# Interim Report on the Electronic Course Pilot (eCP) Program

Although Texas school districts use a variety of methods to deliver distance instruction, distance learning is becoming synonymous with the delivery of instruction through online courses. The ready accessibility of computers and the Internet has dramatically increased the ability of Texas schools to leverage this particular tool to make electronic courses a widely available option for students.

Recognizing the growing use of the Internet to deliver instruction to Texas school students, the 78th Legislature passed Senate Bill 1108, which calls for the Commissioner of Education *"…to establish a program under which a school district may offer electronic courses to students enrolled in the district or to students enrolled in another district, as provided by an agreement between the districts." An electronic course means "…an educational program or course: that includes use of the Internet or other electronic media; and in which a student and a teacher are in different locations for a majority of the student's instructional period."*

Building upon lessons learned from the earlier Virtual School Pilot (VSP) and the Investigating the Quality of Online Courses (IQ Pilot), the Agency's Electronic Course Pilot (eCP) program was designed to implement Senate Bill 1108. Through the eCP, TEA is:

- examining state policies, requirements, and restrictions impacting electronic courses;
- gathering data to develop and support recommendations that enable high-quality online learning; and
- identifying appropriate state funding mechanisms for these courses and instructional programs.

The eCP program design recognized that electronic courses and the Internet allow students to move beyond the limitations of the classroom and the limitations of time and space to receive instruction anywhere at anytime—not just at the school campus, during the traditional school day. The key questions that informed the implementation of the eCP were:

- Does online delivery of courses work educationally?
- What is the appropriate level of state funding?
- How can the state:
    - sufficiently monitor online courses?
    - audit financially?

The Electronic Course Pilot recognizes that electronic courses and the Internet allow students to move beyond the limitations of time and space to receive instruction anywhere at anytime, not just at the school campus during the traditional school day.

The key questions that informed the design and implementation of the eCP were:

- Does online delivery of courses work educationally?
- What is the appropriate level of state funding?
- How can the state:
    - sufficiently monitor online courses?
    - collect /track PEIMS data?
    - ensure student assessment is appropriate, reliable and administered correctly?
    - ensure teacher preparation and participation?

The purpose and goals for the eCP are to:

- gather data to develop recommendations related to online learning;
- identify effective methods of verifying student attendance; and
- determine appropriate state funding mechanisms.

- collect /track PEIMS data?
- assure student assessment is appropriate, reliable and administered correctly?
- ensure teacher preparation and participation?

As the pilot progresses, these questions are being considered within the framework of lessons learned and the issues and challenges that emerged. It is also important to review the degree to which these challenges were either met or provided an awareness of the need for further investigation and/or action. To better understand the current status of the eCP, however, it is useful to review the lessons learned from the two pilot studies that preceded it.

## Background

In fall 2001, TEA began the VSP authorized by the Texas Legislature in Senate Bill 975. The purpose of this pilot was to examine state policies, requirements and restrictions that impact districts and charter schools offering electronic courses to local students who are not physically present for all or part of these courses and to make recommendations regarding methods of tracking student participation in online courses to establish the feasibility of state funding for these courses. This study focused on middle and high school online courses. The VSP ended August 31, 2003.

The goal of a parallel program, the IQ Pilot, was to establish and pilot quality of service guidelines for online courses to provide assurance to the state and schools that courses meeting the guidelines will be of the highest quality, address student achievement and academic excellence and be aligned with the TEKS. A report with information about both pilot programs was sent to the legislature December 2002 and is available at: www.tea.state.tx.us/technology/wbl/wbl_02report.html.

Much was learned through implementation of the pilots.

## Prior Lessons Learned Regarding Students

- Students in small, remote and rural areas of the state can gain access to highly qualified teachers through electronic courses delivered at the school or to another location in the community.
- Students throughout the state can benefit from availability of advanced courses taught by experts who would not otherwise be accessible.
- Online courses offer opportunities for students to take advanced high school courses and give all students access to the full schedule of courses required for the Recommended and Distinguished Achievement graduation plans.
- There is a rising need for high-level courses to challenge students and prepare them for college, and electronic courses are one way to address this need.
- Students at risk of dropping out of school because of pregnancy, high mobility or disciplinary problems may also benefit from access to electronic courses.
- Most students who take electronic courses choose to take no more than one or two courses at a time.
- Many students taking electronic courses do so at district facilities rather than at home or off-site.

