The iNACOL State Policy Frameworks:

5 Critical Issues to Transform K–12 Education

iNACOL
International Association for K-12 Online Learning

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The mission of the International Association for K–12 Online Learning (iNACOL) is to ensure all students have access to a world-class education and quality blended and online learning opportunities that prepare them for a lifetime of success. iNACOL is a non-profit organization focused on research; developing policy for student-centered education to ensure equity and access; developing quality standards for emerging learning models using online, blended, and competency-based education; and supporting the ongoing professional development of classroom, school, district and state leaders for new learning models. **Learn more at www.inacol.org.**

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The iNACOL Center for Policy Advocacy

The primary goals of iNACOL's Center for Policy Advocacy are to provide advocacy and technical assistance to develop state and federal policy frameworks and to create and catalyze transformative new models of learning using digital and competency-based pathways.

iNACOL's primary strategic priority is to transform the policy landscape around digital learning. There is a need for researching model policies for state lawmakers to support digital learning, conduct research, and assess each state's barriers to digital learning, and to provide targeted recommendations, write model language, and issue briefs—all while building an advocacy plan with constituents across the education field in support of student-centered learning.

For more information, including how the iNACOL State Policy frameworks can be adapted for your state, contact the iNACOL Center for Policy Advocacy staff via http://www.inacol.org/.

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Introduction

Over the last decade, the American education system has seen unprecedented transformation of teaching and learning as educators have grasped the power of new learning models to close achievement gaps and extend access to high-quality learning opportunities. During this time, states have established online courses in subjects or modalities that were not otherwise available to students in their schools. Full-time online learning options have increased to meet unique student needs. A majority of states have embraced internationally benchmarked college and career ready standards and have developed aligned systems of online assessments[1]. To date, thirty-six states have adopted policies to enable competency education, allowing for proficiency-based diplomas, waiving seat time requirements, creating credit flexibility, or initiating a redesign of accountability and assessment policies[2]. The availability of adaptive digital tools that use data to improve student learning has exploded as technology and innovation advance.

The next few years hold great potential to continue the incredible progress we have achieved—with new learning models that allow personalization of instruction for each student and a shift towards competency education that will ensure teaching and learning are built on a foundation of true mastery. These advances have the potential to close achievement gaps, prepare more students for college and career, and reduce inequities in our education system.

However, this shift cannot be sustained without changes in state policy. Laws, rules, and regulations written in the analog era must be adapted to support new learning models. States must ensure that students have access to a wide range of choices across the learning continuum, that those choices are of high quality, and that the necessary supports and infrastructure—funding models, data systems, and broadband connectivity—are in place to enable highly personalized pathways.

This policy brief provides concrete, actionable recommendations for state policymakers. There are five key issues in the iNACOL State Policy Framework:

1. Create Competency-Based Education Systems

2. Improve Student Access and Equity

3. Measure and Assure Quality from Inputs to Outcomes

4. Support Innovative Educators

5. Support New Learning Models Through Connectivity, Data Systems, and Security

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[1]   Forty-five states and the District of Columbia have adopted the Common Core State Standards; forty-two states and the District of Columbia belong to one of the assessment consortia, to develop assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards. (Achieve, 2013)

[2]   CompetencyWorks (2014).

We provide background and specific policy recommendations for each of these issues in the following pages.

Taken as a whole, the recommendations present a framework for sustainable, systemic change. However, we present these recommendations with the understanding that each state starts from a different place, with its own unique context in its education system and its policy landscape.

Definitions

Blended learning – A formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online learning, with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace, and at least in part in a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home, and in which the modalities along each student's learning path within a course or subject are connected to provide an integrated learning experience.[3]

Competency education – An approach to teaching and learning in which (1) students advance upon mastery; (2) competencies include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students; (3) assessment is meaningful and a positive learning experience for students; (4) students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs; and (5) learning outcomes emphasize competencies that include application and creation of knowledge, along with the development of important skills and dispositions.[4]

New learning models personalize learning using competency-based approaches and are supported by blended and online learning modalities and environments.[5]

Online learning – Education in which instruction is delivered primarily over the Internet.[6]

Online school – A formally constituted organization (public, private, state, charter, etc.) that offers full-time education delivered primarily over the Internet.[7] Online schools typically are responsible for ensuring their students take state assessments and are responsible for their students' scores on those assessments. Many fully online schools are charter schools, although there are a growing number of fully online district schools.[8]

Supplemental online programs provide individual courses to students who are enrolled in a school separate from the online program. Some states refer to these as part-time programs.[9]

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[3] Christensen, C., Horn, M., & Staker, H. (2013).

[4] Patrick, S. & Sturgis, C. (2013).

[5] iNACOL (October 2013).

[6] Watson, J. F., & Kalmon, S. (2005).

[7] iNACOL (October 2011).

[8] Watson, J., Murin, A., Vashaw, L., Gemin, B., and Rapp, C. (2013).

[9] Ibid.

Issue #1: Create Competency-Based Education Systems

Catalyze the transformation of the education system to personalized, competency-based learning.

Background

Our public education system needs to enable competency-based learning through an alignment of both policy and practice. Moving from a time-based system to a learner-based system requires systemic transformation.

