

K–12 Online Learning

A 2008 Follow-up of the Survey of U.S. School District Administrators



CUNY

Hunter College and Graduate Center



The Sloan Consortium

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2007, the Sloan Consortium issued a report on the extent and nature of online learning in K-12 schools. Entitled, *K-12 Online Learning: A Survey of U.S. School District Administrators*, this report was welcomed by professional organizations and the popular media interested in the use of online technology for instruction in the public schools. It was based on a national survey of school district administrators during the **2005-2006** academic year. It was one of the first studies to collect data on and compare fully online and blended learning (part online and part traditional face-to-face instruction) in K-12 schools. The purpose of this current study is to replicate the original study in order to substantiate its findings and to examine what if any changes occurred in online learning in K-12 school districts. The current study was conducted two years later and was based on a national survey of school district administrators during the **2007-2008** academic year.

Highlights

1. Three quarters of the responding public school districts are offering online or blended courses:

- 75% had one or more students enrolled in a fully online or blended course.
- 70% had one or more students enrolled in a fully online course.
- 41% had one or more students enrolled in a blended course
- These percentages represent an increase of approximately 10% since 2005-2006.

2. 66% of school districts with students enrolled in online or blended courses anticipate their online enrollments will grow.

3. The overall number of K-12 students engaged in online courses in 2007-2008, is estimated at 1,030,000. This represents a 47% increase since 2005-2006.

4. Respondents report that online learning is meeting the specific needs of a range of students, from those who need extra help and credit recovery to those who want to take Advanced Placement and college-level courses.

5. School districts typically depend on multiple online learning providers, including postsecondary institutions, state virtual schools and independent providers as well as developing and providing their own online courses.

6. Perhaps the voices heard most clearly in this survey were those of respondents representing small rural school districts. For them, the availability of online learning is a lifeline and enables them to provide students with course choices and in some cases, the basic courses that should be part of every curriculum.

Abstract

The literature and research on online learning has grown significantly in the past decade. Many studies have been published that examine the extent, nature, policies, learning outcomes, and other issues associated with online instruction. Much of this literature focuses specifically on postsecondary education. With almost 4 million students or 22 percent of the higher education population presently enrolled in fully online courses [3], it would be appropriate to consider that online instruction is maturing in postsecondary education. However, the same cannot be said about online learning in primary and secondary education where online instruction is still considered to be in its nascent stages. There is also a growing need to examine issues related to online instruction in K-12 schools in order to inform policymakers at federal, state, and local governing agencies who are considering how to use this technology to expand and maybe to improve instruction. Several major state-level policy initiatives (e.g., Michigan, Alabama) have recently been undertaken that require much greater use of online instruction in K-12 schools.

In 2007, the Sloan Consortium issued a report on the extent and nature of online learning in K-12 schools [1]. Entitled, *K-12 Online Learning: A Survey of U.S. School District Administrators*, this report was welcomed by professional organizations and the popular media interested in the use of online technology for instruction in the public schools. The report, which will be referred to as the “original study” throughout this report, was one of the first to collect data on and to compare fully online and blended learning (part online and part traditional face-to-face instruction) in K-12 schools. It was based on a national survey of school district administrators during the 2005-2006 academic year. The purpose of this current study was to replicate the original study in order to substantiate its findings and to examine what if any changes occurred in online learning in K-12 school districts. The current study was conducted two years later and was based on a national survey of school district administrators during the 2007-2008 academic year.

Keywords

Online Learning, Distance Learning, Blended Learning, Distance Education, Asynchronous Learning, Primary Education, Secondary Education, K-12

INTRODUCTION

In March 2007, the Sloan Consortium issued its first report based on a survey on the extent and nature of online learning in K-12 schools [1]. Entitled, *K-12 Online Learning: A Survey of U.S. School District Administrators*, this report was welcomed by professional organizations and the popular media interested in the use of online technology for instruction in the public schools. The report, which will be referred to as the “original study” throughout this paper, was based on a national survey of American public school district chief administrators during the 2005-2006 academic year. It was one of the first studies to collect data on and to compare fully online and blended learning (part online and part traditional face-to-face instruction) in K-12 schools. Since its publication in 2007, several hundred articles, news reports, and other media have cited the report’s findings. Typical of these citations was the U.S. Department of Education’s (USDOE) publication, *Connecting Students to Advanced Courses Online: Innovations in Education*, (2007):

“the Sloan Consortium estimates that, during the 2005–06 school year, 700,000 K–12 students participated in online learning. More than half of the respondents (57.9 percent) reported having at least one student who had taken an online course in 2005–06, and an additional quarter (24.5 percent) reported expecting at least one student to take an online course within the next three years.”

[2] USDOE, 2007

While many of the citations referred to the quantitative findings and estimates, the original study also raised important issues related to planning, education policies, and characteristics of students taking online courses. For example, contrary to popular assumptions that K-12 online learning was supporting mostly students desiring to enroll in advanced coursework, respondents reported that online learning was meeting the specific needs of a wide range of students, from those who needed extra help to those who had to make up courses (e.g., credit recovery) as well as those who wanted to take college-level courses. Perhaps the voices heard most clearly in the original study were those of respondents representing small rural school districts. For them, the availability of online learning was important in order to provide students with course choices and in some cases, the basic courses that should be part of every curriculum.

Another interesting finding of the original study was that online learning in K-12 schools was evolving much differently than the way it had been developing in higher education. A comparison was made because online learning in colleges and universities has progressed more rapidly than in K-12 schools. Approximately 4 million college students are currently enrolled in fully online courses. [3] Colleges and universities in order to meet the interest in online learning on the part of their students have invested significant resources in hardware, software, and faculty development to establish their own delivery support structures for offering online courses and in many cases full academic programs. K-12

school districts on the other hand approached online learning with caution. Rather than investing resources in developing their own delivery support structure, they typically depended on a number of outside online learning providers, including postsecondary institutions, independent vendors and state virtual schools. In most cases, K-12 school administrators tended to contract with multiple online learning providers to serve a variety of specific instructional needs.

A methodological question raised with the original study was that it was based on a one-time survey. In response, the authors felt that there was a need to substantiate its findings with a follow-up study and also to draw a larger survey sample. The purpose of this current study was to replicate the original study published in 2007 in order to substantiate its findings and to examine what if any changes occurred in online learning in K-12 school districts. Because of increased funding from The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, this follow-up study was also designed to draw a larger sample of school district administrators than the original study.

BRIEF REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The original study in 2007 was undertaken because there was a dearth of information on the extent and nature of online learning in K-12 schools. No organization – public or private was systematically collecting this information. In 2005, the USDOE [4] issued the first comprehensive examination of distance education in the K-12 schools, entitled *Distance Education Courses for Public Elementary and Secondary School Students: 2002–03*. This report was based on data collected during the 2002-2003 academic year and reported that one-third (36 percent) of public school districts and nine percent of public schools had students enrolled in distance education courses in 2002–03. In this USDOE report, distance education referred to courses taken for credit and offered to elementary and secondary school students where the teacher and student “are in different locations”. It included any technology or modality for delivering distance education to K-12 schools and did not concentrate exclusively on online learning. For several years, this study was the major reference for citing the extent of online learning in K-12 schools. In 2008, the USDOE [5] published a follow-up of its earlier study based on data collected during the 2004-2005 academic year. Between 2002–03 and 2004–05, the number of enrollments in technology-based distance education courses increased by 60 percent overall, from an estimated 317,070 enrollments in 2002–03 to 506,950 enrollments in 2004–05. In both of these studies, the USDOE used course enrollments as its unit for analysis. Districts were instructed to count the student for each course in which he or she was enrolled. Thus, course enrollments included duplicated counts of students. The USDOE studies represent the only attempts to examine and to compare the extent of online learning in K-12 schools over multiple years.

One of the most important aspects of the original study was the distinction made between fully online and blended courses. It concluded that while fully online courses were more popular in terms of enrollment than blended courses, it was possible that blended models (part online and part traditional face-to-face) might have greater potential in K-12 schools than the fully online model. Leaders in the field on K-12 online learning have made similar observations and comments. Julie Young, the founder and president of the Florida Virtual School, when asked about her vision for the future of her school and online learning, offered:

“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...” [6] Young, Julie, 2007.

A recent study commissioned by the North American Council for Online Learning adds credence to Ms. Young’s prediction and states:

“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....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.” [7] Watson, John, 2008.

