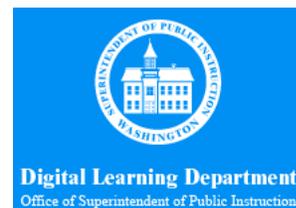




Getting Started with Online Learning



How to Use This Document

This tool is designed to guide you through a series of questions and planning steps that will assist you in implementing an online learning program. It includes links to helpful resources and materials to as you research this dynamic topic. Due to the complex variables involved in developing an online learning plan, it will not cover every possible contingency. In particular, this guide focuses on districts that collaborate with an outside provider to establish their online learning program, rather than developing their own content and courses.

We are not endorsing one approach over the other; our choice reflects the current reality that most districts are choosing to begin their programs with an online partner. We also do not address the issue of blended or hybrid learning (using online learning tools and curriculum in combination with face-to-face classroom instruction). These approaches will be addressed in future versions of this document.

We hope this tool provides you with a strong framework to begin, or continue, implementation of an effective program that enables your students reach greater levels of success.

We would love your feedback! If you have comments, suggestions, or questions, please contact any of the following people:

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Suggested Planning Steps

While no two districts will approach online learning in the exact same manner, the steps below provide a general framework for planning and implementation.

1. Identify the goal(s) you are seeking to achieve.
2. Identify who will have responsibility for developing and overseeing the plan.
3. Define the mission and scope of the online learning program.
4. Assemble an advisory team of stakeholders.
5. Research the requirements for online learning programs.
6. Decide the model of online learning to be provided.
7. Determine criteria for selecting online courses/provider.
8. Select provider of online courses.
9. Determine strategies for student support.
10. Determine strategies for administrative support.
11. Review your policies and procedures for online learning.
12. Plan for evaluation, monitoring, and revision.

These steps are not intended to be equivalent in terms of effort or time, but instead are intended to give a general framework to the stages of developing your plan. You may choose to emphasize some steps or change the order. Be sure to review the entire document to get a better understanding of the steps involved before putting together your own version of a plan.

1. Identify the goals(s) you are seeking to achieve

The first questions to address are: *What do you want to gain through your online learning program? What problem(s) are you trying to solve? What learning experiences do you want to improve?* Online learning is a complicated endeavor and successful implementation begins with truly understanding *why* you are choosing to use digital learning. The goals most commonly cited for offering online courses are:

- Credit recovery: Help students who have failed courses get back on track for graduation.
- Access to courses not locally available: Provide students expanded offerings that the local schools are unable to provide, such as foreign language courses.
- College readiness: Provide access to college-preparation courses that the district may have trouble providing, such as AP, pre-AP, or college-level courses.
- Schedule flexibility: Resolve schedule conflicts.
- Offsite learning: Create an option for students and parents who cannot or do not want face-to-face classes.

Each of these issues has different stakeholders and different implications for implementing your online learning program. Broad inclusion in developing the online learning plan can be critical to your success.

Questions to answer at this step are:

What do we want to gain through the online learning program?

What problem(s) are we trying to solve?

What problem(s) are we NOT trying to solve with online learning?

What learning experiences do we want to improve?

2. Identify who will have responsibility for developing and overseeing the plan

The first question to address is who will oversee this work. Which program or department will lead the planning and who will be assigned the task? This effort involves a great deal of complexity, so the project lead should have skills in facilitating group discussion, organizing and communicating information, and making decisions.

Questions to answer at this step are:

Who will lead the planning?

How much time can this person spend working on the project?

What is the timeline and launch date for implementation of the online program?

3. Define the mission and scope of the online learning program

Your district should already have in place Online Learning Policies and Procedures. You should use this as a beginning point for your plan. (However, it is quite possible that the work of developing the plan may involve recommending new policies and procedures, which you can address in Step 11 (*Review your policies and procedures for online learning*)).

