



Learning without limits

How the rise of online instruction is changing the nature of schooling

Zach Bonner is a smart kid, but he's a bit confused to hear that some adults still assume students in online schools are somehow worse off and spend all day chained to a computer, never learning to socialize in the real world.

Though he may be a full-time Florida fifth-grader whose classwork is completed in his family's Valrico kitchen, less than a quarter of his time is spent in front of a computer screen. More often Zach is doing science experiments, taking field trips, bike-riding with friends from his neighborhood, reading *White Fang*, playing tennis—on real courts, not on a Wii—and running the Little Red Wagon Foundation, a nonprofit he founded at age 8.

Christine Van Dusen is a freelance writer living in Atlanta.

He's been enrolled in the Florida Virtual Academy, a school that uses curriculum from online-learning provider K¹² Inc., since kindergarten, and every year he gets fewer questions and quizzical looks from grown-ups who don't get how it works. Kids, he says, have never treated him differently for going to an online school.

"People ask me a lot about my school; they're usually very interested. So I explain it to them," says Zach, now 11. "But a lot of them seem to understand now."

Says Laurie Bonner, his mother: "Online schooling is a lot more acceptable now than it was 10 years ago."

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Where once virtual schooling for grades K through 12 was unusual—and perhaps only the domain of disabled children, home-schooled students, young movie stars, and school-age Olympic athletes in training—now thousands of brick-and-mortar schools in the U.S. are using online learning to augment their curriculum, aid in credit recovery, and give students the opportunity to move at their own pace. Full-time virtual schools are gaining steam, too; about 44 states offer such programs through their public education systems.

“The acceptance has grown,” says Susan Patrick, president and chief executive of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL). “More and more parents and students are aware that we live in the internet age, and they want access to educational opportunities, whether they’re offered over the internet or not.”

Some of the online-learning programs in the U.S. are state-led; others are charter schools. Some take place

demically and social skills needed to survive and thrive in the real world.

“There are so many elements of education policy and funding that don’t take into account online learning,” says John Watson, founder of Evergreen Consulting Associates, a leading researcher on the topic of virtual schooling. “A lot of people still don’t understand what online learning is. But that’s changing.”

The way Patrick would begin to address the lingering confusion is by explaining what online learning is not: It’s not about sitting in front of a computer all day, staring at static documents and filling out minimally interactive multiple-choice quizzes. It’s not about watching a lecture on video. And it’s not about taking traditional teaching methods and somehow putting them on a computer.

“What we’re talking about is interaction with the teacher and peers, and group work and collaboration, and making education more engaging,” Patrick says.

A chemistry class, for example, would involve intricate experiments conducted with school-issued lab equipment, sent to the home. A student might play a maze game as a way to understand Cartesian coordinates or make a

electronically, work remotely, and meet virtually.

“When you get out into real life, you can’t just walk into a volleyball gym and play for an hour, and leave when the bell rings. You have to figure out a routine and get it to fit into your schedule,” Patrick says. “Online learning teaches the students how to do that.”

Today’s tech-savvy student can toggle between the virtual world and the real world with ease, says Watson: “Whether parents like it or not, kids do a lot of socializing online. But they can balance that with face-to-face communication. Students don’t see the divide there, the way that some parents do.”

Laurie Bonner believes her son is actually getting more in-person socialization as an online student than he would if he’d enrolled in a traditional school.

“In a brick-and-mortar school, there are so many more restrictions on their time,” she says. “When I went to school, we got three recess periods a day. Now, some schools only give them 30 minutes. Zach can work at his own pace and build in time to go outside, do Cub Scouts, activities at the Y, and go camping.”

Zach Bonner fits the profile of one kind of online student: the gifted achiever whose pace of learning exceeds that of many of his peers, and who would be bored and might stagnate in a traditional class setting. Virtual schooling also works for slower learners, kids in need of credit recovery, and students with medical and emotional issues. A child with severe diabetes, for example, might struggle to manage his blood-sugar levels in a traditional classroom. He might need to eat snacks in class when other children aren’t allowed to, or leave class at inconvenient intervals to give himself injections. Online learning also works for children who have been mercilessly bullied and whose fear keeps them from focusing on their studies.