In sum, the blended model has an important role in K-12 online learning and is sufficiently different in its planning and delivery that researchers should distinguished it from the fully online model. For purposes of this study the following definitions were used:

- Fully online course – A course where most or all of the content is delivered online, and typically has no face-to-face meetings.
- Blended/hybrid course – A course that blends online and face-to-face delivery, and where a substantial proportion of the content is delivered online, sometimes uses online discussions and typically has few face-to-face meetings.

Another important finding in the original study was the importance of online learning in small rural school districts that lacked resources and in many cases qualified teachers to teacher certain subject areas. It has been well-reported over the past decade that the United States has a severe teacher shortage. One critical aspect of the teacher shortage issue is its uneven distribution among subject areas and geographical locations. The highest shortages of teachers are in mathematics, science and special education in poorer

rural and inner city school districts. [8] As an example, it has been estimated that high school students in rural areas are less likely (6.8% versus 26.5%) to take advanced placement science courses than students in central cities and in suburban fringe areas because of a lack of teachers and resources. [9] In addition, small rural districts have smaller student populations so if they are able to find teachers in high demand subjects, the small number of students that might enroll in their courses would result in very low student to teacher ratios and hence much higher per pupil costs. Online learning provides these districts with a cost beneficial method of providing courses for students who otherwise would be taught by under-qualified teachers or would require the hiring of teachers who would not have enough students to justify their salaries.

The findings in the original report study which received the most attention related to the extent of online learning in K-12 public schools. Major findings were that the majority (63.1%) of the public school districts in the United States had at least one student enrolled in either a fully online or blended course; that a majority of administrators in these districts predicted that enrollments would grow by approximately twenty percent over the next two years; and that the total number enrolled in online or blended learning courses was estimated at approximately 700,000 public school K-12 students. Much of the interest in these findings was based on the fact that there had been very few national studies that had examined this issue. This continues to be the case and since publication of the original study in 2007, the authors are not aware of any new national studies that have been conducted with more current data. While a number of school districts and regional education organizations have surveyed local school populations, none have attempted to survey school districts nationally. A most important aspect of this follow-up study was to determine if there has been growth in the number of students enrolled in online learning in the two years since the original study was conducted.

Perhaps the most provocative findings in the original study involved the discussion of barriers that school districts faced in developing and providing online learning opportunities for their students. Major barriers included concerns about course quality, development costs, state and local funding policies, and the need for teacher training. These issues have been studied by a number of other researchers. Evergreen Consulting Associates, for example, in collaboration with a number of K-12 online learning providers has published an annual “*Keeping Pace...*” report for the past four years. [10] These reports are valuable for framing these issues within the complex policymaking contexts of state and local education governing bodies. They concluded in a recent report:

“While most programs appear to be offering a high-quality educational option for students and parents, the lack of transparency and data in many states, and questionable practices from a few programs, may threaten the sustainability of online learning for all.... Processes and outcomes of online programs that should be reviewed include:

- *Student achievement outcomes*
- *Student demographics*

- *Curriculum development procedures*
- *Teacher training, supervision, and evaluation*
- *Tracking of attendance and activity in the course*
- *Special education services.”* [10] Watson & Ryan, 2007, pp. 7-8

In sum, while online learning is expanding in K-12 education, significant issues exist and will likely persist that require the attention of educators at many levels to resolve. It is hoped that this study will provide useful information for discussing and helping to resolve these issues.

METHODOLOGY

This study of K–12 instruction used descriptive analysis relying extensively on a modified survey instrument designed specifically for the original study [1]. The instrument was, in turn, patterned after a similar instrument used by The Sloan Consortium to conduct national surveys of chief academic officers in American colleges and universities. Modifications to the survey instrument were minimal – primarily formatting and changing question references to the current school year. This survey was conducted for the 2007–2008 academic year.

The “universe of interest” for this study included all public school districts in the United States that operate schools (16,098). Information on these districts was taken from the Common Core of Data (CCD) from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (<http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/ccddata.asp>).

The study used two waves of outreach:

1. Approximately 10,000 randomly-selected school districts were sent a paper copy of a letter of invitation along with a paper copy of the survey form and a business reply envelope. These respondents were also presented with a web-based option to respond. Both the paper and web-based version of the survey contained a unique survey identification number.
2. Approximately two months after data collection for the first outreach effort was complete all school districts that had not responded were sent a second paper copy of a letter of invitation along with a paper copy of the survey form and a business reply envelope. These respondents were also presented with a web-based option to respond. Both the paper and web-based version of the survey contained a unique survey identification number.

All potential respondents were informed of the funding source for the study (the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation), who was conducting it (“researchers at Hunter and Babson Colleges”) and that “All responses will be held in strictest confidence and at no time will districts or respondents be identified by name.” The survey form was composed of two portions, one that applied to all respondents and a second section to be completed only by those districts with online or blended course offerings. The invitation letter and the survey form itself were carefully worded to encourage responses from all school district representatives, regardless of whether they were involved with online learning or not.

All data collected were entered into an online database, either directly by the respondent if the school district responded using the web version or, in the case of paper-based responses, by the researchers. Each entry included the unique survey ID number that was used to link the response to the description data of that school district contained in the Education's National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data. The data linked from this source included location information (city, town, state, urban/rural), the grade range in the district, the number of students in the district, and the number of teachers in the district.

All data were investigated for missing or out of range values. All missing data were coded as either structural missing (the question did not apply to the respondent) or as non-response missing (the question did apply, but the respondent did not provide any data). After the survey data were merged with the CCD data, cleaned, and all missing value codes added, they were input into the SPSS statistical package for analysis.

The analysis data set contains 867 records (N=867), representing 5.4 percent of all school districts of interest. Responses were received from school districts in all fifty states plus the District of Columbia.

FINDINGS

Respondent Characteristics

The population that participated in this survey represents a cross section of American K–12 education. Eight hundred and sixty-seven (N=867) out of a total universe of 16,000 school districts in the United States responded to this survey. The school districts responding represent approximately 6,297 schools, 3 million students, and 148,000 teachers from every state in the country plus the District of Columbia. The locale of these school districts is presented in Table 1. Definitions of these locales are based on the U.S. Department of Education National Center of Education Statistics (NCES) codes (see Appendix B for definitions).

	Frequency	Percent
Large City	26	3.0
Mid-Size City	33	3.8
Urban Fringe of a Large City	138	15.9
Urban Fringe of a Mid-Size City	85	9.8
Large Town	6	.7
Small Town	136	15.7
Rural, outside CBSA	241	27.8
Rural, inside CBSA	141	16.3
Not Applicable	61	7.0
Total	867	100.0

Table 1. Locales of Respondents (NCES code used for locale; CBSA = Core-Based Statistical Area)

Nature and Extent of Online and Blended Learning

Table 2A shows that 69.8 percent of the school districts reporting had at least one student who had taken an online course in 2007-2008. It also shows that an additional 12.3 percent of those which did not have any students enrolled in an online class planned to have at least one student take an online course within the next three years. Table 2B indicates that 41.0 percent of the school districts reporting had at least one student take a blended course. It also indicates that an additional 21.2 percent of those which did not have any students enrolled in a blended course planned to have at least one student take a blended course within the next three years. Three quarters of all districts (74.8 %) currently have students taking either online or blended courses with approximately another 15.0 percent planning to introduce them over the next three years. These data clearly reflect that the vast majority of American school districts are providing some form of online learning for their students and more plan to do so within the next three years.

	Frequency	Valid Percent
No	154	17.9
Plan	106	12.3
Yes	600	69.8
Total	860	100.0
Missing	7	
Total	867	

Table 2A. Responses to: Are students at the [school district name] taking any fully online courses during the 2007–2008 (12 month) school year?

	Frequency	Valid Percent
No	306	37.8
Plan	171	21.2
Yes	331	41.0
Total	808	100.0
Missing	59	
Total	867	

Table 2B. Responses to: Are students at the [school district name] taking any blended/hybrid courses during the 2007-2008 (12 month) school year?

As a follow-up question to the above, respondents in school districts already enrolling students in online or blended courses were asked if they anticipated growth in enrollments over the next two years. A majority of the respondents anticipated growth (66.3% of districts expect growth in their fully online course enrollments and 61.2% expect growth in their blended enrollments). Districts predict that on average the number of students taking online courses will grow by 22.8 percent over the next two years. The expected level of growth is even greater among blended enrollment; districts with the largest enrollments are expecting the largest rates of growth, with several expecting to double or triple their enrollments over this time period. Blended enrollments lag those for fully online courses, but the growth expectations are much higher.

Table 3 shows the grade levels of the students taking online courses as categorized by fully online and blended/hybrid courses. Not surprisingly, the data show that the vast majority (69%) are enrolled at the high school level.