You may also choose, at this stage, to implement online learning in phases. For example, the first phase may only address credit recovery with a summer program of online courses and limited capacity. Additional courses may be added in the following school year as you build momentum and confidence. Whatever your strategy, remain flexible enough to take advantage of new options and improvements in implementation as you gain experience.

Questions to answer at this step are:

What are the budget parameters for the program?

Of the issues we have chosen to address with online learning, which have the highest priority?

How will we determine that an online solution to an issue is the most effective or appropriate?

What is the timeline for being ready to launch the online program?

Will the program launch in phases, and if so, where will we start?

Will our program be made available to out-of-district students?

4. Assemble an advisory team of stakeholders

Once you have identified why you are implementing online learning, the next step is to establish an advisory team of stakeholders to assist you. These team members may include, but are not limited to:

- Teachers
- Parents
- Students
- Counselors

- Principals
- Student Information System coordinators
- Curriculum coordinators
- Technology coordinators
- Board members

Once you have developed a list of possible advisory team members, decide how often the team is going to meet and what the specific expectations are of the group. Decide which questions and decisions will be handled by the advisory group and which will be handled by district/school staff.

Questions to answer at this step are:

Which stakeholders are involved in addressing these issues?

What differing priorities will these stakeholders have?

Who will be invited to participate on the advisory team?

Which questions and issues will the advisory team address, and which will be left to staff?

How often will they meet and for how long?

Will the advisory team members have responsibility for communicating with other stakeholders to disseminate information about the program once it is in place?

Will the advisory team continue to meet after implementation to monitor and adjust the plan?

5. Research the requirements for online learning programs

Before making any decisions about how to proceed with online learning, you and your advisory team should review the kinds of online learning options available and the requirements that the district/school will need to meet in the delivery of online instruction. There are a significant number to be aware of, and it will make your planning go more smoothly if you address them earlier in the process rather than later.

The Digital Learning Department at OSPI (DLD) has a comprehensive outline of the requirements on its website:

<http://digitalllearning.k12.wa.us/about/districts/responsibilities/>

They are listed in an abbreviated form below.

The requirements are listed in three categories:

Requirements for online school programs

If your district decides to provide online courses as a sequential program “that could provide a full-time basic education program if so desired,” then you will need to plan to meet the following requirements:

- Alternative Learning Experiences (ALE) funding rules.
- Online ALE enrollment reporting
- CEDARS reporting
- Funding restrictions
- online provider approval
- Administration of state assessments
- District-wide average instructional hours
- Staffing ratios
- Transitional bilingual students
- District policies and procedures
- Special education

Requirements for online courses

If your school or district is going to provide students access to individual online courses that are not part of a comprehensive online learning program, the requirements are more limited. You will only need to address these items from the previous list:

- ALE funding rules (if students are enrolled under ALE)
- Online ALE reporting
- Cedars reporting
- Funding restrictions
- District policies and procedures

Requirements for contracted instruction

If your district is contracting with an online learning provider for teachers as well as content, the district has specific legal requirements. (OSPI has developed a model agreement for contracting with an online learning provider, which will be addressed in Step 8.) The two main areas are:

- *Board’s powers and duties when contracting* – Districts must comply with RCW 28A.320.035 regarding contracting. This statute gives district boards of directors the ability to contract to implement the board’s powers and duties, including instructional services.

There are two provisions of note:

- “When a school district board of directors contracts for educational, instructional, or specialized services, the purpose of the contract must be to improve student learning or achievement.”