Addressing the needs of all these different kinds of students and tailoring a teaching approach for each would be incredibly difficult in a traditional school, where budgets are repeatedly slashed and teachers are overworked and underpaid. Online schooling is a cost-effective alternative, Patrick says. There’s less overhead, so the per-child cost or special state appropriation is smaller than with brick-and-mortar schooling. “It’s a way for using money more efficiently in school districts during tight times,” she says.

Funding, however, is one of the biggest obstacles to the growth of online education. A survey of program administrators found that 66 percent of those who would like to see faster growth cite lack of funding as the main hindrance. Connecticut and Delaware, for example, established state-led online programs in 2007-08, but because of budget cuts, they didn’t grow, according to Evergreen’s *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning: A Review of State-Level Policy and Practice*.

Idaho Digital Learning Academy (IDLA), on the other hand, saw its annual appropriation rise from \$450,000 in 2003-04 to \$1.1 million in 2006-07 and saw its enrollments grow at an “extraordinarily fast rate.” For the 2007-08 school year, IDLA was given \$3.2 million and had 6,619 enrollments.

Many states limit funding to a “usual course load,” according to the *Keeping Pace* report, though some make more funding available for accelerated students. Kansas and Colorado, for example, have established a standard level of funding for all online students, regardless of where the student lives and where the online school is situated.

“State budgets are tight, and it’s always a challenge to do more with less,” says Kim Ross, superintendent of Houston Schools in Minnesota, a 450-student district that started an online program in 2002 and now has 1,650 students enrolled from all over the state. (Two of the largest programs are the Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School, with 7,798 students, and the Ohio Virtual Academy, with 5,225 students. Nearly two-thirds of online programs have fewer than 1,000 students.)



Online learning is not about sitting in front of a computer all day, staring at static documents and filling out minimally interactive multiple-choice quizzes. It's about group work and collaboration, and making education more engaging.

on school-supplied computers in the home and require a parent to be present; others are conducted in brick-and-mortar school computer labs. Most are administered by outside providers, such as K¹² Inc. and Connections Academy, that tailor their course offerings and approach to the needs of a school district; other programs are looking to offer online classes a la carte.

Across the board, course registrations have grown more than 50 percent since 2007. But challenges persist.

Some states and school systems continue to grapple with outdated “seat-time” requirements, funding hurdles, teacher licensing reciprocity, and accountability concerns. Programs in Colorado, Idaho, and Kansas have come under scrutiny, facing questioned about quality and oversight. And many parents, educators, administrators, and legislators—schooled the traditional way over the last four or so decades—remain unsure that virtual education will give children the aca-

model of the ocean floor using a baking pan, clay, and water. An algebra student could move ahead during a lesson or linger on a particularly difficult math problem as needed. For physical education, the student could go to a local gym and keep track of his heart rate while he goes through a set number of pushups, squats, and biceps curls. A Portuguese language class would likely include students from Portugal, working with U.S. students on group projects coordinated through web-based discussion boards and chats.

In most cases, the student also is participating in team sports, volunteer work, field trips, and other in-person social activity. Still, it’s true that a good portion of the actual communication in virtual schooling does take place via computer and not face-to-face. But advocates of online education say this is a plus—it prepares students for a world where life is not structured in class periods and adults increasingly communicate

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The variety in size, budget, and approach owes in large part to the state legislatures and what rules and regulations they require for supplemental and full-time online learning programs.

Florida passed a law requiring its school districts to provide online learning opportunities, with the goal of offering full-time virtual education to students in grades K-8 who want to take advantage of it by the 2009-10 school year, according to *Keeping Pace*. Michigan in 2006 was the first state to mandate an online learning experience before graduation; Alabama followed with its own online learning requirement. Hawaii and Wyoming have established task forces to research options, and South Carolina recently opened its first online charter schools. New Jersey initially instituted an online-education requirement but backed away, owing to cost concerns, in favor of making virtual classes available but optional.

"In the state of California, they only fund 240 min-

utes of instruction. Divide 240 minutes by a 50-minute period, and you're only talking about 4.8 classes a day—you've already filled up the school day," Patrick says. "So if a student wants to take a sixth period, California doesn't have a way to pay for it."

The current legislative session is still young, so it's possible some states will make more moves to encourage, expand, and fund online education. "A number of states are looking at options; there's a lot of activity out there," Watson says. "There's really good evidence from many of the states that have extensive online learning opportunities that online learning works. Online learning certainly isn't for everybody; it's a matter of making it an option."