	Fully Online		Blended/Hybrid		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Grades K–5	9016	21%	305	1%	9321	14%
Grades 6–8	6201	15%	4746	20%	10947	17%
Grades 9–12	27289	64%	18312	78%	45601	69%
Other	316	<1%	54	<1%	370	<1%
Total	42822	100%	23417	100%	66239	100%

Table 3. Online Enrollment by Grade Level

An important goal of this study was to estimate the number of K–12 students enrolled in online learning and to compare its growth to the original study completed in 2005-2006. The respondents in this study reported that the total number of students enrolled in fully online courses was 42,822 and the total number of students enrolled in blended courses was 23,417 for a grand total of 66,239. An extrapolation of these figures estimates that approximately 1,030,000 students for the entire population of 49,000,000 public school students were enrolled in online and blended learning courses in the 2007-2008 academic year. In the original study, it was estimated that 700,000 K-12 students were enrolled in either online or blended learning course. The new estimate represents a 47 percent increase in enrollments in two years, or a compound annual growth rate of 21.3 percent. This is a substantial increase but probably accurate given the fact that a number of states such as Michigan, Florida, and Alabama have undertaken major new initiatives to promote online learning in K-12 schools. One caution needs to be mentioned regarding this estimate because it is based on data collected from public schools only. Approximately six million private school students and one million home-schooled students were not included in the sample. This would indicate that the actual number of K-12 students enrolled in online learning is actually higher.

Perceived Importance of Online and Blended Learning

The answers to question number 3 provide insight into the main reasons why online and blended courses are perceived as important by the respondents. For purposes of presentation, the seven-point Likert scale used to provide options in the survey was recoded into a three point scale with 1 = Not Important, 2 = Neutral, and 3 = Important. The percentage responses are provided in Figure 1A. These results indicate that the perceived importance of online learning related mostly to student needs as follows:

1. Meeting the needs of specific groups of students
2. Offering courses not otherwise available at the school
3. Offering Advanced Placement or college-level courses
4. Permitting students who failed a course to take it again
5. Reducing scheduling conflicts for students

Figure 1B provides a comparison of these data with the results from the original study. With the exception of the increase to the item “Certified teachers are not available for traditional face to face instruction,” the responses for both studies were fairly consistent. The increased importance of the “Certified teachers not available...” item is indicative of the fact that there continues to be a growing need for certified teachers in K-12 education.

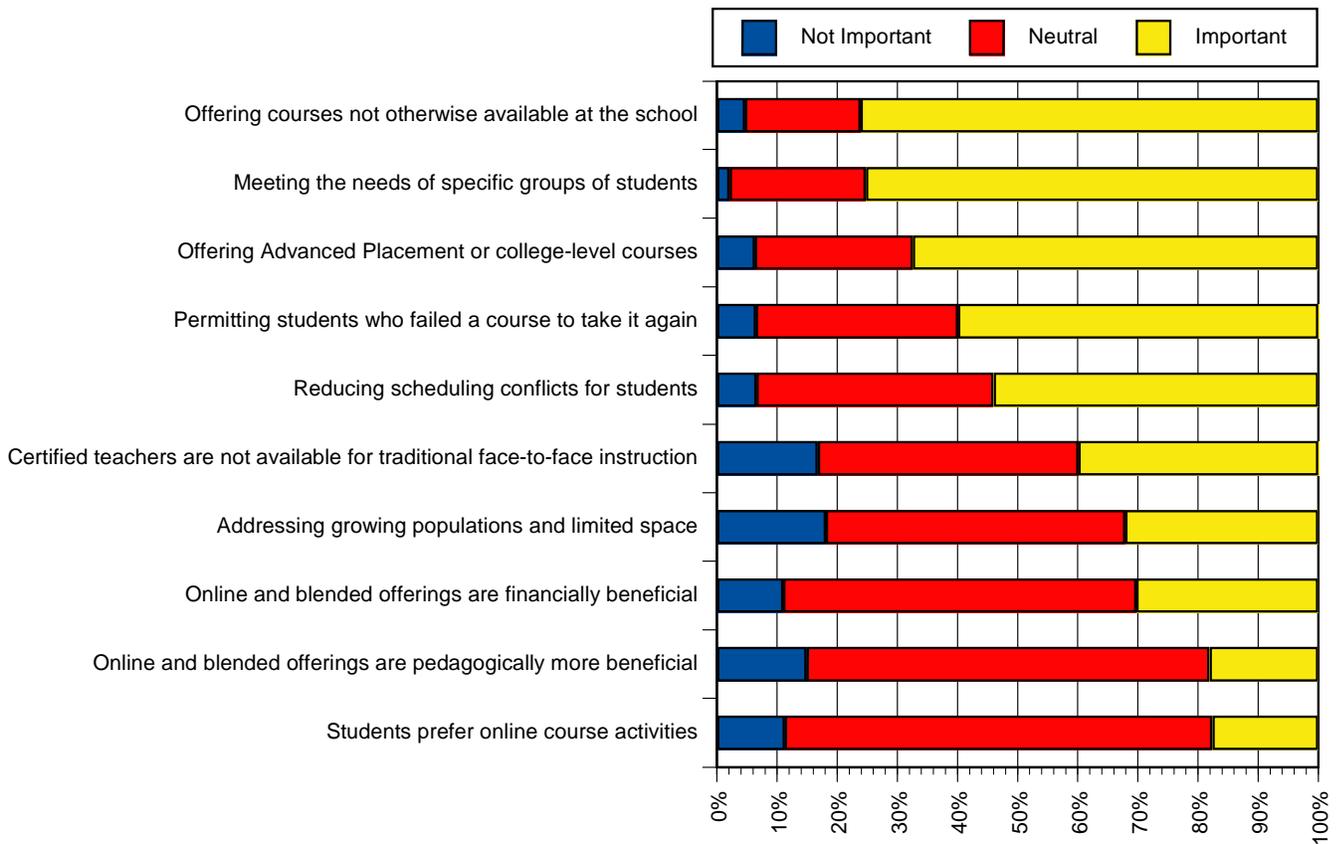


Figure 1A. Percentage Summary of Responses to: How important do you believe the following reasons are for a school district to offer fully online or blended learning courses?

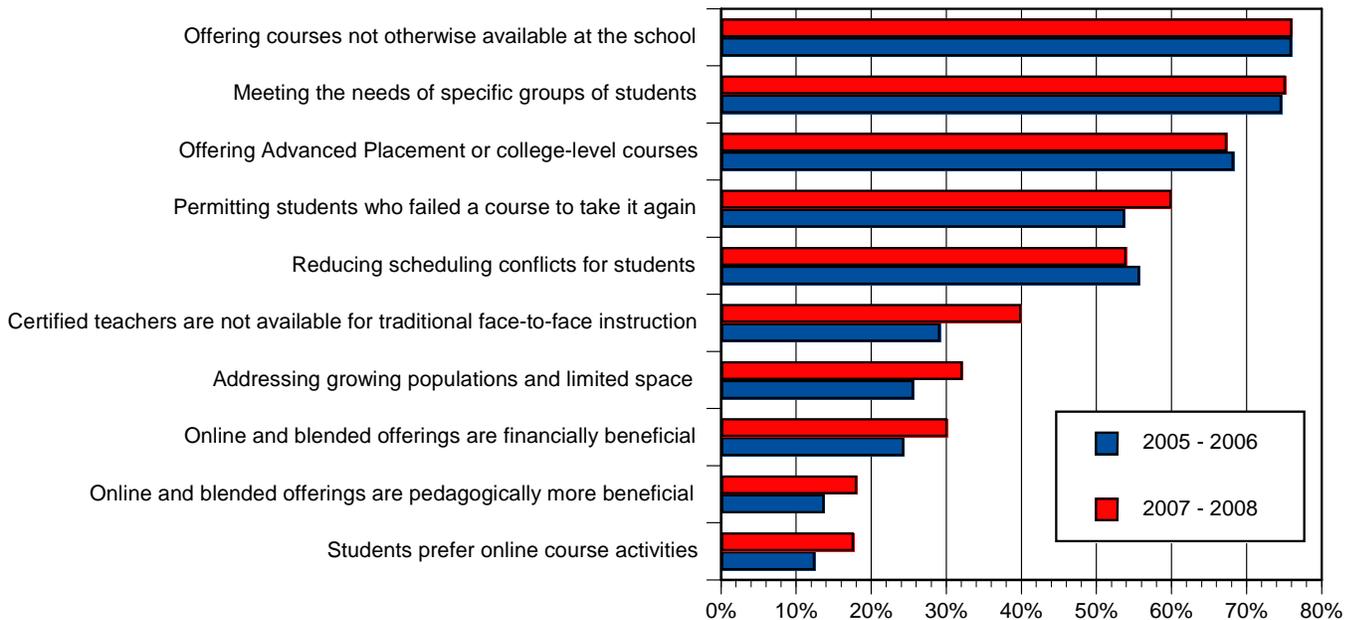


Figure 1B. Percentage Summary of Responses to: How important do you believe the following reasons are for a school district to offer fully online or blended learning courses?