## Prior Lessons Learned Regarding Online Courses

- Online courses should be based on interaction with a teacher via email and other interactive online communication. "Canned" courses that do not offer the ability to interact with a qualified instructor may be helpful as supplemental materials but should not be the entire basis for a course.
- Administrators, teachers and students need time and support to successfully transition into these new technology-based learning processes.
- The literature on virtual schools reveals that one central policy concern is that of ensuring that all students have equal access to these opportunities.
- Institutions providing online learning services must have clear and concise contracts defining expectations, obligations and privileges for parents and students.
- Instructors may build courses from scratch or, more often than not, customize commercial courses.
- The online environment allows teachers to combine various techniques such as e-mail, threaded discussions, chat rooms, whiteboard programs, shared applications, streaming video or audio.
- Research suggests that as programs become more efficient, program costs can decrease.

Online courses provide increased opportunities for students but quality online teaching is critical.

Invaluable information was gained from these two brief pilots; however, due to the many factors that impact the statewide administration of web-based learning, much remained to be explored. The Legislature responded to that reality by creating the eCP program.

## Applicants for Participation in the eCP

Legislation authorizing the eCP provided authority for the Commissioner to charge schools applying to the program a fee. So that the fee charged to schools would not be prohibitive, costs for the eCP are not fully covered by the funds collected. Through the eCP program, eligible Texas public school districts and open-enrollment charter holders selected for participation are qualified to earn state Foundation School Program funding for students enrolled in electronic courses in which a student and a teacher are in different locations for a majority of the student's instructional period. Participating districts and open-enrollment charter schools are potentially eligible to receive federal, state, and local funding for a student enrolled in an electronic course in an amount equal to the funding the district is otherwise entitled to receive for a student enrolled in the district. According to TEC 29.909, possible methods for districts to receive funding from the state could be based on:

- hours of contact with the student;
- the student's successful completion of a course; and
- other innovative methods proposed by the applicant and approved by the Commissioner.

Students began enrolling and receiving instruction through the eCP in Spring 2006

Texas public school districts and open-enrollment charter holders interested in participating in the pilot program were required to apply. Completed applications to participate in the eCP were received from four independent school districts (ISDs) and two open-enrollment charter schools. Each eCP Application for Participation was reviewed to determine the capability of the participant to satisfy the requirements of the project and to provide data to assist the state in achieving the goals of the program.

Four ISDs and one open-enrollment charter school were recommended for participation in the eCP: Coleman ISD, Fort Davis ISD, Houston ISD, Iraan-Sheffield ISD, and Southwest Charter School.

In order to implement the pilot program, the Agency created the eCP Terms of Participation in collaboration with multiple Agency divisions and also developed an application and contract packet based upon the requirements of the Terms of Participation. The eCP Terms of Participation and the application packet are available for review on the Texas Education Agency website at: www.tea.state.tx.us/technology/ecp.

In their application, Texas districts proposed attendance accounting and funding models for Grades 3-12 students who are eligible to participate in the eCP. Applicants selected to participate were allowed to waive the two-hour and four-hour attendance rules for purposes of the eCP and students could participate in electronic courses from a location other than the school campus and could combine traditional and electronic courses. The programs and funding models of applicants selected for participation were approved by TEA through a negotiation process. Each funding method proposed by the districts included:

- a detailed, observable and measurable method to verify a student's participation and progress in courses in accordance with the stated instructional plan and course expectations; and
- a detailed, observable and measurable method of translating (equating) participation in online courses to ADA-based funding for students.

This equated funding method serves as the student's attendance for purposes of calculating Foundation School Program (FSP) funding for participation in an eCP course.

After an extensive negotiation process and review involving many Agency divisions, the three funding models accepted for the purposes of the eCP were:

- 100% based upon successful course completion;
- 80% based upon participation in the course and 20% based upon successful course completion; and
- 100% based upon participation with a $150 reduction per specified section of TAKS for which student does not "meet the standard."

