

Policy News



Washington State
School Directors' Association

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Online Learning Policy Required

For many years, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) adopted and implemented rules governing digital learning programs. At that time “digital programs” meant electronically delivered learning that occurs primarily away from the classroom. Last year, the Legislature reexamined the approval and monitoring provisions for online providers, student online learning opportunities and the roles and responsibilities of school districts in supporting online learning.

The new law describes the tremendous opportunity that online learning provides to students and stresses the importance of quality programs. To ensure oversight and accountability, the Legislature established specific objectives and actions that must occur.

Four initial goals for the state of Washington are to:

1) Provide objective information to students, parents and educators regarding available online learning

opportunities, including program and course content, how to register for programs and courses, teacher qualifications, student-to-teacher ratios, prior course completion rates and other evaluative information;

- 2) Create an approval process for multi-district online providers;
- 3) Enhance statewide equity of student access to high quality online learning opportunities; and
- 4) Require school district boards of directors to develop policies and procedures for student access to online learning opportunities.

School districts, the OSPI and the Washington State School Directors' Association (WSSDA) are the entities responsible for ensuring that the statewide online learning goals are achieved. The OSPI's role is to provide comprehensive information on online learning opportunities and to manage the approval and monitoring process. Districts are responsible for faci-

tating access for students and disseminating appropriate information to students, staff and community members. WSSDA fulfills its policy coordination role by assisting with development of the model policy and procedure.

The OSPI Multi-District Provider Approval Process

The Legislature established a new process for approval and monitoring of multi-district online providers. A district is considered a “multi-district online provider” if the district offers online courses or programs to students living outside the geographic boundaries of the district. However, a multi-district online provider does not include a school district online learning program in which fewer than ten percent of the students enrolled in the program are from other districts under the inter-district student transfer provisions. In other words, as long as ten percent or less of a district's online students are from other districts, the district is not a

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Policy News

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About the WSSDA

Founded in 1922, the Washington State School Directors' Association is comprised of all 1,477 school board members from Washington's 295 school districts. The districts they lead serve more than one million students, have a combined annual budget of \$6 billion, and employ nearly 100,000 people. WSSDA's core mission is focused on ensuring that school board members have the knowledge, tools and services they need to effectively govern their districts and improve student learning.

multi-district online provider and is not required to complete the OSPI approval process. If more than ten percent of a district's online students are from outside of the district, the district qualifies as a multi-district online provider and must comply with the OSPI approval process. Districts are advised to review the specific criteria provided in the OSPI rules. WAC 392-502.

As defined in the rules, if several school districts jointly develop and implement a regional online learning program through an inter-district cooperative program, they are not required to register through the OSPI multi-district approval process.

The OSPI issued their rules regarding multi-district providers on December 1, 2009. They will issue the first round of multi-district provider approval decisions by April 1, 2010. To receive approval, multi-district online providers must meet numerous assurances and criteria. For example:

- The provider must be accredited through an accrediting organization approved by the OSPI;
- Courses and programs offered must be aligned with the state of Washington academic standards;
- All teachers must be certified;
- If high school courses are offered, they must be for credit;
- All courses must comply with Washington laws;
- If advanced placement courses are offered, they must be approved via the College Board advanced placement course audit;
- Student information must be maintained in compliance with the Federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act;
- Web systems must meet specified accessibility levels;

- The provider must agree to respond to request for information from all compliance agencies including the OSPI; and
- Providers must keep the OSPI informed of any significant changes in the program.

Providers are approved for four years (with the exception of those that are "grandfathered in"). Once approved, the multi-district provider must supply essential information to the OSPI on their courses and programs. The information describes the overall instructional program, the content of individual online courses and programs, a link to the provider's Web site, registration information for online programs and courses, teacher qualifications, student-to-teacher ratios, course completion rates as defined by the OSPI and other information requested by the OSPI.

Although, a district may not be required to register with the OSPI as a multi-district online provider, they should be aware of the process and identify approved providers for students and their parents.

Beginning with the 2011-2012 school year, school districts will only be able to claim basic education funding for students enrolled in online courses or programs if the multi-district online provider is approved, if the program is offered by the district and serves ten percent or less of its students or if the program is offered through an inter-district cooperative program agreement.