A major assumption regarding K-12 online learning is that it is widely used for Advanced Placement and the more capable students. The data reported for this survey indicates that online learning is being used to meet the needs of a wide spectrum of students. To provide further insight into this issue, below are several quotations taken from comments supplied by the respondents to the survey.

“The students [taking online courses] vary from excelling students, students in and out of juvenile detention that do not succeed in a regular classroom, expecting parents, parents trying to finish school after having had babies..., and students trying to graduate before their 21st birthday.”

“We are a secure care facility with accredited high school programs. Our students love the online and blended courses. They experience success here and develop a sense of hope of attending a post secondary school upon release.”

“Should be a requirement for all HS graduates. Has been very successful for credit recovery and drop -out prevention.”

“...We are going to heavily promote the use of AP courses so that all high schools can meet the requirement that they offer a minimum of twelve AP courses in their high schools next year.”

“On line courses helped our students who were over aged and behind at least one grade level. Some were able to catch up in grades 9-12 and some were able to graduate because of the availability of the courses.”

“On-line offerings have made it possible for at-risk students to earn make-up credit for graduation purposes; advanced students can take courses that we do not offer.”

“We are a correctional institution - our students are not allowed to take online courses.”

These quotes support the perception that online learning is meeting the needs of a wide range of students from those who need to make-up coursework (e.g., credit recovery) to those who need extra help, and to those who want to take more advanced placement and college-level courses.

Barriers and Issues

Insight into some of the barriers and issues that school districts face in offering online learning was provided by answers to other questions in the survey. For purposes of presentation, the seven-point Likert scale used to provide options was recoded into a three point scale with 1 = Not Important, 2 = Neutral, and 3 = Important. The percentage responses are provided in Figure 2A and indicate that the major barriers and issues for online learning are:

1. Concerns about course quality
2. Course development and/or purchasing costs
3. Concerns about receiving funding based on student attendance for online and/or blended/hybrid education courses
4. The need for teacher training

Issues related to technology infrastructure or government policies were not deemed to be as serious by most of the respondents. Figure 2B provides a comparison of these data with the results from the original study. The responses for both studies were fairly consistent.

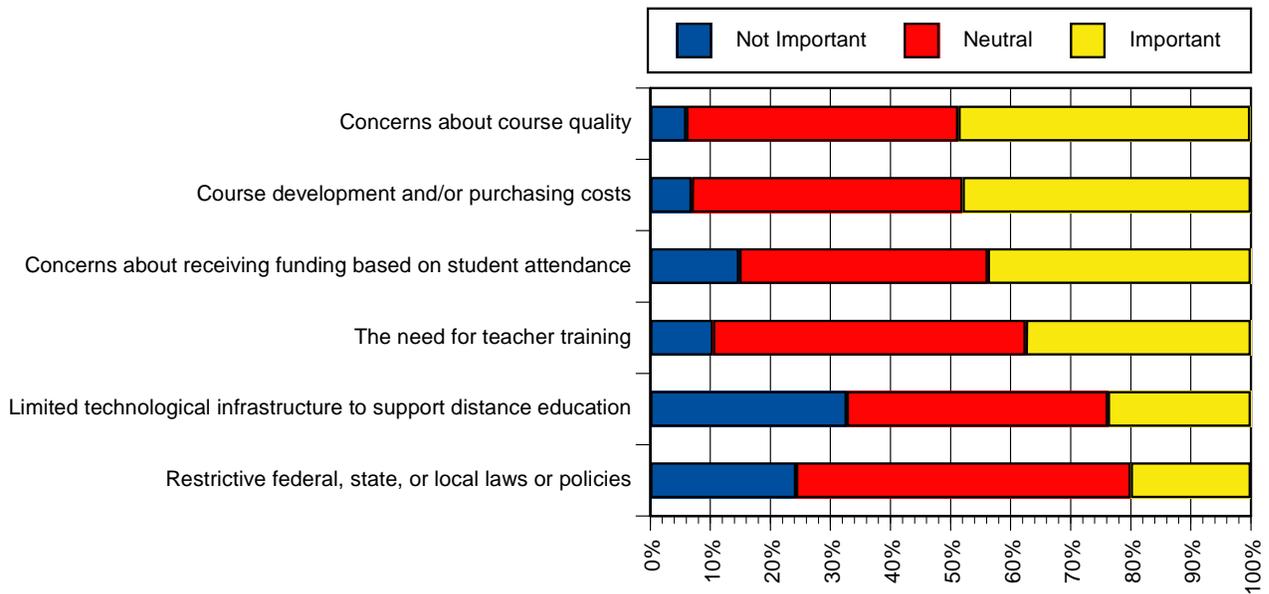


Figure 2A. Percentage Summary of Responses to: How much of a barrier the following areas would be (or are) in offering fully online or blended learning courses?

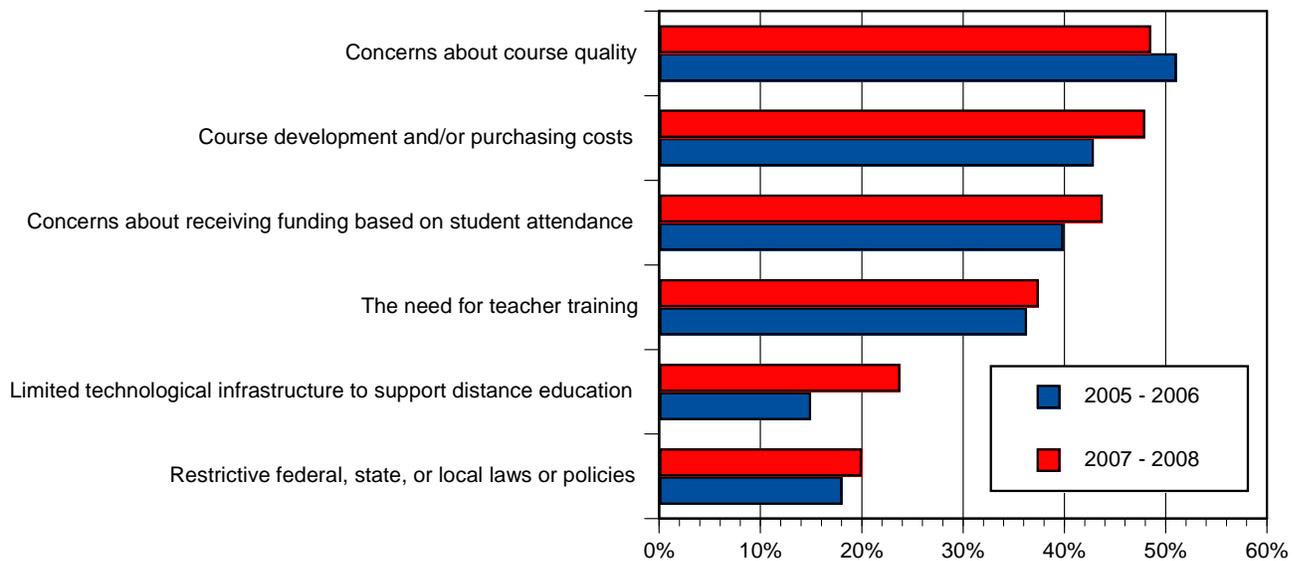


Figure 2B. Percentage Summary of Responses to: How much of a barrier the following areas would be (or are) in offering fully online or blended learning courses?

To provide further insight into these barriers, below are several quotations taken from comments supplied by the respondents to the survey.

Instruction and Teacher Issues

“Online learning is not a panacea...”

“The quality of instruction does not match traditional face to face teaching. However, there is a need for students making up coursework--I think that is its most valuable use.”

“[My responses] address courses that are under the control of my district where we can monitor quality of instruction and student participation and performance. I am very concerned about the for profit online schools that take the state's money, but are not held accountable for student performance.”

“Online courses cannot replace face-to-face instruction effectively. Human interaction promotes greater student motivation and performance.”

“We have begun to offer on-line options this year... in order to return full-time cyber students to district oversight. However, we continue to have reservations about the quality of work, effort and authenticity of what is submitted as student generated. ”

“The keys to the future of online options are: Well trained online instructors, High quality online offerings that align with state standards, Effective strategies for maintaining connections with students, Cost effective options for districts”

“As an administrator I am interested in fully embracing online learning; however, our community (including teachers) are critical of the quality, content, etc. As online courses are evaluated and proven to be viable means of delivery quality instruction, our community will more fully embrace this instructional model.”