Districts applying to participate in the eCP proposed a variety of attendance accounting and funding models:

a.) 100% based on successful course completion;
b.) 80% based on documented participation and 20% based on successful course completion; and
c.) 100% based on documented participation less a funding reduction for student performance per TAKS content area not meeting standard.

For purposes of funding, student participation will be reported by eCP districts in the following ways:

80% Participation/
20% Successful Course Completion Model

- Percentage of course completed

100% Participation/
TAKS Performance Model

- Number of lessons completed

Since the pilot is still underway, it is not yet possible to perform a conclusive final analysis of the various funding models. However, some initial assumptions can be made regarding the costs and benefits of each of the three funding models.

### 100% successful course completion

Positive:

- This funding model is easy and economical for schools to document and report.
- It is easy and economical to track for state funding purposes.

Negative:

- This model does not indicate the level of student participation in instruction and interaction in the course.
- This model may encourage districts to structure courses and practices in such a way as to artificially ensure successful course completion.

### 80% participation - 20% successful course completion

Positive:

- This model indicates the level of student interaction in the online course and course completion rates.

Negative:

- This model creates the need for significantly more complex documentation and reporting for schools.
- This model creates the need for significantly more complex tracking for state funding purposes.

### 100% participation with a $150 reduction per section of TAKS for which student does not "meet the standard."

Positive:

- This method indicates the level of student interaction in the online course and reflects student achievement on the statewide student assessment exam.

Negative:

- This model creates the need for significantly more complex documentation and reporting for schools.
- This model may require the state to seek reimbursement of funds from districts.

## Available Methods of Verifying Attendance

Another requirement of TEC §29.909 was to provide various methods of verifying attendance. For the eCP, each district or school proposed different methods of verifying attendance in accordance with the eCP Terms of Participation. In general, means of verifying attendance in online courses include:

- student submission of completed assignments and ongoing assessments;
- student participation in the online classroom activities and discussions;
- tracking features available through the courseware program document student activity;
- teacher monitoring of student activity and communication with teacher; and
- parent or guardian confirmation of student engagement in instructional activities.

Additionally, a proctored course completion exam is required in each subject area to confirm mastery of course content.

## Security and Privacy Issues

Districts, through communications and policies, inform students about safe computer usage and warn that violations could result in removal from a course or suspension. In some instances, students are unable to access courses until students and parents sign and return confidentiality and appropriate use agreements.

Districts must ensure that students are informed about safe computer usage and warn that violations could result in removal from a course.

## Waivers

The following is a list of waivers and provisions that were called for in the eCP Terms of Participation and are granted by TEA upon request:

- eCP participants were required to request a waiver from the two-hour and four-hour attendance rules for the eCP.
- eCP participants offering secondary science were required to request a waiver from the 40% “wet” lab requirement and indicate the alternative methods by which this requirement would be met.
- Participating open-enrollment charter schools were required to submit amendments to their educational program to include electronic courses.
- Waivers and charter amendments must clearly indicate that the request is for participation in the eCP.
- Waivers and charter amendments are limited to the period of time during which the district or charter school is participating in good standing in the eCP.

Participants in the eCP were granted a waiver from the state’s normal attendance accounting rules based on physical attendance at school.

Based upon the Terms of Participation, eCP districts are required by TEC §29.909 to post an Informed Choice Report on their website. A link to district website's Informed Choice Report is available on the TEA website at: www.tea.state.tx.us/technology/ecp. The Informed Choice Report provides data such as a list of each course of instruction offered to students in the program, materials required for each course, and a variety of other information about the program. As part of the final evaluation of the eCP, the Agency will examine the delivery of online instruction by reviewing each school's eCP program in detail.

