

# EXPLORING ACCOUNTABILITY IN K-12 DIGITAL EDUCATION

GETTING SMART

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 01** Online Learning At-a-Glance
- 02** What's Behind School Choice? The Factors Influencing Online Learning
- 03** The Current State of Accountability
- 05** Aligning Expectations of School Leaders and Policymakers
- 06** Exploring More Nuanced Solutions
- 08** Recommendations for School Leaders, Parents and Policymakers



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K–12 education in the United States has undergone a tectonic shift. When it comes to learning, today’s students have more formal and informal options than any generation before them.

Online learning represents one alternative avenue that has grown and evolved rapidly over the past two decades, thanks to technological and infrastructural developments and an ever-expanding provider marketplace. A variety of learners with diverse needs are currently being served in blended and online learning environments. Their educational settings range from fully online programs with digital courseware to experiences that combine virtual learning with in-person instruction.

The flexible nature of online learning attracts a variety of students, who engage in alternative educational programs for many different reasons. This brief aims to outline the common reasons behind their decisions to enroll in online educational options, as well as examine the parameters

according to which online schools are being held accountable by policymakers. Expert recommendations on areas for improvement and ways to continue this important dialogue are provided at the end of this document.

### Types of Learners Served

- + Accelerated students
- + English-as-a-second-language learners
- + At-risk students with credit deficiencies
- + Learners with extenuating life circumstances
- + Students with medical issues or disabilities
- + Learners seeking electives, world languages or dual-enrollment options
- + Previously homeschooled students



## WHAT'S BEHIND SCHOOL CHOICE? THE FACTORS INFLUENCING ONLINE LEARNING

Initially, online education provided a means for educating students in exceptional situations who could not otherwise attend a physical school, such as world-class athletes and performers, or students with severe medical issues. These populations represented a small minority of school-age children, and they often thrived within these academic accommodations.

Fast-forward to today. The number of students who have sought out blended and online learning programs in their K–12 education has skyrocketed. They arrive at these options in response to a dizzying array of circumstances. As a result, leaders at the school, district, state and federal levels are faced with an increasingly complicated public-education landscape to monitor and evaluate.

Some students arrive at the online option willingly and voluntarily, while others are pushed toward it. As districts are incentivized to demonstrate ever-improving academic performance, those who are struggling are often marginalized and encouraged to enroll in online programs as a last resort. Some parents also believe that if their child performs poorly within a district with a “good” school rating, something must be wrong with that student. In turn, the lower performance of such students often negatively impacts the institutions they join, based on state accountability frameworks.

Unfortunately, this is an occurrence that tends to repeat, as the current public education system lacks a business model flexible enough to provide new, effective support for those students with significant learning challenges—issues that are often exacerbated by online environments.

**Recent research** also identifies a variety of social-emotional health and safety factors that influence school choice. These can include physical- or mental-health issues, dangerous neighborhoods and instances of bullying—there often being overlap among these categories as well. In such situations, online learning can offer a more personalized, less stressful and far safer alternative to the traditional school experience.

Full-time, part-time and temporary online options provide the level of flexibility necessary to accommodate children’s and teens’ interests and life events, including extracurricular activities such as athletics or the arts, family travel or moving, divorce between parents, or the loss of a loved one. Students are also turning to online learning in order to pursue courses in a specific discipline not offered by their local public schools.

Online learning scenarios are as unique as students’ individual circumstances. Each also poses its fair share of challenges. Extenuating circumstances can lead to late enrollments, and students who are behind academically or credit-deficient are at a disadvantage from the beginning. Student populations in an online setting fluctuate much more than those of traditional schools. The majority of full-time online learning students enroll late, and most are academically behind. Sometimes, those who opt into online programs are also disengaged from the outset. Disengaged students with academic gaps who enroll late in online programs are not likely to succeed.

These represent the most common and significant hurdles for providers of online education, who find themselves accommodating a broad spectrum of student experiences—potentially broader than those associated with a traditional learning environment.