“...teacher contract- some concerns about replacing teachers w/ online courses”

Funding Issues

“Funding is not available to purchase courses. For a small district, we cannot provide our own.”

“We would offer more courses if we could afford the infrastructure to support additional students. We are also interested in blended/hybrid courses, but again, funds to support this are negligible.”

“I am very interested in offering online/hybrid courses, but the costs to operate a center to provide this opportunity exceeds the allotment of money given per student by the state...computers, dedicated T-1 line, personnel etc.”

“We see the need for on-line 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 district can deliver an on-line course and not lose state aid because of no physical seat time.”

Policy Issues

“Blended courses address a need for 21st Century learning styles, but state and federal government place too many restrictions on the possibilities.”

“The largest concern is the need for policy on the school level regarding students withdrawal from courses and application of credit. Funding is also an issue.”

“We are interested in growing our course offerings through our own staff and through outside sources as well. We are hoping that the state DOE will see the benefit of this and will make adjustments in attendance policies and allow us to claim these students and receive funding for the students who chose to take on-line classes from home.”

“The real issue in our state concerns how we count our students who take online or hybrid courses and whether the funding follows them or not. ...”

“Government restrictions that result in an inability to pursue development of high quality courses and serve students with genuine needs are a significant barrier. There are times that we feel encouraged to do creative think and then are told to get back in the box.”

“In Texas, we are required to teach the TEKS. If on-line courses are aligned to the TEKS, then it would be easier to use them.”

The data in Figure 2A along with the respondents’ comments above indicate that significant issues (e.g., course quality, cost, funding policies, teacher training) remain to be resolved. Regardless of these issues, many school districts are moving forward with online learning either by new initiatives or by expanding existing programs.

Lessons Learned

Insight into lessons learned with online instruction was provided by the respondents who already offer online courses to their students. For purposes of presentation, the seven-point Likert scale used to provide options was recoded into a three point scale with 1 = Disagree, 2 = Neutral, and 3 = Agree. The percentage responses (see Figure 3A) indicate that there is strong agreement on the following:

1. Students need more discipline to succeed in an online course than in a face-to-face course.
2. Fully online and blended/hybrid courses fulfill an important educational need for my students.

These respondents tended to be more neutral with regard to the other four issues namely:

1. State or local governing bodies or regulations are encouraging school districts to enroll students in online and blended courses.
2. Fully online and blended/hybrid course experiences are comparable in educational value to traditional face to face instruction.
3. Fully online courses and blended/hybrid courses have allowed [school district] to build important relationships with other organizations.
4. Faculty at [school district] accept the value and legitimacy of online education.

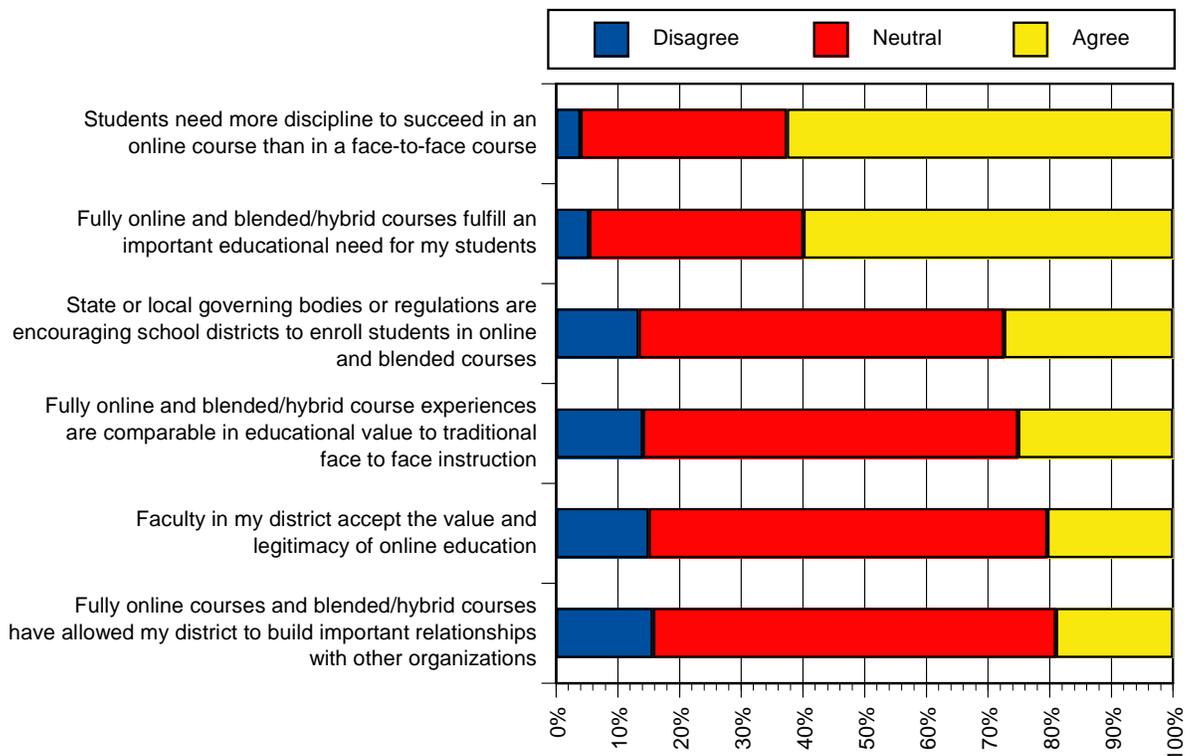


Figure 3A. Percentage Summary of Responses to: Please select the level at which you disagree/agree with the following statements. (Asked of only those school districts that provide online or blended courses to their students.)

Figure 3B provides a comparison of these data with the results from the original study. The responses for both studies were fairly consistent.

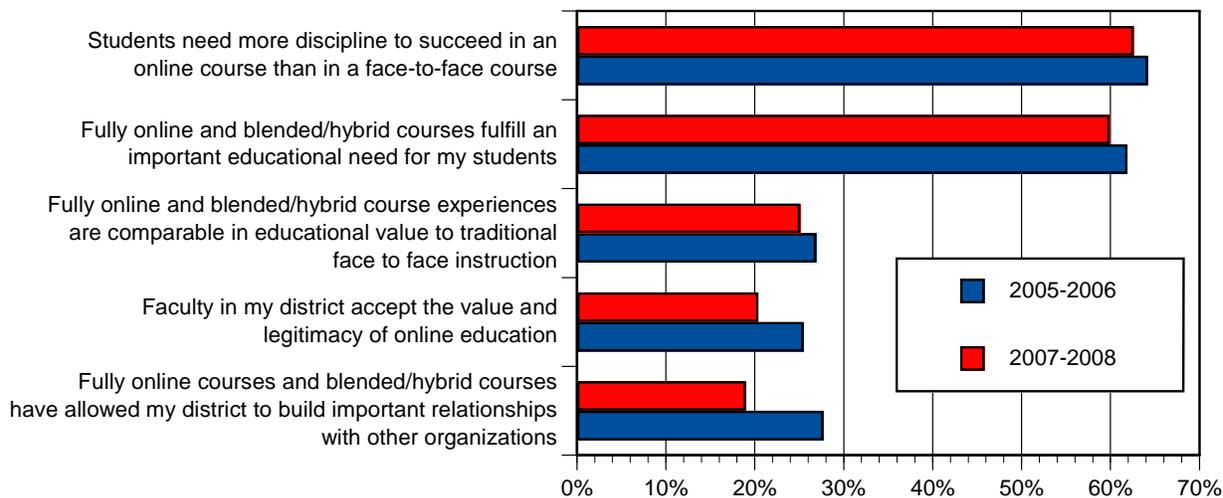


Figure 3B. Percentage Summary of Responses to: Please select the level at which you disagree/agree with the following statements. (Asked of only those school districts that provide online or blended courses to their students.)

To provide further insight into these “lessons”, below are several quotations taken from comments supplied by the respondents to the survey.

Self-Direction

“Students need to be self-directed, though, and I have seen even some of our brightest students fail these courses because they lack self-direction skills.”

“Online education opportunities benefit some students who are self-disciplined.... I have found that mathematics is one area in which students achieve less success than in language-based courses (language arts, science, social sciences) when engaged in online course work.”

“Observation: Students that struggle with reading have difficulty with online courses. Students that are self starters and with average or above academic skills find the highest success rate with on-line courses.”