Implementation of the eCP program has been slower than anticipated. It was affected by the initial lack of funds and other resources needed to administer the pilot; the complex process of negotiating the details of a contract for this non-traditional method of instruction; the need for alternative methods of attendance verification and funding for students who are not physically present at school; and the intensive communication necessary throughout divisions in the Agency and school districts' administration to reach agreement on the many complex issues. The state's existing data collection system, PEIMS, and the existing automated state funding systems do not accommodate the tracking of students in a virtual setting. Therefore, it was necessary to create a separate manual system for reporting eCP students' alternative attendance and for requesting funding for each of the three unique funding models proposed by eCP districts. In Spring of 2006, Southwest School had a signed contract and began serving Grades 3-6 students in the eCP. Houston ISD had anticipated beginning their program as well, but as a result of significant district-wide budget cuts and a series of internal reorganizations, district leadership determined it would not be possible to begin prior to the 2006-2007 school year. It is anticipated that Houston ISD will have a signed contract and serve Grades 9-12 students during the 2006-2007 school year. Coleman ISD, Fort Davis ISD, and Iraan-Sheffield ISD prepared their applications collaboratively. Although much work was accomplished in preparation for participation in the eCP, final contract completion did not occur, necessitating withdrawal from the program.

The pilot was extended for the 2006-2007 school year to enable participants to implement their eCP programs, thereby allowing the Agency to collect sufficient and meaningful data through evaluation of site visits, focus groups, and surveys.

*"It's great having class with students from across the state. I really got to know them."* 10th grade student

## Lessons Learned

The Texas Education Agency's three pilot programs (VSP, IQ Pilot, eCP) focusing on electronic courses and online learning have been vital for establishing a knowledge base for the state of Texas to enable our students to move beyond the limitations of the classroom and the limitations of time and space to receive instruction anywhere at anytime—not just at the school campus during the traditional school day.

The results of the pilot programs, have confirmed that a strong online education program can increase the opportunities and choices for improved academic performance for all Texas students by alleviating inequities in access to:

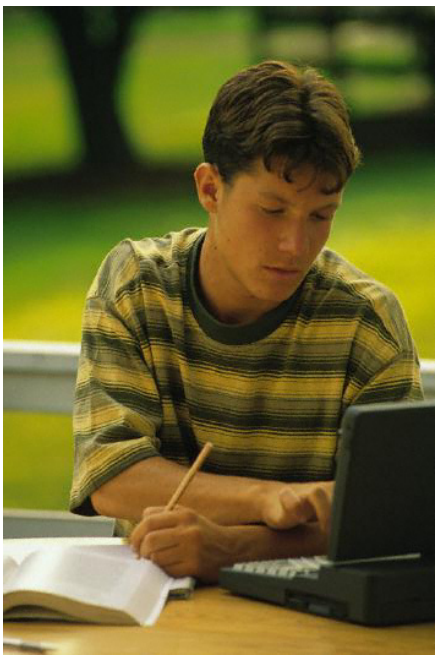
- critically needed courses identified by the TEA, aligned with the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, and meeting quality standards for online courses; and
- qualified teachers that meet teaching standards.

In addition, these results have shown that online courses can meet multiple and various needs of diverse student populations and serve as an important strategy to address education needs in the state. These include:

- credit recovery;
- Advanced Placement;
- accelerated study;
- courses required for the Recommended High School Program and the Distinguished Achievement Program;
- alternative learning methods and opportunities for students whose needs are not being met through traditional instruction in a traditional classroom setting;
- students who may not be able to attend regular school because of illness;
- flexible time for students with schedule conflicts, who may be working during the regular school day;
- flexible pace for students who need to work at a faster or slower pace; and
- electives for which qualified teachers are not available locally.

It is also apparent that online learning:

- increases parental involvement in the learning process; and
- increases teacher interaction with individual students.



*"I wouldn't have had the opportunity to take an AP class my senior year because my school doesn't offer AP courses.*
12th grade student

Finally, we have learned that:

- students underestimate the work required in online courses;
- students and parents need information about realistic expectations of effort required;
- online courses are currently not readily available to all students;
- requests for online courses continue to increase;
- online courses may not be for all students;
- schools underestimate planning needed to establish online programs;
- schools need time to plan and implement virtual programs;
- online teachers need specialized training in order to teach effectively in an online environment;
- teaching online courses is not for all teachers; and
- online courses have unique monitoring requirements for quality and accountability.

The issues that emerged as part of the Agency's online learning pilot programs proved to be representative of the lack of compatibility between policies enacted to fit brick-and-mortar schools and the need for development of policies that are appropriate for online learning.

