The New Gold Rush

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Establishing Effective Online Learning Policies

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By Ferdi Serim

Online learning is the fastest growing segment of educational technology, for both the best and worst of reasons. The promise of delivering student-centered education, anytime, anywhere, at any pace provides the best reason. Online learning certainly has the potential to finally deliver on these promises.

The temptation to replace highly skilled professionals with scripted, mass delivered "content" as a means of reducing costs and/or maximizing profits is a contender for the worst reason.

New policies at both district and state levels will either promote or prevent effective online learning, depending on how well they are informed by professionals who have already spent years working in this field. District leaders can expect the onslaught of course providers seeking to stake their claims in the new "Gold Rush" for online learning. Here's how to navigate your way to improved success.

Use Research and Best Practices

As with any other instructional program you would adopt, high-quality instruction using high-quality materials is key. Research suggests that hybrid courses (combining face-to-face and online instruction) with smaller enrollments and clear linkages to approved curriculum practice seem to offer higher completion rates and arguably better-quality learning outcomes than online courses alone. The Laguna Department of Education Partners for Success program in New Mexico applied the finding that online learning optimally should be used in combination with face-to-face instruction by using qualified and experienced teachers who are in physical proximity to enrolled online students as teacher facilitators and instructional supervisors. Harness your best teachers to partner up with the highly qualified online instructors you should expect from any online course provider.

There is no part of the educational process that is untouched by moving into online learning, which makes professional development a top priority. When provided with quality professional development opportunities and supervised online clinical experience, good traditional teachers also can become effective facilitators of online learning. Similarly, well-qualified and experienced online instructors can learn the more specialized instructional design and implementation skills that are necessary to create high-quality online learning materials based on their existing teaching experience and curricular expertise. The seven years of experience that shape the National Network of Digital Schools practices suggest that you can expect to see gains within the first year. Working alongside experienced online teachers as the face-to-face partners in the hybrid model, your staff can learn to apply their existing skills to this new and different environment.

Evaluate Offerings Using Research

District leaders face the challenge of developing and implementing key policies and practices for teaching and learning. Understanding and evaluating online programs requires understanding the issues and priorities of the stakeholders.

Priority issues for policy are: costs and benefits; quality and equity of online learning opportunities; funding (formulas, sources, and strategies) accountability and assessment; state or district planning, coordination, support, and evaluation; and teacher certification and licensure.

Priorities for teaching and learning include: professional development, constructivist teaching practice, philosophy guiding online learning programs, best practices (national, state, local), quality assurance (for content of online learning materials), and technology equity (access, usage, availability).

See the rubric on pages 14–15 for help assessing online offerings in relation to each of these policies and practices to more effectively gain support for your programs.

Prepare for a Long Journey

Taos Pueblo in New Mexico began its journey three years ago, as a magnet school of the Taos Municipal School District located on Pueblo land. Following the first year, when the program was located in a temporary building, students and parents handmade 4,000 adobe bricks and

E-learning in Perspective

"E-learning isn't about digital technologies any more than classroom teaching is about chalkboards. E-learning is about people and about using technology systems to support constructive social interactions, including human learning. Although computers and other digital technologies clearly will play an increasing role in K–12 schools, e-learning may work best when it is combined with some face-to-face classroom experience.

In the best of all possible worlds, an eventual goal might be for students to have their own notebook computers to support both in-school and at-home learning, as long as they actively pursue other publicly available educational opportunities."

—Learning Point in NCREL Policy Issues 1:1 Virtual Schools.

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Rubric for Evaluating CyberSchool Policies and Offerings

E-Learning Priorities for Policy Issues		
Policy Item	Level 1	Level 2
Costs and benefits; return on investment (ROI)	Startup costs known, long-term costs and benefits unclear.	Startup costs and two-year sustainability costs known; no mechanism provided for evaluating ROI.
Quality and equity of online learning opportunities	Quality stated by vendor, not independently verified.	Quality is verified by user testimonials, but is not independently verified.
Funding: formulas, sources, strategies	Program is funded by one-time grants.	Program is incorporated into operational budgets, but not part of student funding formula.
Accountability and assessment	Accountability and assessment limited to performance within system.	Accountability and assessment linked to state Core Content Standards.
State or district planning, coordination,	Efforts are implemented without coordination between state, regional, and local entities.	Shared evaluation methods are used among state, regional, and local entities.
Teacher certification and licensure	Teacher certification and licensure issues are not addressed.	Teacher certification and licensure issues for instructors are addressed.
E-Learning Priorities for Teaching and Learning		
Policy Item	Level 1	Level 2
Professional development	Professional development limited to operation of course delivery software.	Professional development goes beyond operation of course delivery software to address required changes in pedagogy.
Constructivist teaching practice	System is a content delivery model, with limited interactivity, posing only questions for which answers are already known.	System allows students to interact with materials in ways that strengthen problem solving and higher-order thinking skills.
Philosophy guiding online learning programs	Access to required information and opportunities to practice is sufficient to improve student achievement on standards-based assessments.	Interaction with course materials should produce information capable of improving instruction in core subject areas, and adapt materials presented based on success or problems encountered in prior lessons.
Best practices (national, state, local): Establish Conversations	Innovative technology leaders in the e-learning movement and established state education policy leaders have not established a basis for communication and dialogue on critical policy issues relating to K–12 online learning.	Innovative technology leaders in the e-learning movement and established state education policy leaders informally communicate about critical policy issues relating to K–12 online learning.
Best practices (national, state, local): Professional Development Required for Effectiveness	Traditional teachers are not provided with quality professional development opportunities and supervised online clinical experience to become effective facilitators of online learning.	Traditional teachers are provided with quality professional development opportunities to become effective facilitators of online learning. However, well-qualified and experienced online instructors are not provided with appropriate professional development opportunities.
Best practices (national, state, local): Hybrid Courses Most Effective	Online instruction is used primarily as a cost reduction strategy, by increasing class size and reducing the need for physical instructional spaces and materials.	Online and face-to-face instruction are not coordinated and do not support one another. For example, online courses are used primarily for credit recovery and not to expand the scope of curricular offerings.
Quality assurance (for content of online learning materials)	Quality stated by vendor, not independently verified.	Quality is verified by user testimonials, but is not independently verified.
Technology equity (access, usage, availability)	System requires proprietary content, network configuration, and bandwidth; access only available from specific sites.	System works on open standards (e.g., Internet and Web browser); supports concurrent use of at least 50% of school/district users; access from home.