Expediting that process are companies like K¹², which was founded in 1999 and has grown by 50 percent every year. It now serves more than 55,000 students in 21 states.

In the earlier days, K¹² met some resistance from school districts that saw the company as a competitor for their students. Now, according to founder and chief executive officer Ron Packard, schools are coming to view the company as a partner in helping to deliver

online instruction and meet the needs of kids who aren't finding the right fit in the traditional school setting.

And while it has taken some time to sway school administrators in this direction, resistance from teachers has been scattered and short-lived.

When Ross' program—a partnership with K¹²—started up in Minnesota, the teachers' union filed suit against the state education department in an effort to decertify the online school. Since then, though, the teachers in the district have come to see the online school as a good complement to the brick-and-mortar system.

Overall, K¹² hasn't felt much resistance from teachers, Packard says. The company now employs 1,600 educators. "We've been flooded with teachers who want to teach with us," he says. "They've seemed really ready to embrace this. It's younger teachers, but also retired teachers."

The same benefits that students derive from online learning—such as a more flexible schedule, and the chance to delve more deeply into topics of particular interest—also apply to teachers, he explains.

Allison J. Dracha became a virtual teacher in August

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Internships help train future online teachers

Florida Virtual School teams up with education schools in first-of-its-kind program

Maya T. Prabhu
Assistant Editor

As virtual schooling continues to surge in popularity, there is a growing need for new K-12 teachers who understand how to teach in an online environment successfully. To help meet this need, the Florida Virtual School (FLVS) is teaming up with area colleges to pair teachers-in-training with its online instructors in a first-of-its-kind internship program.

Six University of Central Florida (UCF) education majors are in the middle of a seven-week internship where they are working hand-in-hand with FLVS teachers. Interns were chosen because they expressed an interest in teaching online.

UCF student Katelyn Richardson, who is majoring in English language arts education, was chosen to participate in the internship program, but had not yet begun the virtual portion of the program at FLVS as of press time.

"Being able to have this chance to intern with the Florida Virtual School opens a world of possibilities for the University of Central Florida, and me, personally," she said. "It is truly encouraging to know that there is an organization that truly believes, and lives out, the philosophy of student-centered education. The Florida Virtual School not only puts forth these ideals, but supports and enables the teachers to give 100 percent of themselves to the students and their education."

FLVS, founded in 1997, provides virtual K-12 education solutions to students throughout the country, offering more than 80 courses for middle and high school students.

After spending seven weeks at FLVS, interns will spend seven weeks in traditional classrooms in central Florida, said Brian Marchman, instructional leader with FLVS.

"I think that it's the first of its kind of ... internship to prepare students to teach not only online, but in the traditional classroom as well," he said.

The program is being piloted with UCF as well as at the University of Florida in Gainesville, but Marchman said FLVS hopes to be able to work with all 10 of Florida's state colleges and universities eventually. Officials currently have established at least some communication with five.

Marchman said the internship was welcomed im-

mediately at UCF.

"We're a forward-thinking institution here," said Michael Hynes, the chair of the Teaching and Learning Principles department at UCF, in a press release. "We want to be thinking ahead of where the education industry is now. We have great confidence this pilot is going to work. It will give our students and edge, because they will not only know how to teach a traditional class, they will know now to do it virtually."

World geography instructor Julia Maccarone, who has taught for 15 years, six of them with the virtual school, said she decided to leave bricks-and-mortar instruction for FLVS so she could work in an environment that was centered around students.

"The Florida Virtual School is all about students," she said. "It's efficient and more about what the student learned, and less about how long a student sat and was bombarded with information. It's just a better way for kids to learn."

Maccarone, who is mentoring a UCF intern, said much of what she is sharing with her intern is similar to what she would have shared in a traditional school, but some things need to be highlighted.

Online teachers "need to develop a relationship with their students, so they know their strengths and weaknesses," she said, adding that some students have extenuating circumstances that can make it harder for them to complete certain assignments.

Though Richardson had not begun her virtual internship as of press time, she said the orientation she attended at FLVS already has allowed her to see the benefits of teaching online.