Fulfilling an Important Educational Need for Students

“Online + blended/hybrid courses provide a window to the 21st century education and workforce development. Courses should no longer be x numbers of hours in with a teacher in front of a classroom and a book in front of a student.”

“I work at an alternative school. Using online classes for our students allows each student to work at their own pace. . . It also allows us to offer a variety of classes that only 1 or 2 students might want to take.”

“We are very pleased with the use of online courses for our students and believe that the use of these courses offers opportunities to our students that enhance their educational experience.”

“We offered our seniors the opportunity to take online courses in the Fall 2007 and the Spring 2008 semesters. These were very successful for our students. It provided opportunity for our students to receive college credit prior to graduation. We have students graduating with 20 plus college credits.”

State and Consortial Activities

“The state of Alabama has the ACCESS program which is a state-wide initiative to provide distance learning.”

“...[in]summer of 2008, 361 students enrolled in 516 online course sections via the Idaho Digital Learning Academy, a partially state-funded provider of online courses.”

“At present our state department of education (Mississippi) offers free online courses to our students. We have been fairly satisfied with the program. Our only concern is that classes close and some students do not get a chance to register due to course load.”

“We are members of blendedschools.net and are very happy with the services and products provided by the organization for online education within our district. Our approach is a “blend” of online instruction along with a required weekly meeting with the instructor during after school hours. The weekly meeting has helped tremendously to keep students on task and more accountable for their progress.”

“We are in a consortium, SuperNet. Through the Virtual High School that has been created by teachers in our districts, we have an impressive offering of curriculum that is online. We are using the courses for credit recovery and to resolve getting classes due to scheduling conflicts.”

Major Providers of Online and Blended Learning

An important question for this study was: Who are the major providers of online and blended learning courses to K–12 schools? The assumption was that most school districts were not providing their own online learning services and had to contract or buy these services from other providers. Table 4A provides a percentage distribution of the online learning providers of respondents to this survey who reported that they had students

enrolled in online or blended learning courses. Percentages do not add up to 100 percent because many school districts are using multiple providers.

Online Instruction Provider	Fully Online (percentage of districts with fully online courses using this provider)	Blended (percentage of districts with blended courses using this provider)
Your district (i.e., delivered centrally from the district)	17.0%	35.1%
Cyber (i.e., online) charter school in your district	8.9%	6.5%
Other schools in your district	6.3%	4.6%
Another local school district, or schools in another district, in your state	21.2%	18.5%
Education service agencies within your state (e.g., BOCES, COE, IU), not including the state education agency or local school districts	28.9%	15.1%
State virtual school in your state (i.e., state-centralized K–12 courses available through Internet- or web-based methods)	40.7%	14.5%
State virtual school in another state	10.3%	2.2%
Districts or schools in other states (other than state virtual schools)	4.9%	2.2%
Postsecondary institution	46.5%	27.1%
Independent vendor	34.7%	17.5%
Other	2.2%	1.5%

Table 4A. Online Learning and Blended Learning Providers

The data in Table 4A indicate that the major providers are:

1. Postsecondary Institutions
2. State Virtual Schools within the district’s home state
3. Independent Vendors
4. Education Service Agencies

Also important is the fact that many school districts are using multiple providers and are not relying exclusively on one provider. Table 4B provides a frequency distribution of the number of online learning providers being used by the respondents.

Percentage of Online or Blended Learning Providers	%
1	17.5%
2	24.9%
3	18.8%
4 or more	38.8%
Total	100%

Table 4B. Percentage of Online Learning Providers Being Used

The data in Table 4B indicate that only 17.5 percent of the school districts responding to this question were using one online learning provider. The vast majority (82.5%) of the school districts are selecting multiple online learning providers depending upon their needs rather than contracting exclusively with one provider. They may develop their own online courses, partner with another provider to offer a course, contract with a virtual school for a course that they are not able to offer, or might rely on a postsecondary institution for students to enroll in college-level work. The use of multiple vendors makes sense and allows the school districts to be most flexible in meeting the specific needs of their students. Even if one examines a specific category of online learning providers such as postsecondary institutions (see Table 4C), only 48.1 percent of the school districts are using one college or university. The majority (51.9%) are using multiple colleges and universities. As an aside, the US Department of Education [13] in a study of postsecondary institutions in 2006-2007 estimated that there were more than 500 colleges and universities or approximately 12 percent of higher education institutions providing distance learning services to K-12 school districts.

Percentage of Postsecondary Providers	%
1	48.1%
2	23.8%
3	16.9%
4 or more	11.2%
Total	100%

Table 4C. Percentage of Postsecondary Providers Being Used

DISCUSSION

The Future of Online Learning

In 2008, Clayton Christensen, Michael Horn, and Curtis Johnson published a book entitled *Disrupting Class: How Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns* [11]. Christensen is a professor at the Harvard Business School and the best-selling author of *The Innovator's Dilemma*. In *Disrupting Class...*, Christensen, Horn, and Johnson present a compelling rationale for changing education in a way that makes far greater use of online technology to provide more student-centered and individualized instruction. The book's call for change is being cited by a host of respected educators as something policymakers need to consider in looking at the future of American education. Among the most provocative aspects of this book are the predictions that by the year 2016 about one-quarter of all high school courses will be online and that by the year 2019 about one-half of all high school courses will be online. In Chapter 4, Christensen et al provide the bases for their prediction and among other citations refer twice to our original study published in 2007. While we are not making the same predictions as Christensen et al, the data collected in our original study and in this present study indicate that online learning is spreading throughout K-12 education and specifically in secondary education.

In our original study, the number of students enrolled in online courses was estimated at 700,000. In the present study it is estimated at 1,030,000, a 47 percent increase in two years¹. This is quite a substantial increase. Furthermore, these figures do not derive from a few highly-successful large virtual schools or the distance learning needs of rural school districts. They are the result of students taking either online or blended courses in three quarters of all districts (74.8 %) with approximately another 15.0 percent of the districts planning to introduce them over the next three years. Furthermore, online learning in K-12 education is in its nascent stages and significant growth is yet to come. A majority of the respondents in this study are anticipating that the number of students taking online courses will grow by 22.8 percent and that those taking blended courses will grow even more over the next two years. It also appears that the number of school districts offering online courses is accelerating. One of the questions asked of respondents who were offering online or blended learning courses, was: In what year did any student in your district *first* take a fully online or blended/hybrid course? Figures 4 and 5 provide bar charts illustrating the percentage responses to this question. They show that online and blended learning have been on an upward spiral for the past eight years with more and more districts adopting these approaches in recent years. The data in these charts support the upward growth estimates discussed above. In 2007, our original study predicted that over the subsequent five or six years, the K-12 enrollment in online courses would easily approach several million students. The data collected in this current study supports that prediction and it is conceivable that by 2016 online enrollments could reach between 5 and 6 million K-12 (mostly high school) students.

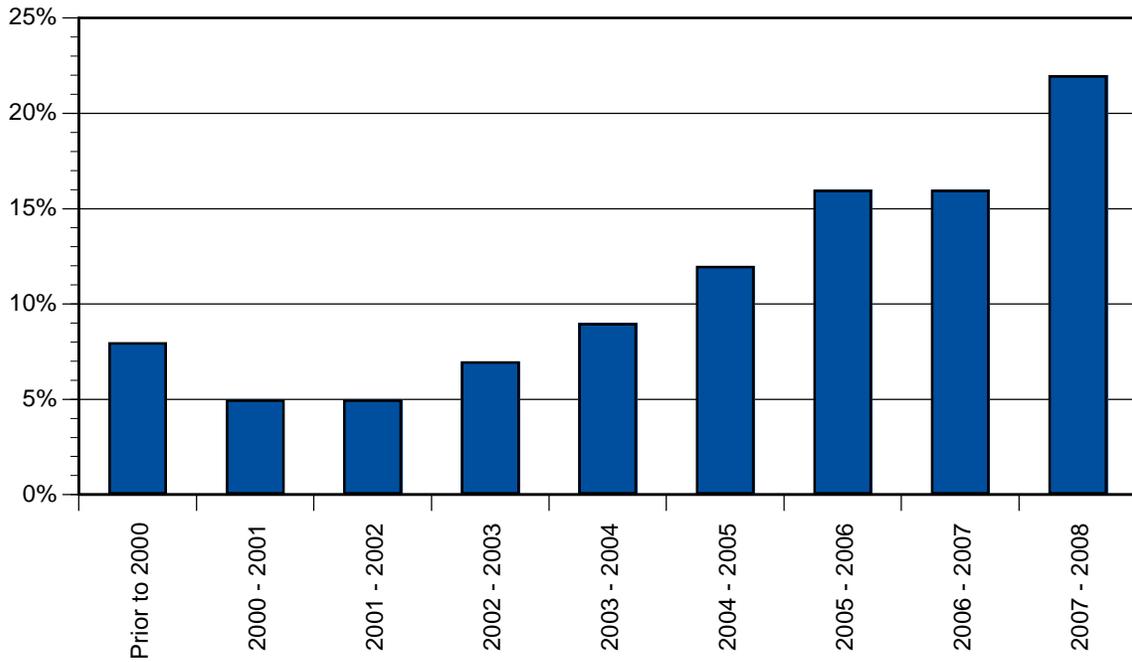


Figure 4. Year in which the First Student took an Online Course in those School Districts that indicated Students were enrolled in Online Courses.