There is one other circumstance under which a district may provide online courses to students. If the course is in a subject in which no online courses have been approved and the course meets high school graduation requirements (if it is a high school course), such courses

may be approved for state funding. The OSPI developed a criteria list to determine if a non-approved course is eligible for state funding. Districts that claim funding for a course from a non-approved provider must document satisfaction of the criteria.

Workgroup

The Legislature directed that the OSPI in collaboration with WSSDA, develop a model policy and procedure for online learning. Specifically, the legislation emphasized the model policy and procedure should detail how districts will provide students access to online learning opportunities.

In response to the legislative directive, WSSDA and the OSPI convened a workgroup representing various stakeholders. The groups invited to participate in the workgroup included representatives of principals, teachers, superintendents, online learning advisors, program directors and coordinators, alternative learning program directors as well as staff from the OSPI and WSSDA.

Over the course of several months, the workgroup reviewed the legislative charge, online learning policies from other states and drafted various proposals. The workgroup discussed potential issues related to online learning, such as granting credit and access to courses.

The directive from the Legislature regarding topics in the policy and procedure is very specific. However, many options exist within each topic. Ultimately, the workgroup identified options for online learning which each district must choose based on its needs and the needs of its students.

The agencies were directed to disseminate the model policy and procedure by February 1, 2010. School

districts have until August 2010 to adopt a policy for their school district. Districts are not required to adopt this model policy and procedure, but they must adopt a policy and procedure that addresses online learning for their district. The policy and procedure become effective for the 2010-2011 school year.

Typically, districts are required to have a policy and monitoring is done in connection with an OSPI or other government audit. The legislation requires that each school district submit its policy to the OSPI by September 15, 2010. This is a unique requirement for districts, but one that we highlight because the policies regarding online learning and student access will become part of a report that the OSPI submits to the Legislature in 2011.

Model Policy and Procedure

The model policy establishes the board's over-arching goals regarding online learning opportunities. It summarizes the board's beliefs regarding online learning, as well as their support for the district making online learning opportunities accessible to students.

There are many sections in the procedure where the district is asked to choose among a series of options depending on the types of programs and courses offered by the district. Particularly challenging for the workgroup was creating a document that establishes one correct approach.

Although districts have discretion in the types of online courses and programs they choose to offer, the law is very specific about the broad categories that must be considered. At a minimum, the model policy and procedure must discuss student eligibility criteria; the types of online courses available to students

through the school district; the methods districts will use to support student success, which may include a local advisor; when the school district will and will not pay course fees and other costs; the granting of high school credit; and a process for students and parents/guardians to formally acknowledge any course taken for which no credit is given.

The model procedure mirrors Washington law and defines an online course as one primarily delivered electronically using the Internet or other computer-based methods and that is taught by a teacher primarily from a remote location. "Online program" is defined as a program delivered primarily electronically using the Internet or other computer-based methods, is taught by a teacher primarily from a remote location, is a part-time or full-time sequential program and has an online component including online lessons and tools for student and data management.

Policy and Procedure Considerations

The model policy and procedure should be considered in the context of the district's overall approach to instruction. The district's overall goal is to provide high quality academic programs to students using all of the available resources. The Legislature's focus was on a quality education provided through online courses or programs and appropriate expenditure of funding. Districts are not required to offer online courses or programs. Rather, the purpose of the model policy and procedure is to address how a district will support students in accessing online learning. As districts develop, re-

view and revise their policies and procedures, they should consider the following issues:

✓ **Informing Students, Parents and Staff**

Students and their parents/guardians should be informed of the options available to them both within and outside of the district. The OSPI developed a list of providers and informational documents that offer guidance for districts, students, parents and staff. The district must give general information to all students. Once a student decides to enroll in an online course the district has an obligation to inform the parent/guardian that their child will take an online course, providing information on the prerequisites, technology requirements and course syllabi. Equally important is giving students and parents/guardians information regarding granting credit and course withdrawal.

A district's current mode of communication such as the district Web site, school calendar and student handbook are excellent mechanisms for sharing information regarding online learning. The district should also take advantage of in-person opportunities with parents such as student conferences, back-to-school nights and community outreach programs. These venues provide excellent opportunities for the district to share information about online learning with parents, staff and community.