"The greatest asset is the availability to work individually with each student. No longer are you forced to continue a lesson while students straggle behind, you can work one-on-one with the student. This marks an important difference between the two methods of education," she said. "Online education is based on motivation and individual attention, whereas much of the focus in a brick-and-mortar institution is forced to be on classroom management and teaching a large group of students."

After the first few weeks, Maccarone said her intern is preparing to interact directly with the students through three-way monthly phone calls.

"It's a really interesting program," she said. "The



interns who [are participating] in it are thrilled."

Richardson said she can see herself pursuing online teaching once she graduates from UCF.

"While talking with some of the current teachers at the Florida Virtual School, I asked if they missed the interaction of seeing their students. They responded that they felt as though they knew them just as well, if not more than if they were in a brick-and-mortar school," she said. "The opportunity for individual attention, somewhat flexible hours, and an organization that does anything for you to ensure you are able to do your best definitely appeals to me."

Marchman said the interns each have a primary course, but they have exposure to multiple courses in an effort to expose students to different FLVS teachers with different teaching styles.

UCF interns are earning course credit as well as credit toward state certification, and FLVS supervising teachers are earning college credit toward advanced degrees through state colleges. **CSN**

LINKS:

Florida Virtual School
<http://www.flvs.net>

University of Central Florida
<http://www.ucf.edu>

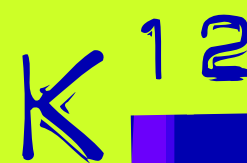
IN 75% OF U.S. SCHOOL
DISTRICTS, STUDENTS TAKE
ONLINE OR BLENDED COURSES.*

*The Sloan Consortium, January 2009, A 2008 Follow-up of the Survey of U.S. School District Administrators



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2003, and though she often teaches from her home, she still sees similarities between the traditional learning environment and virtual schooling.

"We are a public school and are held to the same mandates by our state's department of education as the brick-and-mortar schools," says Dracha, who teaches elementary and middle school science and mathematics for Agora Cyber Charter School in Pennsylvania. "And I feel just as, or more, connected to the students, because I take the time to get to know who the child is. I often ask them why they chose our school; this helps me understand who they are and the path they took to get here. Many parents have told me they know more about me than any other teacher their child had in a brick-and-mortar school."

Debbie Wotring became involved in online education when she enrolled her own children in K¹²'s program at the Ohio Virtual Academy. She is now a lead teacher there, overseeing 12 teachers and 28 students.

"In any one grade level or class, you will have many different levels of abilities. In an online environment, each student is able to work at their own pace and at their own level within set guidelines," she says. "In an online environment, students are able to select the way in which they would like to learn a concept. They may decide to write a speech, create a poster, or take a written assessment to show that they have mastered a concept."

Like Dracha and Wotring, all of K¹²'s teachers are certified to teach in their individual states. At this point, most programs are not open to students across state lines—though this can vary on a case-by-case basis, because the decision is generally up to the specific school district.

"In most cases, when students take an online course from a state virtual school, the local and physical school is granting the credit," Watson says. "The national Virtual High School works this way as well, with local schools granting the credit."

He adds: "Most of the national organizations and companies are working through organizations at the state or district level to grant credit, and in most cases to secure funding. There are a couple of national online schools, but they are private and tuition-based, so their student numbers are low, at least so far."

The credits do, however, typically transfer if a student moves to a new district. And they are being recognized by colleges. Institutions of higher education—which were the first to try out and embrace online learning—don't view online high schoolers as weaker candidates, says Mickey Revenaugh, who co-founded virtual-schooling company Connections Academy in 2002.

"There may have been a point 10 years ago that a college might look askance at a diploma from a charter school, but that's all gone by the wayside. Charter schools are now just as recognized as private schools. The same thing is true of the virtual-school experience," she says. "What we're hearing from colleges is that our students are better suited to online learning at colleges and that they've developed good time management and self direction through online learning."

Zach Bonner, for one, believes his online schooling is preparing him well for the future. It's given him time to work on his foundation and plan a 625-mile charity walk from Atlanta to Washington, D.C., to raise awareness about the plight of homeless kids. He collected 27 truckloads of sundry items for people left homeless after Hurricane Katrina and won the Alexandra Scott Butterfly Award in 2008, given to "an exceptional child hero." He's met Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush and been featured on Good Morning America.