Part-time online learning, sometimes called course choice, is growing rapidly as secondary students gain access from their local schools or from state laws that expand options. Some reasons for engaging in part-time online learning are similar to those for full-time—acceleration and credit-recovery options. Part-time online learners are also seeking expanded electives and a broader range of world languages than their local school provides. Part-time online learners also face some of the same fit issues that full-time online learners do: some are better prepared than others academically, and more prepared to succeed in an online setting.



## THE CURRENT STATE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

*“I want appropriate accountability systems in place for online schools—for all schools. Ultimately, educational leaders, parents and policymakers need to know: are the schools serving these students well? Then step back and ask if the accountability system measures that goal. If not, is there a better solution?”*

— Matthew Wicks, Vice President Efficacy Research and Reporting, Connections Education

### The Backstory on U.S. School Accountability

The last quarter century of American K–12 education represented a bet on policy as the big improvement lever—and it didn’t work out as well as many had hoped. The trifecta of standards-based reform launched by 1983’s “A Nation at Risk” initiative, and codified by state policies in the 1990s, included:

- » Clear higher-learning expectations, which, in the last decade, became defined as college readiness for all
- » Valid, reliable and inexpensive measures of student proficiency in reading and math
- » Progressively harsher school accountability measures, ranging from extra support to closure

The bipartisan push for better and more equitable outcomes that resulted in the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law in 2002 was well-intentioned and even inspiring. And as the former head of Council of Chief State School Officers, Gene Wilhoit, said, a lot of good came from the effort: better, clearer and higher standards, a commitment to equity, practice informed by data, and a recognition of the importance of good teaching were all outcomes of that law.

But NCLB was flawed from the outset; it grew stale, then damaging. The unintended consequences of the law were numerous. Because it focused on grade-level proficiency, it locked in the historic age-cohort model and slowed innovations in personalized learning. A narrow focus on testing in compliance-oriented systems

### Top 3 Issues in Measuring Online Education Accountability

- + Existing standards are ill-fitting
- + Student mobility isn’t acknowledged or tracked
- + Time spent doesn’t reflect the quality of the learning experience

drove out creativity and collaboration rather than encouraging them. Later efforts to measure growth penalized programs seeking to serve struggling students.

### Accountability for Online Learning

In the 30 states that currently have statewide online schools, there is a mix of district-run programs, district-contracted programs and virtual charter schools. District-run programs can advise student placements and steer students away from online learning when it is not in their best interest. Virtual charter schools enroll students by lottery if there is more interest than capacity, but are also able to scale up or down to meet demand. Because virtual charters are not allowed to discriminate, most steer clear of requiring interviews that might help determine fit for individual students and ensure online learning is truly their best option.

For accountability purposes, performance in most states is defined primarily in terms of grade-level proficiency in reading and math and graduation rates. The states that do include growth measures usually use **norm-referenced** measures that don't accurately measure individual student growth during short enrollments. Because most online schools serve temporary and high-mobility students, their contributions are poorly measured.

Most states are now approaching assessment and accountability in ways that ultimately penalize schools that work with struggling students over short periods of time. This is because they:

**Prioritize proficiency over growth:** Given states' primary focus being on measuring proficiency rather than growth factors, online schools are penalized for serving at-risk students and others who are struggling.

**Focus on simplified cohort analysis:** By emphasizing four-year graduation rates as a key performance indicator, policies are negatively impacting digital schools and programs that often serve as a safety net or "school of last resort" for large numbers of highly mobile and at-risk transfer students.

**Institute weak measurements:** With the current proliferation of standardized tests, states possess a widely accepted method of assessment—yet they lack an in-depth and robust perspective on the multitude

of ways in which individual students are expanding their knowledge and skills.

**Ignore data shortcomings:** Data systems at the state level are not yet capable of identifying or tracking mobile student populations, leaving significant knowledge gaps in overall performance and student outcomes.

**Measure the aggregate, not the individual:** Although online learning offers unprecedented opportunities to measure, track and intervene at the student level, states rely solely on measurements based on aggregated and average rolled-up data, as opposed to individual student measures.