## Curriculum and Course Challenges

Beyond the impact on students and districts, there were additional lessons learned about the curriculum and course challenges inherent in delivering courses online. These include:

- determining which courses should be offered online;
- determining the best methodology (license, purchase, or develop) for obtaining those courses;
- verifying that purchased, licensed or developed online courses meet the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS);
- verifying that purchased, licensed, or developed online courses meet other online course quality assurance standards and use appropriate techniques and methods for electronic delivery;
- identifying and developing methods of providing hands-on experience in secondary science courses addressing the educational intent of the 40% "wet lab" requirements; and
- determining the intellectual property rights for online courses that are purchased, licensed, or developed.

Those same issues and challenges are reflected by other state departments of education who have or are attempting to establish online courses as a choice for K-12 education. Shown below is information about some of the issues and challenges emerging from the Texas pilots, Texas school districts' implementation of online learning, and the efforts of other state education departments.

## National Snapshot of Online Learning

Online learning—instruction and content delivered primarily over the Internet—continues to expand exponentially in the United States for all levels of education. Higher education has embraced the concept of online learning. In 2004, 2.3 million higher education students were enrolled in online courses (Allen 2005). A 2003–2004 study by the Sloan Consortium asked the question: Is online education now part of the mainstream of higher education? In its most current study, the Sloan Consortium concluded that the answer to this question appears to clearly be "yes". Schools are offering a large number of online courses, and there is great diversity in the courses and programs being offered.

The evidence:

- Sixty-five percent of schools offering graduate face-to face courses also offer graduate courses online;
- Sixty-three percent of schools offering undergraduate face-to face courses also offer undergraduate courses online.
- Among all schools offering face-to-face Business degree programs, 43% also offer online Business programs (Allen 2005).
- The online enrollment growth rate of 18.2% is more than ten times that projected by the National Center for Education Statistics for the entire postsecondary student population (Allen 2005).

More than 3.1 million students took at least one online course during the fall 2005 term, or about 17% of all U.S. college students, up from 2.3 million the previous year. (Elaine Allen, Kevery R. Joyce, & Jeff Seaman. *Growing by Degrees: Online Education in the United States*, 2005)

www.sloan-c.org/publications/survey/index.asp

- Among all schools offering face-to-face Master's degree programs, 44% also offer Master's programs online.

While K-12 online learning programs may not yet be as ubiquitous as they are at the postsecondary level, the K-12 programs are growing just as exponentially. The vast majority of K-12 online learning programs provide high school-level courses for credit toward graduation, with some also offering middle school-level courses. Most research and information pertaining to online learning addresses these grade levels. Elementary grade-level programs entail significant additional challenges. Programs at elementary grades are not widespread and limited research is available.

*"The explosive growth [of K-12 online learning programs in the southern United States] is very much aligned to what is happening nationally. The latest estimates are: 500,000 enrollments in K-12 online learning in the U.S. in 2005-2006, and we expect 1,000,000 in 2006-2007 nationwide."*
Susan Patrick, CEO of the North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL)

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) *Report on State Virtual Schools* (2006) summarizes the history of the development of statewide virtual schools. Current research provides substantiating evidence that the most accountable K-12 online learning programs are expanding at the state level in the form of state-led virtual schools (Watson 2005, p. 20).

In the nation as a whole, twenty-two states offered online learning through a statewide virtual school as of May 2005 (Technology Counts 2006). By August 2006, that number had grown to twenty-four states having state-led virtual schools and twenty-six states having developed significant state policy dealing with online learning. During the 2005-06 school year, Florida Virtual School (FLVS) served more than 31,000 students in 65,000 half-credit courses (FLVS 2006) and is anticipating enrolling students in 100,000 half-credit courses for the 2006-07 school year. Utah's Electronic School's course registrations were up by 141% for 2005-06; Wisconsin Virtual School's were up by 100% (Watson).

A state-led online program is defined as "An online learning program that was created by legislation or by a state-level agency, and/or administered by a state department of education or another state-level agency, and/or directly funded by a state appropriation or grant for the purpose of providing online learning opportunities across the state" (Watson 2005). State-led programs are primarily or entirely supplemental and operate primarily at the high school level. Almost all develop at least some of their own courses, rely in whole or in part, on local schools or districts to provide support for the online students, and are experiencing rapid growth (Watson 2005).

