table 1: Known Online School Programs

District	Program
Bethel	ALE
Edmonds	Edmonds eLearning
Evergreen	iQ Academy
Federal Way	Internet Academy
Kelso	Kelso Virtual Academy
Monroe	Washington Virtual Academy (High School)
North Franklin	North Franklin Virtual Academy
Omak	Washington Virtual Academy (Elementary School)
Omak	Washington Virtual Academy (High School)
Omak	Washington Virtual Academy (Middle School)
Quillayute Valley	Insight School of Washington
Toppenish	NW AllPrep
White Salmon	Columbia Tech High
Yakima	Yakima Online

Appendix C: 2015 Full Review Approval Cycle

Approval Reviewers and Scoring

OSPI uses contracted external reviewers to score applications that qualify for the full review process. Seven reviewers participated in the 2015 review process, all of whom conducted reviews in previous review cycles. In earlier review cycles, these reviewers underwent extensive training in preparation for their reviews and scoring and all attended a 2015 training to update them on the changes to approval eligibility, to the criteria, and to the review process. The reviewers scored each application against the 54 criteria, with each item worth a single point. Applicants must have provided evidence to show the

reviewer that they met the criteria. Reviewers could score an item 0, .5, or 1. Applicants draw on many sources for this evidence, including sample courses, written policies, and other primary source documents. OSPI provides applicants with extensive feedback on their application, including written comments from the reviewers.

Process Changes

After each review cycle, OSPI staff, working with the Online Learning Advisory Committee (OLAC), updates the criteria based on feedback from applicants and reviewers. OSPI made a few dozen edits to the criteria prior to the 2015 review cycle, including language responsive to the changes to the assurances in WAC 392-502 which require online school programs to attest to the implementation of their district's curriculum adoption policies in the selection or development of curriculum used in their course offerings. A compilation of all changes to the criteria can be found on the department's Changes to the Criteria Web page: <http://digitalllearning.k12.wa.us/approval/process/criteria/changes.php>

2015 Full Review Approval Cycle Results

To be approved, providers were required to meet or exceed a cut score of 46 points (85 percent of 54 possible points). The cut score was set in consultation with OLAC. Only one provider sought approval in the 2015 cycle; the provider is an online curriculum provider looking to emerge into the online course provider space but was not approved in the initial or appeal reviews.

OSPI provides equal access to all programs and services without discrimination based on sex, race, creed, religion, color, national origin, age, honorably discharged veteran or military status, sexual orientation including gender expression or identity, the presence of any sensory, mental, or physical disability, or the use of a trained dog guide or service animal by a person with a disability. Questions and complaints of alleged discrimination should be directed to the Equity and Civil Rights Director at 360-725-6162 or P.O. Box 47200 Olympia, WA 98504-7200.

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