He wants to go to Harvard University and eventually become a prosecuting attorney, and he doesn't worry at all that his online schooling will somehow stand in the way. He expects that more and more kids will join schools like his—and adults will become more and more comfortable with the idea, too.

"I have lots of flexibility," Zach says. "I really enjoy it. It's right for me."

LINKS:

International Association
for K-12 Online Learning
<http://www.inacol.org>

K¹² Inc.
<http://www.k12.com>

Connections Academy
<http://www.connectionsacademy.com>

Florida Virtual School
<http://www.flvs.net>

Virtual High School
<http://www.govhs.org>

Evergreen Consulting Associates
<http://www.evergreenassoc.com>

*Keeping Pace with K-12 Online
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Online learning is a 'lifeline' for rural schools

Three-fourths of K-12 districts report having students enrolled in online courses

From eSchool News staff
and wire service reports

Online learning offers a lifeline for rural schools in particular, according to a recent study that also predicts “blended learning” could be the way most students learn in the future.

The Sloan Consortium (Sloan-C) study, called “K-12 Online Learning,” is a follow-up to the group’s 2007 report, which was one of the first studies to collect data about online and blended learning in K-12 schools. The new study is based on information gathered from more than 800 U.S. school systems during the 2007-08 academic year.

According to the study, three-quarters of responding school districts had at least one student enrolled in a fully online or blended course, an increase of about 10 percentage points from the group’s earlier study.

The total number of K-12 students taking online or blended courses in 2007-08 was estimated at 1,030,000—up from 700,000 in the earlier study—and two-thirds of respondents said they expect their online enrollments will continue to grow.

Online learning has developed differently in K-12 schools than it has in higher education, the report noted.

At colleges and universities, online learning has grown much more rapidly, as these institutions have invested significant dollars in developing and delivering their own online courses and degree programs.

K-12 schools, on the other hand, have “approached online learning with caution,” the report says. “Rather than investing resources in developing their own delivery support structure, they typically depend on a number of outside online learning providers, including postsecondary institutions, independent vendors, and state virtual schools.”

What’s more, most school districts (83 percent) said they use multiple online-learning providers rather than contracting with a single provider.

Contrary to popular belief, the report says, it’s not just advanced students who are benefiting from online instruction. Respondents said online learning is meeting the needs of a wide range of students—from those who want to take advanced classes to those who need extra help or credit recovery.

And rural students seem to be benefiting the most.

“The loudest and clearest voices were those of respondents representing small rural school districts. In these places, online learning is not simply an attractive alternative to face-to-face instruction but increasingly is becoming a lifeline to basic [high-]quality education,” the report says.

“Shortages of teachers in high-demand secondary school subject areas such as science, mathematics, and foreign languages, as well as modest property tax bases and the lowest per-pupil expenditures ... have forced rural school districts to use their financial resources as wisely and effectively as possible.”

Online learning gives these districts a cost-efficient way to deliver courses that otherwise would require hiring teachers, the report says—many of whom “would be uncertain in their subject areas and ... would not have enough students to justify their salaries.”

Without online learning, one survey respondent said, “there may have been 40 fewer high school graduates in our small county last year.”

Though online learning is meeting the needs of a variety of students, including those who need credit recovery or extra help, many respondents noted that students have to be disciplined to succeed in an online environment.

“Observation: Students [who] struggle with reading have difficulty with online courses. Students [who] are self-starters and with average or above academic skills find the highest success rate with online courses,” wrote one respondent.

The study found that concerns about the quality of online courses and the costs of providing them are the key barriers to K-12 online instruction. Responses suggested that a more thorough evaluation of online learning will help overcome any remaining questions about its rigor.