State-led programs are primarily or entirely supplemental and operate primarily at the high school level. (John Watson. *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning: A Review of State-Level Policy and Practice*, 2005.)

The No Child Left Behind Act calls for new forms of educational choice and supplemental services to serve students attending failing schools. Already a number of online learning options have emerged to provide alternatives for students and parents and to help teachers become highly qualified.

## Recommendations for Online Learning in Texas

Educational choice and supplemental services are required by the No Child Left Behind Act.

As previously discussed, during the 2001 – 2002 school year, the TEA implemented the VSP for the purpose of gathering data with which to formulate recommendations regarding potential state funding of courses and policies that enable high-quality online learning. Twenty-four educational entities applied to participate in the project including independent school districts, charter schools, and consortia of districts and schools. Recently, the Agency's Division of Instructional Materials and Educational Technology followed up with participants. Those districts were contacted by telephone and email during the summer, 2006. The districts that responded to questions indicated that while large district programs remain in place, smaller districts that originally participated were not currently offering any online programs for several reasons:

- the complexity and expense of evaluating and selecting online courses was prohibitive;
- modifying online courses that did not meet the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) required more resources than were available in districts;
- state funding was not available for students who were not physically present on campus during the traditional school day;
- scheduling students taking online courses into the traditional school day was time consuming and complicated; and
- providing the space and technology resources needed for students who are taking online courses on campus during the traditional school day was problematic.

*"This course is not only teaching me English, but also useful computer skills, time management and discipline– lessons that will stay with me throughout college and life."*
12th grade student

*"It really allowed me to not only catch up, but now I'm even ahead. There is no way I could have done this in my old school."*
12th grade student who had fallen behind in a traditional school

For all of the growth in online learning programs, it is important to recognize issues and challenges that exist for Texas schools and districts. Equity does not exist across Texas in terms of students' access to highly qualified teachers and to rigorous online courses. Additionally, the quality of online courses and online instruction offered across the state varies widely with no assurance to the student or the state of alignment with state curriculum standards or other quality assurance guidelines. Most districts do not have the resources, manpower or expertise to effectively evaluate online courses developed by a third party or to create high quality online courses locally. Not all districts allow students to take online courses. Students in some districts that do allow student to take online courses are required to pay the cost of the online course themselves, thereby excluding students who cannot afford the cost. Students and the state must have assurance that courses and instruction offered online are of high quality and meet state standards. Equity must be ensured to reach students of different needs, of different socio-economic backgrounds, from different geographic regions, and of different learning abilities.

Equity must also be ensured so that all public school students for whom online courses provide a learning environment that meets their educational needs and who wish to take an online course for credit toward graduation have the opportunity to do so.

While much is known about what works and what does not in online learning, all states continue to struggle with many issues related to online learning. There is no one perfect approach to a statewide virtual school or program, no one size fits all solution, and no one state has figured out all the answers. Texas is part of a strong collaborative effort, the SREB Educational Technology Cooperative which is comprised of Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

The collaborative is exploring and addressing the common issues and working to identify the factors that are vital to success. Those elements will inform the recommendations for the state's role in supporting online learning and implementing a state virtual program or school.

TEA staff has extensively researched statewide virtual schools that have been implemented in twenty-four other states, and has implemented and learned from three pilot programs to identify and explore opportunities, challenges and issues involved with online learning programs. The Agency has also participated in a wide variety of multi-state and national efforts to investigate effective online learning programs and policies, including those led by the SREB and its member states, the North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL) and BellSouth Foundation.

During the past two years, Agency staff served on two SREB committees charged with developing standards for quality online courses and standards for quality online teaching. These committees pulled together knowledgeable, experienced resource personnel from K-12 and postsecondary education drawn from national and regional organizations, SREB state departments of education, and colleges and universities. Through extensive collaboration and sharing over many months, the work culminated in specific standards that can be used to define and implement quality online courses and teaching. These standards have been supported by practice over time. Research at both the K-12 and postsecondary levels is creating a growing body of evidence that attests to the quality learning experience that online courses and online teaching can offer. The SREB reports *Standards for Quality Online Courses* and *Standards for Quality Online Teaching* resulted from this work.