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Level 3	Level 4
Multi-year costs provided; system provided for evaluating ROI.	Plan for sustaining costs provided; student performance data shows better return on investment than traditional instruction.
Quality is independently verified for traditional learners, but not verified for all NCLB subgroups.	Curriculum quality is independently verified and provides differentiated instruction for all NCLB subgroups and learning styles.
Program is incorporated within student funding formula, state and federal Ed Tech funding.	Program expenses generate income from classes offered/taught for other districts.
Accountability and assessment demonstrated to predict performance on standards-based assessment.	Accountability and assessment result in student performance exceeding statewide and local trends for traditional instruction.
Shared support and evaluation methods are used among state, regional, and local entities.	Extensive planning, coordination, support, and evaluation
Teacher certification and licensure issues for instructors and course designers are addressed.	Teacher certification and licensure issues for instructors, course designers, and onsite facilitators are addressed.

Level 3	Level 4
Professional development goes beyond required changes in pedagogy to address communication and collaboration skills.	Professional development goes beyond required changes in pedagogy and communication and collaboration skills to assist students and parents in making choices about further education and career options.
System allows students to interact with materials in ways that apply problem solving and higher-order thinking skills to authentic tasks.	System allows students to interact with materials through collaboration, in applying problem-solving and higher-order thinking skills to authentic tasks within their schools and communities.
Interaction with course materials and instructors should produce information capable of improving instruction through integration with all subject areas, and adapt materials presented based on success or problems encountered in prior lessons.	Student choices for learning should be unlimited by place, time, or calendar; the full range of technologies should connect the students with the right instructor and appropriate materials; learning requires a blending of human and technology resources.
Innovative technology leaders in the e-learning movement and established state education policy leaders annually communicate and dialogue on critical policy issues relating to K–12 online learning.	Innovative technology leaders in the e-learning movement and established state education policy leaders routinely communicate and collaborate on critical policy issues relating to K–12 online learning.
Traditional teachers become effective facilitators of online learning. However, well-qualified and experienced online instructors are not provided with professional development to learn the more specialized instructional design and implementation skills, and create quality online learning materials based on their existing teaching experience and curricular expertise.	Good traditional teachers are provided with quality professional development opportunities and supervised online clinical experience, and become effective facilitators of online learning. Well-qualified and experienced online instructors learn the more specialized instructional design and implementation skills, and create quality online learning materials based on their existing teaching experience and curricular expertise.
Face-to-face instructors rely on data produced by student participation in online learning opportunities but do not link respective curriculum activities in meaningful ways.	Hybrid courses (combining face-to-face and online instruction) with smaller enrollments and clear linkages to approved curriculum practice provide higher completion rates and arguably better quality learning outcomes than online courses alone.
Quality is independently verified for traditional learners, but not verified for all NCLB subgroups.	Curriculum quality is independently verified and provides differentiated instruction for all NCLB subgroups and learning styles.
System works on open standards (e.g., Internet and Web browser); supports concurrent use of at least 75% of school/district users and parents; access from home.	System works on open standards (e.g., Internet and Web browser); supports concurrent by all users; access from anywhere, anytime.