When **half of all online students enroll late and most are academically behind**,<sup>1</sup> students and schools alike face an uphill battle toward achieving state-mandated performance levels. Online students usually transfer from their local schools after falling behind, and are likely to enroll late because of whatever occurrence led them to online options in the first place. Portable learner profiles and better tracking of student enrollment would help measure the contribution of different schools and learning experiences to student progress.

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<sup>1</sup> Watson, John and Pope, Larry. "School Accountability in the Digital Age." Evergreen Education Group. February 2015. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59381b9a17bffc68bf625df4/t/593eff1e414fb5cb8740729/1497300768219/KP-AccountabilityInTheDigitalAge.pdf>



## ALIGNING EXPECTATIONS OF SCHOOL LEADERS AND POLICYMAKERS

Experts from across the education spectrum agree that a chasm exists between practice and policy. An accountability system based on the narrow measures of proficiency measured by standardized tests doesn't fully account for a school or program's contribution to learning, which leaves many important questions unanswered. Are virtual schools with lower graduation rates truly failing, or are they adequately serving struggling students who are years behind and looking for another chance to earn a high school diploma? Is there a better way to measure the contribution of programs serving over-aged and under-credited students than in terms of "on-time" graduation?

Accountability policies are intended to regulate quality measures and provide transparency for constituencies. In doing so, they can either reflect the reality of a situation or, conversely, serve to punish organizations—and more importantly, families and students—for erroneously identified issues. Online learning providers have often experienced the latter, and the medium has been widely considered to be broken or dramatically underperforming. But what happens when the average online student is seen as underperforming? A weak set of initial indicators can set off a chain reaction that distorts

perceptions and ultimately undermines opportunities, as parents are dissuaded from seeking out online education as a viable option for their children.

Accountability measures that encompass student growth include defined milestones and benchmarks, but must be relative to each student's starting point. What matters in any case is that the student is making progress and acquiring the skills they need to succeed in college and career. Combining goals of formative progress and building comparability matrices would take more important variables into account.

From the perspective of school leaders, there are also high costs to opposing regulations. Low school ratings cause online providers to reallocate a significant amount of attention and resources toward defending themselves against these potentially off-base metrics—resources that could otherwise be invested in supporting students.

With this in mind, policymakers can begin to recognize the limitations of test results, while seeking to understand the ways in which online environments accommodate students with variations in instructional methods, mediums, supports and other resources.



## EXPLORING MORE NUANCED SOLUTIONS

Leaders of virtual and brick-and-mortar schools recognize that accountability isn't a matter that's up for debate. But standards should not only be rigorous; ideally, they should also be contextualized in order to accurately measure the individual student's learning experience and academic progress.

The establishment of effective accountability measures needs to start with the right questions being asked. When the majority of incoming students are students who transferred to a new school after falling behind academically in their previous school, does it make sense to measure the receiving school by that student cohort's aptitude toward "on-time" graduation? Given the diverse population currently being educated in online environments, the overarching answer to these issues must involve a range of solutions rather than a single definitive outcome. Otherwise, state accountability

systems will remain challenged by the high rates of student mobility and student credit deficiencies that continue to be prevalent in online schools.

To facilitate this change, the conversations legislators, educators, school leaders and parents are having surrounding K–12 education need to become much more nuanced in order to both appropriately accommodate students' needs and encourage relevant measurement. Rather than forcing online schools to fit a metric that inaccurately assesses their population, states have the opportunity to create radically different accountability models that can produce improved student outcomes and offer a truthful perspective on individuals' and schools' performance.

It's time to open a critical dialogue that seeks to answer the following questions:

**What readiness indicators could assess a student's suitability for pursuing full- or part-time online learning?**

**What kinds of information would better guide parents of K–12 children to make informed school choices?**

**If prior learning or a readiness assessment indicates academic gaps, weak engagement and poor study habits, how could online providers deploy sufficient onboarding and student-engagement policies to set students up for success or refer them to a more appropriate program?**

**What other measures in addition to a four-year graduation rate might provide a more accurate picture of student performance in online education? How could progress toward graduation be measured in a single course enrollment or semester of work?**

**With mobile populations, how could short-term indicators of contribution be aggregated to determine if these students are making, e.g., a year of progress (or its equivalent over another period of time)?**