✓ **Granting Credit for Online Courses**

Generally, students taking online courses should be granted credit in the same method as students taking courses in the traditional manner. However, because online courses can be of-

fered by the district or through an outside provider; or online course credit may be transferred into the district, it is important for the district to be prepared to address potential questions regarding awarding credit for online courses. The district will need to establish a process for students enrolled in courses outside of the district so that they can notify the appropriate administrator and receive pre-approval that the course is eligible for district credit. In the event that a student transfers into the district bringing online credits with them, the receiving district must be prepared to assess the course and provide credit consistent with how credit is awarded for other transfer courses.

✓ **Supporting Student Success**

Students have a variety of community, familial and educational support systems. One of the primary goals of the Legislature was to have districts "level the playing field" when it comes to students ability to access and benefit from the online learning environment. In developing its procedure, the district should consider the support it can provide to aid the success of those students who enroll in online courses. The OSPI suggests, and we recommend in the procedure, that districts provide an online learning support team. The district can choose the members of the team, however we recommend a local advisor, the registrar, a school administrator and the building technology specialist. These individuals serve as the primary contact to assist students in accessing courses, understanding the work and in helping the student to successfully complete the course. The team members working

with the students will determine the frequency of student contact. In addition to the staffing support, the district must also consider whether it will provide a class period during the school day for students to access their online learning course. Some districts will choose to offer formal courses for students to connect to their online courses. Other districts may offer the class period, but also offer additional opportunity for students to access computers outside of the school day. The law does not mandate how a district must provide these opportunities, but does require the district describe what it will do to support student success. For enrolled students taking online courses, the district should provide the necessary hardware and connectivity, as well as a learning support team to assist the student in using the resources to maximize their academic benefit.

✓ **Determining Which Students are Eligible**

Online learning opportunities may be available for students in kindergarten through twelfth grade, however, the district determines which grade levels are appropriate for its online courses and programs. Also, the prerequisites for a student enrolling in an online course will be determined by each district. In that regard, the legislation is not prescriptive. A district may establish grade level, grade point average, teacher/counselor/principal approval or other prerequisites to determine if a student has the academic ability to succeed in an online course. Prerequisites should not become a hindrance to students accessing online courses or programs. The district should also consider describing

the approval process for a student who wishes to enroll in an online course outside of the district through an inter-district transfer.

✓ **Courses and Programs Available**

Each district will determine the type and quantity of courses it provides online. At this point, it appears the district will only be limited by the availability of the course. Provision of courses may be determined by the need the district is attempting to fill. For some districts it may be important to provide a variety of credit retrieval courses for high school students. Online courses may offer the preferred alternative for students as well as the district to resolve scheduling challenges. Other districts may seek to offer advanced-level courses that historically do not attract a sufficient number of students to be offered as part of the regular curriculum. For small or rural districts where it is a challenge to offer unique courses, an opportunity to complete an online course may provide a solution for students. We provided examples in the model procedure as a starting point. We hope that

district staff and administrators will have a robust conversation about the needs of its district and how best to facilitate access to online learning.

✓ **Equity of Access**

One of the four state goals for online learning is equity of access. Although districts are not required to provide online courses, it is important to consider equity issues when facilitating the opportunity for students through another district or a multi-district provider.

✓ **Costs**

To avoid confusion or misunderstanding, the model procedure clearly states that students/parents or guardians are not to be charged for online courses if the district claims state education funding and the course is part of the legally required annual average total instruction hour offering. If the district does not claim funding and the course is not part of the one thousand hour offering the district may impose a course fee.

✓ **Distinguishing Alternative Learning Programs**

Districts may choose to continue to offer other distance learning

options. Those options remain available to school districts and are covered under Alternative Learning Experiences. These programs continue to provide value to the district and students even though they do not have an online component.

Online learning opportunities are rapidly growing in Washington. According to the OSPI's December 2009 "Review of 2008-09 Online Courses and Programs," 15,800 students in Washington took online courses. Many unanswered questions remain about providing courses and how they interface with traditional courses and funding. Nonetheless, the Legislature took the first step in providing guidance and the overall philosophy for online learning opportunities for Washington students. As districts embark on this journey, considerable assistance is provided by the digital learning department of the OSPI on its Web site at www.k12.wa.gov. Districts can download information on online courses, programs, multi-district providers and a list of other resources.