- “A contract...may not be made with a religious or sectarian organization or school where the contract would violate the state or federal Constitution.”
- *Instruction provided under contract* – WAC 392-121-188 covers instruction provided under contract from a third-party course or program provider. There are seventeen requirements that must be met in order for the instruction to be counted as a “course of study” and claimed for state funding. All provisions must be followed, but a few specific items should be noted:
 - The school district board of directors must adopt a resolution that “concludes it is in the best interest of the students to expand the options available by providing an appropriate basic education program pursuant to the contract, and, sets forth the rationale in support of the conclusion.”
 - The provider must provide “instruction free of sectarian or religious influence or control.”
 - The curriculum must be approved by the district.
 - The program must be for “academically at-risk students” if the contract is for an ALE program and the contractor “exercises primary responsibility for the student’s written learning plan.” Since all online school programs are considered ALE programs, then this provision may come into consideration if the provider is responsible for the student’s written learning plan. At-risk students are defined in RCW 28A.150.305.
 - Assuming the provider is not a higher education institution, the provider must maintain “a ratio of full-time equivalent certificated instructional staff serving the annual average full-time equivalent students reported for basic education funding pursuant to this section which is at least equal to the district's basic education funding ratio for the grade level of the students being reported for basic education.”
 - The district must report certificated instructional staff (CIS) from the provider on the S-275, if the program, at any time during the school year, serves more than 25 students which equals more than one quarter of one percent (.0025) of the district's annual average full-time equivalent enrollment claimed for basic education funding. If the district is using the DLD Online Courses, consider students taking DLD courses as being served by a single provider, regardless of the number of DLD providers actually delivering services.

Questions to answer at this step are:

Do the district policies and procedures for online learning address the necessary legal requirements?

Who will be responsible for determining compliance and in which areas?

*Are there already programs involved in providing ALE experiences for students, and have they been consulted on reporting procedures?
Are requirements for special populations addressed?*

6. Decide the model of online learning to be provided

You will need to determine the kinds of online learning options you will provide for your students. These include whether you provide a comprehensive online school or supplemental courses, where students participate, and when students participate.

Online School Program versus Individual Online Courses

In an *online school program*, students enroll full- or part-time to complete their courses or grade-level coursework. For these students school is all or mostly online, whether they connect to their courses from home or from a district-supplied computer lab.

OSPI defines an *online school program* as a school or program that offers:

- Courses or grade-level coursework that are delivered primarily electronically using the internet or other computer-based methods. The program must have a component that features online lessons and tools for student and data management.
- Courses or grade-level coursework that are taught by a teacher primarily from a remote location using online or other electronic tools. Note that access to the teacher may be synchronous or asynchronous.
- A sequential program – a set of courses or coursework that may be taken in a single school term or throughout the school year in a manner that could provide a full-time basic education program if so desired by the student. Students may enroll in the program as part-time or full-time students.

In *individual online courses*, students remain enrolled in their local building and register for individual online courses that complete or supplement their full-time enrollment in their brick-and-mortar school or program. For these students school is partially online, whether they connect to their courses from home or from a district-supplied computer lab during or outside of the school day. This is not necessarily an “either/or” situation. You may choose to provide an online school program for one population of students and individual courses for another.

Where will students be served?

Students may either participate remotely, logging in at home, from the library or another community location. Or, they may participate by taking their courses at the school site. Many schools have set up dedicated computer labs for students to take online courses. This is often the case with credit recovery courses, as it provides a model where a teacher or paraprofessional can be present in the room to monitor and assist the students as they work.

You may have a program with both onsite and offsite students. However, deciding to have an onsite option creates its own set of questions (to be addressed in Step 9):

- *Where will the lab be set up?*
- *How will it be paid for?*
- *How many stations will it have?*
- *Who will staff the lab?*

The onsite/offsite question has one additional implication. If students are offsite, you will be claiming their funding under ALE rules. If students are onsite, you may be able to claim their funding under basic education funding.

When will students participate in their online program?

In addition to where the students participate, you need to determine when the students will participate. This has implications for how you support the student and who pays for the courses.

If the course(s) taken online fit within the normal credit schedule of the student (that is, the combined online courses and face-to-face courses don't exceed the number of courses a typical student takes), then the curriculum would be covered under basic education funding and would be available to the student at no cost.

However, if the course(s) are in addition to the normal school day or offered during summer, then the district/school may require the student/family to pay for the course. School *or* student/family may pay.