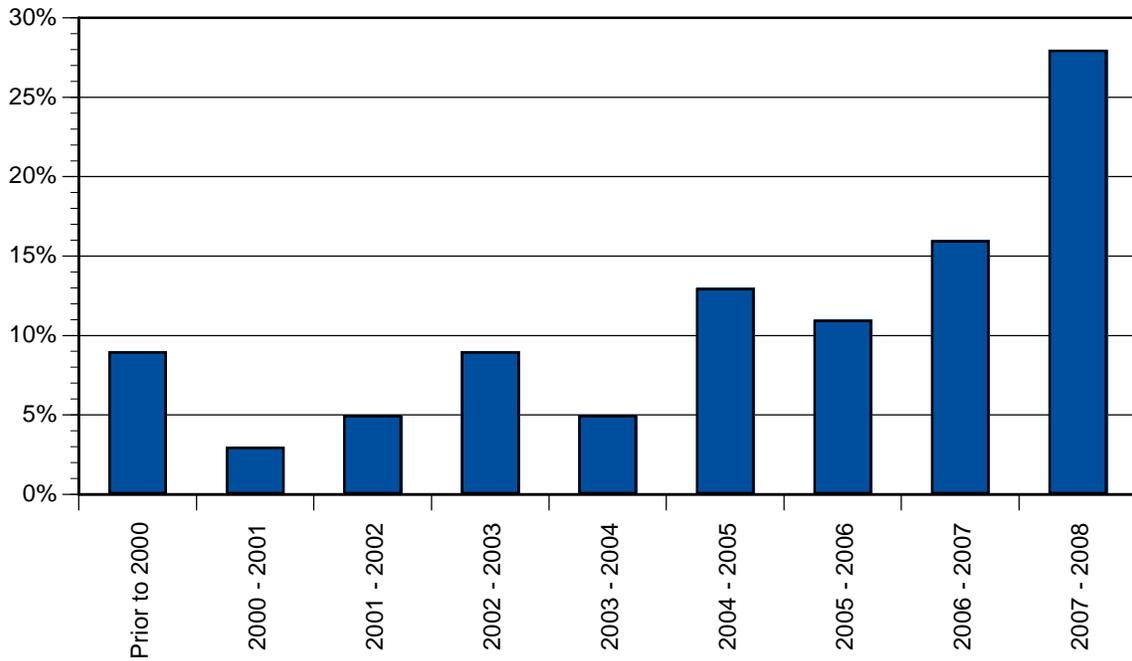


Figure 5. Year in which the First Student took a Blended Course in those School Districts that Indicated Students were enrolled in Blended Courses.

While the numbers are impressive, we do not want to present a picture of unbridled enthusiasm for online learning in the K-12 schools. As one of the respondents commented, it is not a “panacea”. There are important issues reported in the findings of this study that could slow its growth. Concerns continue to be expressed about the quality of online courses, costs, and state and local education policies. While resolvable, these issues need to be addressed at various levels of policymaking and are not simply the responsibility of the schools and districts. Large city school systems, state education departments, and even the federal government have roles to play. Several states such as Michigan (Merit Curriculum) and Alabama (Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators and Students Statewide) have initiated major new policies regarding online learning in secondary education. The Florida Virtual School is perhaps the most successful example of state policy supporting an online program that is meeting the needs of tens of thousands of students. Consortial arrangements such as the Virtual High School Global Consortium and blendedlearning.net provide quality services at reasonable costs. Lastly, colleges and universities, the main providers of online learning for K-12 students, have developed a good deal of expertise in designing and developing online programs and increasingly are becoming willing partners in assisting K-12 schools in developing K-12 online learning opportunities. However, more can and needs to be done before online learning evolves into a readily acceptable alternative in primary and secondary school education.

Before concluding this section on the future of K–12 online learning, a brief mention regarding private schools and home-schooled students is in order. There are six million private school students and an estimated 1.1 million students who are home-schooled [12]. Data especially on the home-schooled is lacking. No attempt was made in this study to collect data on these two populations and the estimates provided would likely increase if they were included.

Rural School Districts

In the original study and in this study, 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 quality education. 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 compared to urban and suburban districts have forced rural school districts to use their financial resources as wisely and effectively as possible. Online learning provides these districts with a cost beneficial method of providing courses that otherwise would require hiring teachers, many of whom would be uncertified in their subject areas and who would not have enough students to justify their salaries. This would be true not only for electives and enrichment subjects but increasingly for required courses as well. Several of these issues were presented earlier in this report. Below the voices of respondents to our survey state well their concerns and needs:

“[Online learning] provides great opportunities for rural school systems.”

“Without this choice [online learning], there may have been 40 fewer high school graduates in our small county last year.”

“Online courses have been very beneficial because we are very small and students need credit recovery or they need to take/retake a course we are not offering that semester.”

“It has great potential for our district since we are located in a small rural isolated area of Michigan....”

“Online courses provide needed options for our students in a high poverty area with limited resources. These services expand learning opportunities for our students and enable them [to enroll in] courses they may not be able to take in our school and to accelerate/enhance learning through AP courses.”

“I can't speak for urban communities - online courses in rural areas are important. Our teachers have multiple preps, offering electives with only a handful of students is not feasible. As well, some instructors in areas such as foreign language are hard to come by. Another great attribute of distance ed/ online courses is availability of dual credit or college credit. Students can graduate high school with a semester of college courses completed.”

“I believe that with the decreasing number of certified teachers available and the economically disadvantaged rural area that I live in; this type of teaching and learning will definitely bridge the gap. My district is ...in dire need of certified teachers. ...It will also allow our students the opportunity to be more competitive in education because they will be able to have more Honor, AP and College Preparatory courses.”

“We are a rural Texas... school. Online courses have been important to making college courses available to our students...”

Online or Blended Learning

The data in the original study and in this study indicate that fully online courses have higher student enrollments than blended courses. The results also indicate that many school districts continue to have concerns about quality, student readiness, and staff development related to online education. As stated in our original study, it may be that blended instruction is a better option for districts with these concerns. We continue to agree with Julie Young's comments referenced earlier in this report that in the next five years multiple types of blended models will emerge [6]. Also, as referenced earlier [11], the exuberance for the future of online learning as expressed by Christensen, Horn, and Johnson will likely come to pass only with the proliferation of blended learning models where online instruction not only meets individual student needs but where there is also a "flesh and bones" teacher available to assist and guide students in their studies.

It is also our position that any future research on online learning environments needs to distinguish between the different instructional models. Fully online and blended learning represent two different models with time online serving as the distinguishing feature between the modalities. But we are seeing versions of each of these models that are substantially different from one another and that take different approaches to instruction. We encourage other researchers, especially those examining student outcomes, to define the specific nature of the online learning models being investigated. We are approaching the point where to simply identify a course as being taught online is too broad a generalization.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this current study was to replicate the original study published in 2007 in order to substantiate its findings and to examine any changes that have occurred in online learning in K-12 school districts in the two years between studies. Issues related to planning, operational concerns, and online learning providers were examined. We conclude that the earlier findings have been substantiated. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, online and blended learning grew by forty-seven percent between 2005-2006 and 2007-2008. Every indication is that this growth will continue in the foreseeable future. If K-12 follows the pattern of enrollment growth in higher education, it is quite possible that online learning will emerge as a substantial component of all learning at the secondary level. While we do not corroborate the expansion timeline as presented by Christensen, Horn and Johnson, we do support their concept that online and blended learning environments will become a most important aspect of secondary education in the future. Our disagreement is simply a question of "when" rather than "whether".