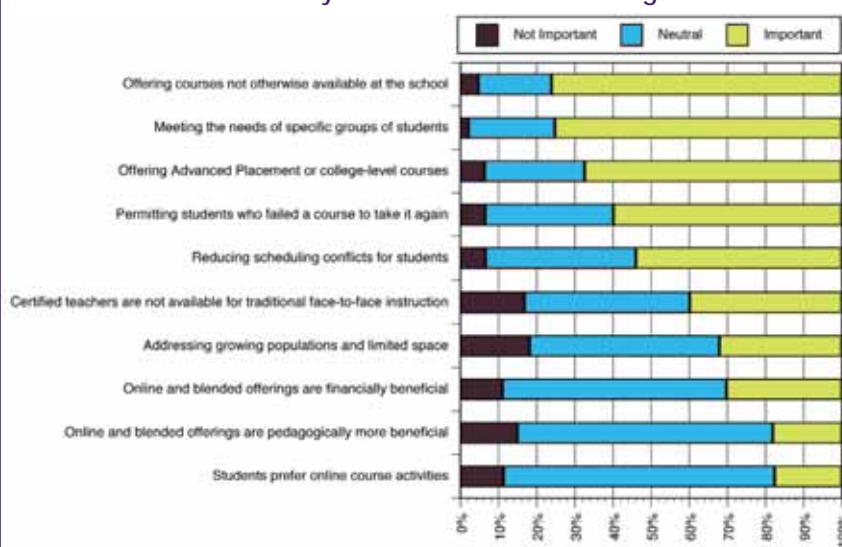
“As an administrator, I am interested in fully embracing online learning; however, our community (including teachers) are critical of the quality, content, et cetera,” one respondent wrote. “As online courses are evaluated and proven to be viable means of delivering [high-]quality instruction, our community will more fully embrace this instructional model.”

Interestingly, restrictive federal, state, or local laws and policies were not found to be much of a barrier; only 20 percent of respondents cited these as “important” concerns. But one policy that does appear to need changing is the tying of per-pupil funding to outdated “seat-time” requirements.

“We see the need for online courses as a means to address student learning styles and to minimize the need for increased facility space. The state department of elementary and secondary education needs to change standards so that a

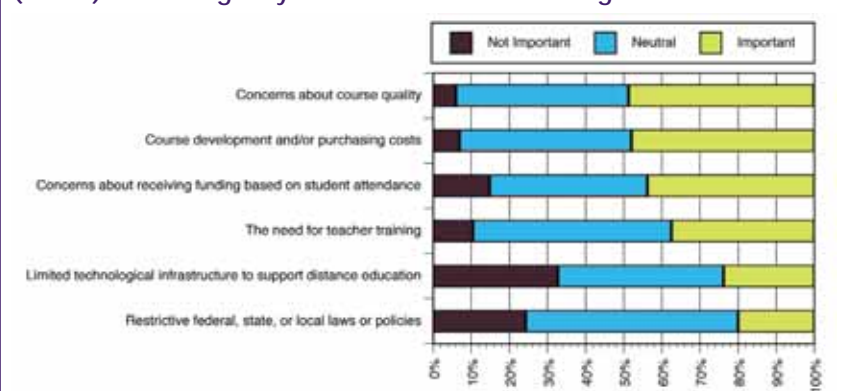
Percentage Summary of Responses to:

How important do you believe the following reasons are for a school district to offer fully online or blended learning courses?



Percentage Summary of Responses to:

How much of a barrier the following areas would be (or are) in offering fully online or blended learning courses?



district can deliver an online course and not lose state aid because of no physical seat time,” wrote one respondent.

Not surprisingly, the report said, the vast majority of K-12 students taking online courses are high schoolers. Kindergarten through fifth-grade students represent only 21 percent of those enrolled in fully online courses—and just 1 percent of blended enrollment.

Though blending learning, which combines both face-to-face and online instruction, hasn’t played much of a role in K-12 education so far, many experts say it’s likely to emerge as the predominant model for education in the future, according to the Sloan-C report.

The report quotes Julie Young, founder of the Florida Virtual School, as saying: “Within five years, there will be lots of blended models, such as students going to school two days a week and working at home three days a week. Another blended model ... is where a student takes five [face-to-face] courses at school and two virtual courses...”

And a 2008 report, from the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL, formerly known as the North American Council for Online Learning), stated: “The blending of online programs and the classroom setting has been relatively slow to develop in K-12 education. However, emerging models in other countries, such as Singapore and Australia, as well as in higher education, suggest that a large part of the future of education will involve providing content, resources, and instruction both digitally and face-to-face in the same classroom.”

The iNACOL report concluded: “This blended approach combines the best elements of online and face-to-face learning. It is likely to emerge as the predominant model of the future—and to become far more common than either one alone.” **ESN**

LINK:

Sloan Consortium

<http://www.sloan-c.org>

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