*"For many students, online access has changed the way they see the world and the way they work and play. Consideration of these student issues is now critical in designing and delivering quality online instruction."*
SREB Standards for Quality Online Courses, 2006

Additionally, TEA staff participated in two multi-state efforts to begin answering questions related to the cost of online education. As a result of collaboration with state virtual schools in sixteen SREB states, state education leaders, and the BellSouth Foundation, the SREB report entitled *Cost Guidelines for State Virtual Schools: Development, Implementation and Sustainability* is now available. Links to all of these reports are available on the TEA website at www.tea.state.tx.us/technology/wbl/wbl_resources.html.

The Agency was also a contributing member of the national research effort to create the 2006 report, *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning: A Review of State-Level Policy and Practice*. The report is sponsored and guided by seven organizations with expertise in online learning. TEA is one of those seven organizations. Additional support was provided by NACOL and BellSouth Foundation. TEA staff was very active in the research and development of the report, providing knowledge and experience based on the work with pilot programs and its involvement with other research projects.

A state-led online learning program, closely aligned with the state's educational goals, provides an effective and economical strategy for addressing critical public education challenges such as the need to increase the graduation rate and students' academic readiness for success in college and other post-secondary pursuits, high school redesign and critical teacher shortages.

This work furthered exploration of the policies and practices, nationwide, for bringing online learning to students. The report is available online at: www.nacol.org.

As a result of these activities and research, the need for a state-led online learning program has been clearly identified. The benefits of this approach are many. A state-led online learning program, closely aligned with the state's educational goals, provides an effective and economical strategy for addressing critical public education challenges such as the need to increase the graduation rate and students' academic readiness for success in college and other post-secondary pursuits, high school redesign and critical teacher shortages. It would ensure that the state can better track and monitor the online courses provided to Texas students, and provide standards and monitoring of the quality of online course and online instruction.

**A state-led online learning program:**

- creates equity among schools across the state;
- provides expanded opportunities to meet the needs of diverse student populations including at risk, traditional, and accelerated students;
- ensures that students have access to rigorous online courses that align with the state's curriculum standards and meet other quality assurance guidelines;
- provides expanded access to highly qualified teachers;
- provides significant efficiencies and economies of scale and reduces redundant costs and efforts; and
- enables students to graduate prepared for the full range of postsecondary opportunities.

This includes sharing and ensuring quality of teachers and rigorous, online courses evaluated against state standards, consistency in course interfaces, access, and registration, and a centralized web presence as well as the ability to leverage the state's purchasing power.

Online learning for public school students in Texas must have high-quality education as its goal; online is simply the delivery mechanism. The Instructional Materials and Educational Technology Division has identified critical success factors for state-led virtual schools through extensive research, conversation with leaders of statewide virtual schools, and participation in local, national, and international conferences and meetings with leaders of online learning programs.

## Critical Success Factors

- State standards for and evaluation of online courses are essential to ensure quality learning experiences for students.
- State standards for teachers of online courses and ongoing oversight are needed to ensure quality teaching of online courses.
- Legislated appropriation of dedicated, multi-year funding is essential to cover planning, start up and operational costs until the statewide online learning program is fully established.
- Stable source of ongoing funding (i.e. Foundation School Program) is essential for sustainability and growth.
- Funding must be based upon enrollment, course completion, or other factors pertinent to online learning rather than seat time.
- Students must not be restricted or limited by districts from taking online courses.
- Parents and students must be informed by districts that online delivery is available as a choice for obtaining courses.
- Sufficient numbers of qualified, dedicated teachers are essential.
- Sufficient preliminary and on-going professional development specifically for teaching in an online environment is essential.
- Course providers across the country, including all Texas school districts, other state virtual schools and online programs, higher education institutions, non-profit entities and for-profit vendors offer a valuable source of existing online courses for evaluation and consideration for purchase or lease by the state.
- As needed, additional online courses should be developed by or under the oversight of the state online learning program.

Efforts need to be made by the state of Texas to provide equitable, statewide access for all Texas students in all districts to the benefits, expanded opportunities and alternative choices offered through a state-led online learning program.

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