**How can we track each student through their own academic career, and how can every level of the system share in measuring accountability and student-learning outcomes?**

**How could better growth measures and weighted funding (i.e., more funding for students who bring more risk factors to school) provide incentives to serve academically struggling students?**



Exploring these issues can lead to substantive change, if only on a state-by-state basis. There are indicators that [accountability frameworks can indeed be adjusted to better align with online schools](#). For example:

- » The Arizona State Board of Education developed a proposal for an alternative framework for online schools that has now been approved at the federal level.
- » Ohio enacted legislation that provides for student orientation prior to the first day of school and, in doing so, better prepares students for the rigor and unique challenges of the online setting.
- » Indiana recently passed a law requiring its schools to establish student engagement policies, a measure that enables online schools to create and enforce initiatives that would closely track and encourage student success.

A roundtable of experts from across the educational field agreed that while online education providers and proponents of education reform are advocating for adjustments, they aren't simply looking for ways to obtain an "easy A."

"There has to be a separate framework—but this shouldn't be interpreted as, 'expectations or accountability in online education should be lower.' To me, it's the furthest thing from that," explained Matthew Wicks, Connections Education's Vice President Efficacy Research & Reporting.

*"We need a system that makes sense for the type of students who are being served. If we continue to use default formulas that have been designed for certain conditions, we've lost the opportunity to see which virtual schools are actually moving students forward versus those that aren't. Current measurements don't include these insights; in fact, they falsely show that the majority are performing poorly, when that isn't actually the case."*



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS, PARENTS AND POLICYMAKERS

*“Instituting strategic policy changes would help ensure that all schools are held accountable for advancing students during their time at the school, whether that time comprises the student’s entire education or is a very short stop along their educational path.”*

—John Watson, Primary Researcher, Evergreen Education

There are many opportunities for online learning to boost student equity. In order to set up students and online schools for success, policies should support initiatives that build a solid foundation for those transitioning into this new learning environment. The following practices are recommended next steps:

### 1 IMPROVED OUTREACH & INFORMATION ACCESSIBILITY

Schools should seek to inform parents and prospective students about the inherent challenges of working online and the kinds of supports necessary, acknowledging that this is not an easier path—it’s simply a different one.

### 2 NEW STUDENT ORIENTATION

Policymakers should support specialized orientations to help acclimate new students to the rigors and demands of online learning, and give them a greater understanding of the types of healthy routines and study habits required for success in that setting. Schools should be granted autonomy in designing orientations that they believe will best serve their specific populations.

### 3 ENGAGEMENT POLICIES

Rather than create enrollment restrictions that would unfairly deny access to online schools, policymakers and school leaders should work together to develop clear and enforceable student engagement policies. This ensures that all students have equal access to digital learning offerings and opportunities to demonstrate engagement, and measures against those unwilling to engage.

### 4 TRIAL PERIODS

Acknowledging that online learning isn’t for everyone can play a pivotal role in how it is evaluated. Within a new accountability framework, schools shouldn’t be penalized when students disenroll; a designated trial period places less pressure on both the student and the school, while simultaneously discouraging discrimination and increasing student equity.

### 5 PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

Schools should work to identify potential problems of disengagement early on in a student’s academic career, and move swiftly to support students with behavioral nudges, academic supports and other interventions.

### 6 DEEPER INSIGHTS INTO STUDENT CHOICE

Identifying the reasons why parents and students choose online schools and the rationales behind why they disenroll will aid schools in providing them with appropriate supports.

### 7 DATA INTEGRATION

Improving state data and student information systems will ensure that student academic profiles can move seamlessly and without delay alongside students who transfer.

*“We don’t always know, based on indications, or can predict who will thrive in an online learning environment. Rather than refusing to enroll those with a lower likelihood to transition successfully, we provide low scorers with different onboarding and additional supports. In the process, we’re able to mitigate higher risks, and there’s a large group of such students that do wonderfully. Let’s not remove the opportunity; let’s get them into a better situation.”*

—Matthew Wicks, Vice President Research & Reporting Connections Education