NOTES

1. It would be beneficial to try to support our estimate with the results of other studies on online learning in K-12 schools. However, there have been very few studies on this topic. The only national studies (besides our own research) that provide comparisons for two or more years are those conducted by the United States Department of Education (USDOE) for the 2002-2003 and 2004-2005 academic years [4,5]. While the two pairs of studies cannot be compared directly, we can look at some of the data to substantiate our estimates. In both of their studies, the USDOE examined “distance education” using any technology including online, Internet-based delivery. Distance education was defined as credit-granting courses offered to elementary and secondary school students enrolled in which the teacher and the student were in different locations. The implication of this definition is that the course was fully delivered in distance education mode. There is no provision for blended – some online and some face-to-face – courses as included in our studies. The USDOE studies also collected data on course enrollments, whereas our studies asked specifically for the number of individual students enrolled in distance education courses. A student enrolled in multiple distance education courses would be counted once in our studies and multiple times for each course enrolled in the US Department of Education studies. Even with these differences, it may be possible to substantiate our estimate.

In 2002-2003, the total number of course enrollments reported by the USDOE in distance education courses was 328,000. By types of primary technology used for distance education, “districts reported two-way interactive video (49 percent) ...Internet courses using asynchronous computer-based instruction (34 percent) and Internet courses using synchronous computer-based instruction (9 percent)...” [5, p. 45]. However, not all school districts are the same size. For large school districts with enrollments of 10,000 students or higher, the percentages change dramatically to 24 percent for interactive video, 59 percent for asynchronous Internet course, and 11 percent for synchronous Internet course. A modest estimate that approximately 50% of all distance education enrollments were in either asynchronous or synchronous online courses would yield 164,000 course enrollments. In 2004-2005, the total number of course enrollments reported by the USDOE in all types of distance education courses was 506,950, an increase of 55 percent. However, districts reported that use of Internet technologies had increased significantly and specifically that the “primary mode of instructional delivery for any technology-based distance education courses was two-way interactive video used by 41 percent of these districts... asynchronous Internet technology (40 percent) ..., and Internet technologies using synchronous computer-based instruction were used ... by 13 percent of these districts”. [5, p. 45] However, again for large school districts with enrollments of 10,000 students or higher, the percentages change dramatically to 19 percent for interactive video, 63 percent for asynchronous Internet course, and 14 percent for synchronous Internet course. Taking a conservative estimate that 65 percent of all distance education enrollments were in asynchronous or synchronous online courses, the number of course enrollments in online courses can be estimated at 329,517 in 2004-2005, for an increase of

approximately 165,000 course enrollments or a little more than 100 percent increase in two years (or a compound annual growth rate of 42 percent). If we were to extend the rate of increase in online course enrollments of a 42 percent increase every year, the number of course enrollments in online courses in 2007-2008 (the year of our present study) would be 938,488.

The issue then becomes how to compare the extended USDOE figure of 938,488 course enrollments to the 1,030,000 estimated in our study. Our estimate is relatively close to the USDOE estimate, but our estimate reflects individual students enrolled in online courses while the USDOE reflects course enrollments (not individual students enrolled). This would lower the USDOE estimate number. Furthermore, our study estimate includes students taking blended courses. The USDOE data collection did not differentiate and essentially examine “distance education” courses. In all likelihood, the USDOE estimate reflects fully online course enrollments and would increase if blended course enrollments were included. Our data also show significant increases in the number of school districts enrolling students in online or blended learning courses for the first time in the academic years between 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 which would further increase USDOE estimates. In summary, we remain comfortable with our estimate that in 2007-2008 approximately 1,030,000 students were enrolled in fully online and blended courses. And that, given the differences in definitions between the two studies, this estimate matches what you would expect from the USDOE estimates as reported in 2002-2003 and 2004-2005.

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This survey can be completed online at <http://www.sloansurvey.org/> - Use activation code: 99999999

Did students in your district take any **fully online** or **blended/hybrid courses** between July 1, 2007 and June 30, 2008?

	At least one student took this type of course	No students; but the district plans to offer them within three years	No students; no district plans to offer them within three years
Fully online courses A course where most or all of the content is delivered online, typically has no face-to-face meetings	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Blended/hybrid courses A course that blends online and face-to-face delivery. Substantial proportion of the content is delivered online, sometimes uses online discussions, and typically has few face-to-face meetings	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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

	Not at all Important		Neutral			Very Important	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Online and blended offerings are pedagogically more beneficial.	<input type="radio"/>						
Addressing growing populations and limited space.	<input type="radio"/>						
Online and blended offerings are financially beneficial.	<input type="radio"/>						
Students prefer online course activities.	<input type="radio"/>						
Certified teachers are not available for face-to-face instruction.	<input type="radio"/>						
Offering courses not otherwise available at the school.	<input type="radio"/>						
Offering Advanced Placement or college-level courses.	<input type="radio"/>						
Meeting the needs of specific groups of students.	<input type="radio"/>						
Reducing scheduling conflicts for students.	<input type="radio"/>						
Permitting students who failed a course to take it again.	<input type="radio"/>						

How much of a barrier are the following areas to your district in offering fully online or blended/hybrid learning courses?

	Not at all Important		Neutral			Very Important	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Course development and/or purchasing costs.	<input type="radio"/>						
Limited technological infrastructure to support distance education.	<input type="radio"/>						
Concerns about course quality.	<input type="radio"/>						
Restrictive federal, state, or local laws or policies.	<input type="radio"/>						
The need for teacher training.	<input type="radio"/>						
Concerns about receiving funding based on student attendance for online and/or blended/hybrid education courses.	<input type="radio"/>						

We are interested in your opinions. Please let us know your thoughts (positive or negative) on any aspect on online and blended/hybrid courses and their potential for your district. (Use additional sheets if needed.)

Email address if you would like a free download of the final survey report:
 [_____]

Survey continues on other side.

The following questions are for districts that offer online or blended/hybrid courses.

In what year did any student in your district **first** take a fully online or blended/hybrid course?

Year for first fully online course: [_____] Year for first blended/hybrid course: [_____]

Select the level (1-7) at which you disagree/agree with the following statements with regard to students in your district.

	Strongly Disagree		Neutral			Strongly Agree	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Fully online and blended/hybrid courses fulfill an important educational need for my students.	<input type="radio"/>						
Fully online and blended/hybrid course experiences are comparable in educational value to traditional face-to-face instruction.	<input type="radio"/>						
State or local governing bodies or regulations are encouraging school districts to enroll students in online and blended courses.	<input type="radio"/>						
Fully online courses and blended/hybrid courses have allowed my district to build important relationships with other organizations.	<input type="radio"/>						
Students need more discipline to succeed in an online course than in a face-to-face course.	<input type="radio"/>						
Faculty in my district accept the value and legitimacy of online education.	<input type="radio"/>						

The nature of online or blended/hybrid courses taken by students in my district (check all that apply):

	Required courses	Elective courses	Remedial courses	Advanced Placement (AP) courses	Courses for College Credit other than AP	Other
Fully online courses	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Blended/hybrid courses	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

What is your best estimate of the **number of student enrollments** (a student enrolled in more than one course should be counted only once) between July 1, 2007 and June 30, 2008?

	Number of students taking at least one fully online course	Number of students taking at least one blended/hybrid course
Grades K-5		
Grades 6-8		
Grades 9-12		
Other		

Over the next two years, my district expects **fully online course enrollments** to:

- Grow by about [_____] percent.
- Stay about the same.
- Decrease.

Over the next two years, my district expects **blended/hybrid course enrollments** to:

- Grow by about [_____] percent.
- Stay about the same.
- Decrease.

The **provider(s)** for fully online and blended courses for my district are (check all that apply):

Provider	Online Courses	Blended/Hybrid Courses
Your district (i.e., delivered centrally from the district)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cyber (online) charter school in your district	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other schools in your district	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Another local school district, or schools in another district, in your state	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Education service agencies within your state (e.g., BOCES, COE, IU), not including the state education agency or local school districts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
State virtual school in your state	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
State virtual school in another state	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Districts or schools in other states (other than state virtual schools)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Postsecondary institution	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Independent vendor	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Thank you for completing the survey, please insert this form in the supplied postage-paid return envelope.

In 2007, the Sloan Consortium issued a report on the extent and nature of online learning in K-12 schools. Entitled, *K-12 Online Learning: A Survey of U.S. School District Administrators*, this report was welcomed by professional organizations and the popular media interested in the use of online technology for instruction in the public schools. It was based on a national survey of school district administrators during the 2005-2006 academic year. It was one of the first studies to collect data on and compare fully online and blended learning (part online and part traditional face-to-face instruction) in K-12 schools. The purpose of this current study is to replicate the original study in order to substantiate its findings and to examine what if any changes occurred in online learning in K-12 school districts. The current study was conducted two years later and was based on a national survey of school district administrators during the 2007-2008 academic year.



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