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State of the Art from the North American Council on Online Learning

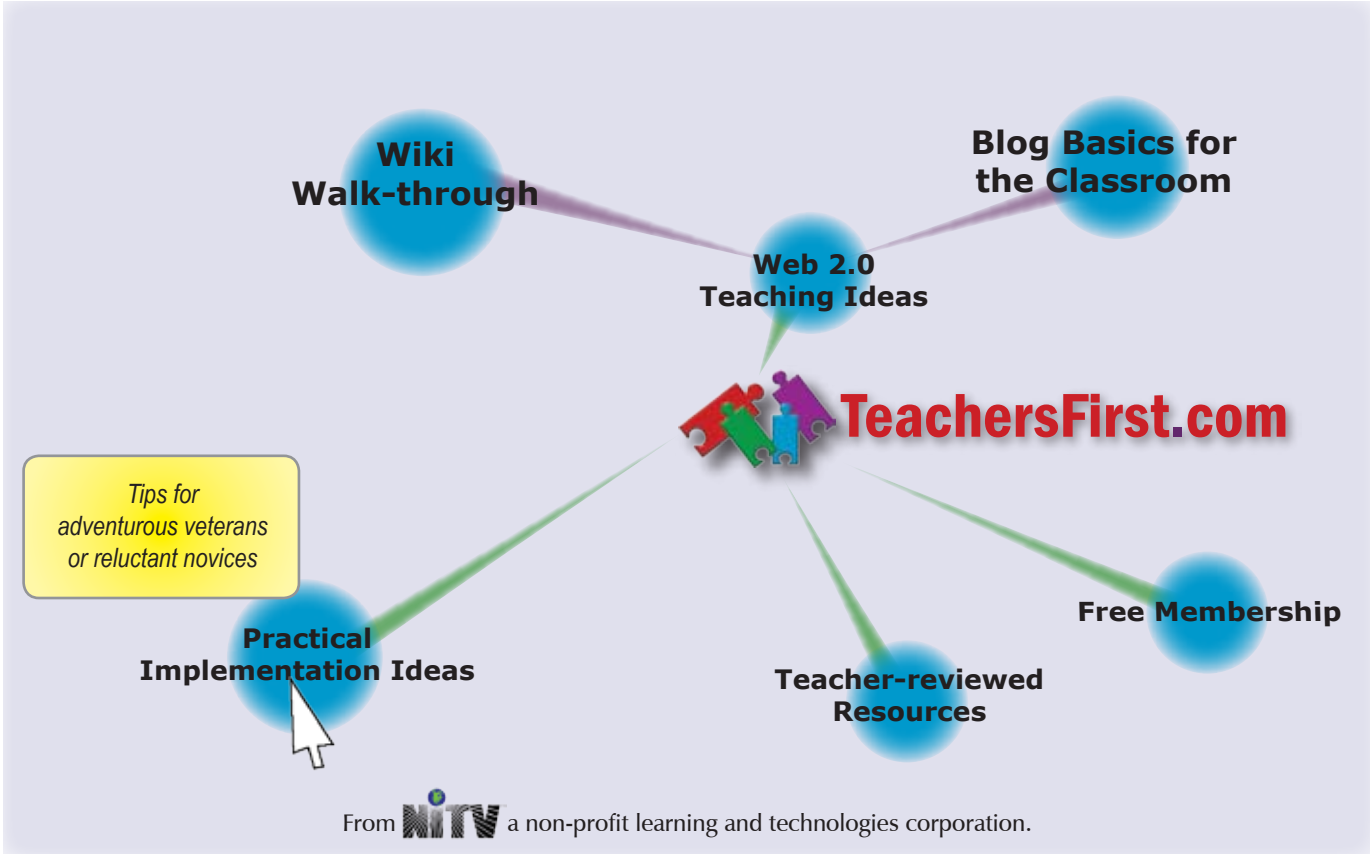
Online learning continues to grow rapidly across the United States as an increasing number of educators and policymakers recognize the benefits of learning unconstrained by time and place. As of September 2006, 38 states had either state-led online learning programs, significant policies regulating online education, or both. In the past year, numerous states have added new state-led programs or passed online learning laws, including Missouri, South Carolina, South Dakota, and Nebraska. Growth of the number of students in many existing programs has been sustained, with Louisiana Virtual School growing by 18%, Virtual High School by 24%, Florida Virtual School and Idaho Digital Learning Academy by more than 50%, and Ohio's eCommunity Schools collectively by 22%.

contructed a building to house their online learning program. Students who had previously been considered at risk or had dropped out found that when they were in control of the pace and direction of their education, they were able to achieve at higher levels than they (or anyone else) had anticipated. Seeing this change, parents and the community began to realize that something special was going on.

Shawn Duran (Director of Education for Taos Pueblo) and Alexsis Blake (Instructional Supervisor for the site, who is also a Taos public school teacher) have created a blended model of online and service learning experiences that set a high standard for online programs anywhere. Using what they've learned in their online academic studies, students have constructed four greenhouses, irrigated by solar pumps they've constructed; researched and obtained heirloom seeds of vegetables grown by previous generations on Taos Pueblo; and organized a weekly farmers market so that community members can enjoy fresh produce year round.

The partnership between the Taos community, public schools, and NNDS has grown beyond their anticipation by making a sustained commitment, keeping an eye on emerging best practices, and making professional development a continual process rather than a single event. By applying these lessons, you can confidently embark on your voyage into online learning, helping your students learn in ways never before possible. It's worth the trip!

Ferdi Serim, an ISTE Board member, is the Southwest Region director for the National Network of Digital Schools and is a former program manager for literacy, technology, and standards for the New Mexico Public Education Department.



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