Details about payment should be included in your district's online learning policy and procedure.

Questions to answer at this step are:

Will we provide an online school program, supplemental courses, or both?
Will students participate remotely, onsite, or both?

Will we offer students the option of taking additional credits above the standard schedule, and will we charge them for it?

Will we offer a summer program, and will we charge students/families for it?

What districts are already offering programs similar to what we are considering, and what can we learn from them?

If we implement in phases, which options will we offer first?

7. Determine criteria for selecting online courses/provider

Once you have determined the issues you plan to address and the model(s) you intend to implement, you may begin the process of selecting a provider. This may be more complicated than selecting a textbook or curriculum, as one provider may represent dozens of different content areas spanning multiple grades. Depending on how many courses you are preparing to make available, you may need to enlist the help of a team of teachers or curriculum staff across content areas to review possible providers.

The first and most obvious point would be whether the provider has been through the approval process at the DLD. This indicates that the provider has already addressed basic issues such as alignment to standards. The approval process encompasses a total of 54 criteria, and it would make a good starting point to review these at <http://digitallearning.k12.wa.us/approval/process/criteria/criteria.php>.

While the presence of a provider on the approved list means that they have addressed these criteria, you may find that some items are of a higher priority to your district than others. In your selection process you may want to emphasize how *well* the provider addresses certain criteria.

Some providers are able to support ALE requirements better than others. If you anticipate enrolling ALE students, it will be important to consider the level of ALE information you will receive from the provider.

Another reference point is the diagram *Attributes of Online Programs* from iNACOL at http://www.onlineprogramhowto.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/iNACOL_Prgrm_Mgmt_Page6.pdf. This covers a variety of attributes to consider in all aspects of developing an online program. Those that might be helpful in guiding your selection process are:

- Learner-Content Interactivity
- Learner-Teacher Interactivity
- Learner-Learner Interactivity
- Learner Autonomy

- Curriculum Flexibility

There are important technical criteria to consider as well. Some providers can integrate with your district data system to allow for “single sign on,” meaning students can sign on in the district network and access their online courses without going through an additional login process. Some providers will create a district-themed front page for their courses that incorporate your district logo and appearance. Some can be set up for easy access from your district home page. Finally, consider adding criteria for integration with your district student information system. If possible, you want student data to flow from the provider’s system into your district student information system directly.

Of course, a very real factor is cost. There is a fairly wide range of costs between providers, usually charged on a per-semester course, per-student basis. You will need to determine if cost is simply a weighted factor, or whether it will be an automatic disqualifier above a certain price point.

One final criteria would be district recommendations. References from districts can be a very informative part of the screening process.

The goal is to find the provider that offers the best fit with the instructional goals of your district. While ultimately you want to have your online learning program function as a seamless part of your district’s curriculum, you are looking for best current solution. If the match is not perfect yet, do not be discouraged. All of the online providers are in a constant process of updating, modifying, and adapting their programs, often in response to customer input.

Questions to answer at this step are:

What criteria will be used to select our provider(s)?

Who will establish the criteria?

How will the criteria be weighted?

How will cost be weighted? Is there a maximum cost per course?

Who will participate in the screening process? (Will we include students?)

How many providers will we screen?

Will we have providers conduct live demonstrations of their product (in person or via web meeting)?

Will we require providers to give screeners guest access to their systems to spend more in-depth time reviewing their courses?

8. Select provider of online courses

With your criteria and process for screening in hand, you will probably spend a fair amount of time examining different providers. (In the event that no one provider has the best content in all areas you seek, one alternative is to work through the

DLD, which maintains a catalog of courses from multiple providers. This allows the ability to select the best courses from each provider to create a stronger program..)

Once you have selected your provider, you will need to establish a contract with them. The DLD has a model agreement at <http://digitalllearning.k12.wa.us/about/districts/agreements/>. The model covers a number of topics, including:

- Provider and district responsibilities
- Program management and oversight
- State and federal compliance
- Pricing, invoices, and payment
- Student services
- School records and reporting

Questions to answer at this step are:

If the screening process does not present a clear choice, who will make the final decision?

Who will handle the contracting process with the online provider?

9. Determine strategies for student support

Now that you have determined which provider you will use, you may begin to develop the student support strategies. For many of your students, the most important factor determining whether they are successful in an online course is the support that you provide above and beyond what is provided through the course itself.

Note that the kind of support you provide may differ depending on the type of online learning and the nature of the students involved. Students enrolled in a credit-retrieval course may need a different kind of structure than a student taking an AP course. In neither case, however, should you assume that just providing the student access to the course is sufficient.

Areas to consider for student support are:

- Student recruitment – Make sure information made available to students and parents clearly explains the nature of taking an online course and what will be expected of them. This will also mean providing counselors with training to help guide and inform students. Your online provider will probably have resources to assist with this.
- Eligibility requirements – Will students be required to hold a specific GPA before taking online courses? Will they need to get parental permission? Will

there be required coursework to complete before enrolling in particular classes?

- Orientation – An effective orientation helps students (and parents) develop a clear idea of what to expect in an online course, including how the learning management system works, time expectations, and the challenges of setting a schedule. Many providers have an orientation course, a kind of “practice” course, that gives students a hands-on practice run.
- Monitoring progress – Some students may start to fall behind in their online coursework. All providers have a mechanism for staff at the local school to monitor individual student progress. The school should have a plan in place to address students that are not keeping up; one that addresses the problem as quickly as possible. *Do not assume the online teacher will handle this.*
- Additional Materials - Some courses may require a textbook or other books/materials or supplies (such as for science labs). How will these resources be acquired? Who is responsible for paying for them?
- NCAA Eligibility - You will want to get your online courses approved by the NCAA if your student athletes plan on attending NCAA colleges. If you are using the teachers from providers where the course is already NCAA approved, you will not need to get the course approved, but you will need to complete the NCAA non-traditional course questionnaire.
- Student Communication - Connecting with offsite students regularly and reliably is a key to student success. Do you have accurate phone and email information? Are you able to send mass emails efficiently? As your online student roster grows, consider putting mail merge systems in place or use features of your student information system to send detail information to each student.

It is important to consider how school policies for regular courses apply to online courses.

- Drop policy – Will the drop policy for regular courses be the same for online courses? For example, if a student can drop a course within four weeks of the start date without getting an F on the transcript, will that hold true for an online student?
- Attendance – What are the consequences for “non-attendance” in an online course?
- Grading – Will progress grades for online courses be posted in the same manner and timeline in the regular school grade reporting system?

If you are providing students with an onsite lab for taking online courses, you will need to decide how it will be staffed. You need to determine if it will be a certificated staff person, or classified. You will need to budget time (and possibly money) for training, and decide how many students at a time will be in the lab.

One last, specific issue to consider is how you will classify the courses on the student’s transcript. While courses must be flagged as online courses when reported

in CEDARS, the district has the discretion to decide whether these courses are listed as online when recorded on the student's official transcript. Many districts do not list online courses separately out of concern that this may negatively impact a student when applying for college; however, there are some colleges that see online courses as a positive indicator.

This is a step in your process where it will be particularly helpful to consult with other districts with more online learning experience. "Best practices" in supporting students in online courses are still in development and your colleagues in other districts may be your best source of accurate information.

Questions to answer at this step are:

Who will coordinate student support?

How widely will the online courses be publicized?

Will the use of online courses be targeted to specific students?

Will there be criteria for participating in online courses?

What kind of orientation will be provided? Who will provide it?

Who will train guidance counselors and registrars?

What system will be set up to monitor student progress?

Who will have responsibility for monitoring students?

What interventions will be implemented for students falling behind? Will it be different for credit recovery courses or standard courses?

Will there be an onsite lab?

Who will staff the lab? What training will they get?

How many students will be in the lab each period?

10. Determine strategies for administrative support

The contract developed as part of Step 8 provides the framework for much of this step. You will need to identify who in the district will manage the contract and be responsible for oversight of the program. In addition, as detailed in Step 5 above, there are many administrative requirements associated with online learning. You will need to identify who will take responsibility for meeting each of these requirements.

Another challenge is coordinating data from the online course provider. As early as possible, bring together the IT staff handling your student information system and the appropriate support staff from the provider to begin working on the details.

Budget issues are another area where preparation is key. Most providers charge on a per-course basis, which means handling payments for each course taken by each student. Once your program has more than a few students, the process of managing these payments can begin to get complicated. You will need to identify who will handle this effort, and set aside the time to do so.

If you maintain a lab for students to take online courses, you will need to identify the budget for support (and eventual replacing) of those computers. It will be critical to provide adequate support for a lab of this type as the computers are essential to the students being able to complete their work. When these labs are being used at full capacity, every hour of down time on a computer means a student falling a day behind in their online course.

Questions to answer at this step are:

Who will manage the contract with the online provider?

Who will oversee the meeting of legal requirements?

Who will handle ALE reporting? Has enough time been allocated?

Who will coordinate issues of data integration between the provider and district. This includes student information systems, student accounts, and connecting to the district website (if desired)?

What will be the procedure for dealing with technical issues with the provider's system? Who can call the provider for technical support?

Who will manage the budget for online course subscriptions?

If we use an onsite lab, how quickly will technical support be provided? What budget will pay for support, maintenance, and replacement?

11. Review your Policies and Procedures

Now that you've reached this stage in the process, you will need to go back and revisit your district's Policies and Procedures for online learning. It is entirely possible that some of the information you have uncovered and decisions you have made will not align with the existing Policies and Procedures; revision will be necessary before you start registering students.

Questions to ask at this step are:

Who will review the Policies and Procedures for alignment?

If changes are necessary, who will write them and prepare the justifications?

Who will present the proposed changes to the board?

Who will get it onto the agenda with enough lead time to pass prior to rolling out the program?

12. Plan for evaluation, monitoring, and revision

Once the online learning program is underway, you will need a system that regularly monitors the success of students within the program. This data will guide the updating and revision of your student and administrative support systems, as well as providing feedback to the online provider. You may choose to keep your advisory

group in place to assist with this process. Online learning is a very dynamic, rapidly-changing option, and has the potential to involve significant numbers of students in your district. You may find that your current online provider is not working well with your district, and you may need to consider other options. That may involve customizing the provider's curriculum for your district (which some will allow) or even eventually having your own district teachers replace the online provider's teachers. As you monitor and adjust the program over time, you will increase the chances for success for your students.

Questions to ask at this step are:

Who will oversee the monitoring of the program? How will you gather feedback and collect data on program performance?

What will you consider program success? (How will the data be measured against your program goals?)

How often will they report this data? Who will receive and act on the reports?

How will feedback on the effectiveness of the online curriculum be shared with the online provider?

If the evaluation and monitoring of the program indicates problems with the online provider, under what circumstances would the district revisit the selection process?

Resources

Digital Learning Department Website - <http://digitallearning.k12.wa.us/>

This site is maintained by the DLD at OSPI, and has a wide variety of resources, including access to courses, the current list of approved online providers (and the approval criteria), annual reports on the state of online learning, and much more.

iNACOL - <http://www.inacol.org/>

The International Association for K-12 Online Learning is the largest educational organization dedicated to issues of online learning. They are both a resource and advocacy group hosting a variety of webinars and professional development opportunities, including the national Virtual Schools Symposium online learning conference held in November. Their *How to Start An Online Program* resource (<http://www.onlineprogramhowto.org/>) is an effective complement to this document.