To date, forty states have some type of policy in place to provide flexibility for competency education models. However, waivers and limited flexibility provisions are not enough for schools to implement next-generation systems that support personalized learning and competency education. Policymakers should evaluate their state laws, rules, and regulations to uncover limiting time-based policies and provide flexibility to support high-quality new learning models. True competency-based flexibility is required. Thus, rather than schools simply applying for annual waivers of existing seat-time rules, schools need to define credits as competencies and have the flexibility to manage programs for blended learning, with personalized learning and anytime, everywhere mobility. Finally, by redefining credits as competencies rather than time-based units—and asking students to demonstrate mastery of the competencies—states will see students progress based on authentic proficiency and have the support to fill in gaps in their learning. Holding all students to high levels of rigor on academic standards is key. Additionally, proficiency-based diplomas provide an important policy lever. In an equitable system, all students would have the opportunity to attain the knowledge and skills necessary for success in college and careers. Proficiency-based diplomas facilitate meaningful recognition of demonstrated knowledge, skills, dispositions, and abilities.

Recommendations

- Redefine Carnegie Units or credits as competencies aligned to state academic standards.

- Base student progression on demonstrated mastery of the competencies, not on seat time.

- Create a proficiency-based diploma.

- Establish a state task force on competency education composed of practitioners piloting competency education programs. The task force's purpose would be to identify barriers to and opportunities for policy improvements and to align the full continuum of pre-K, K–12, higher education and workforce systems to competency-based learning.

- Rethink the state accountability system to support competency-based learning, using measures of proficiency and growth to motivate daily improvement of student learning, not just to annually label schools.

- Redesign state systems of assessments to support competency-based learning:

  - Measure individual student growth along personalized learning progressions.

  - Use multiple measures of learning, including performance-based assessments.

  - Include summative assessment data as a validator for student-centered accountability.

  - Allow students to take through-course and end-of-course assessments when ready.

- Redesign state data systems around systems-level supports for teaching and learning.

Issue #2: Improve Student Access and Equity

Ensure that each student has access to the entire continuum of student-centered blended and online learning opportunities.

Background

Blended and online learning opportunities can leverage the talent of today's best teachers with technologies that extend their reach and can personalize instruction at any time or place. Across the education system, licensed, effective teachers are developing skills in using digital content and platforms to provide highly differentiated instruction. Students might take more time on certain lessons or move ahead once they demonstrate competency. Students in rural, urban, and underserved communities, who do not have access to courses, could take them from a licensed teacher online and might collaborate with students from across the state and with diverse backgrounds. Blended learning incorporates high-quality digital content and tools with the best of both worlds—traditional school locations and flexibility of anywhere, anytime digital learning opportunities. Whether taking an individual course, enrolling in a full-time online school, or benefiting from blended learning in a brick-and-mortar school, students should have access to the full spectrum of services and programs that best fit their unique learning needs.

Ensuring students have access to, high-quality, fully accessible blended and online learning models is important, as is providing fair, equitable, and adequate funding to provide educators and students with the support systems they need to be successful. Recent adequacy studies show that the amount of per-pupil funding needed to enable high quality teaching and learning in an online learning environment is ninety-three to ninety-five percent of the cost of providing the same excellence in traditional education on a fully adequate base cost[10]. Personnel costs in online learning are comparable to those in traditional environments; both administrative leadership and teacher leadership are required to run high-quality educational programs using blended and online learning. While some cost savings might be achieved through online learning, in adequacy studies, savings were less than ten percent of the cost of traditional schooling. Equitable funding does not necessarily mean equal funding, but the amount must be adequate to ensure that students of all abilities, needs, and backgrounds have the requisite support and resources to achieve success.

Recommendations

- Provide equitable and adequate funding for a spectrum of new learning models with base funding amounts that are adequate to assure quality in each delivery method:

  - Blended learning should be funded at the same levels as brick-and-mortar settings.

  - Supplemental online courses should be funded at a level sufficient to cover the cost of the course curriculum and instruction.

  - Full-time online schools should be funded at a level sufficient to cover all operating costs, including teaching, learning, and student support services.

- Per-pupil funding formulas should be weighted to provide the resources necessary to support at-risk students, students with disabilities, and English language learners.

- Create a student performance-based funding model with the primary purposes of motivating programs to provide world-class instruction and to maximize student gains—not to drive cost savings. Performance incentives should reward attainment of competencies and student growth along a learning trajectory, based on objective, externally validated learning metrics.

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[10]   iNACOL (2014).

- Allow multiple authorizers to authorize, oversee, and evaluate multi-district, full-time public online schools (whether charter-, district-, or state-run), so that any student in the state has the opportunity to attend.

- Establish a course access program, to provide public school students with expanded course offerings across learning environments from diverse, accountable providers.[11]

- Ensure that all digital, blended, and online learning is accessible to students with disabilities. Quality standards for course and school providers should ensure that any student can benefit, that content complies with Federal 508 accessibilty requirements, that programs comply with student Individual Education Plans (IEPs), and that instruction incorporates the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

Issue #3: Measure and Assure Quality from Inputs to Outcomes

Ensure the system identifies and rewards quality providers, holding them accountable for results through transparent reporting of quality through appropriate student learning outcomes.

Background

With the growth of new learning models comes the need to improve quality assurance systems across K–12 education to ensure that only high-quality providers serve students. It is important to promote educational innovation while focusing on quality assurance by analyzing both the relationship between inputs of quality, such as reviewing courses and curricula for alignment with state standards, and the impact of programs on multiple outcome measures of student learning.

iNACOL has led the field in identifying quality standards for provider eligibility and appropriate outcomes-based performance metrics for transparency and accountability. One of the key challenges for the entire field of K–12 education in any delivery mode – traditional, blended or online learning – is the lack of independent, valid assessments spanning the entire K–12 curriculum. Outside of new assessments aligned with state standards required for accountability, there are many untested subjects, grade levels and courses offered by online learning providers. Until appropriate independent, validated, third-party assessments are developed and adopted, true quality assurance will present a challenge.

States should demand that all providers report the data they use to evaluate program outcomes and student success. Given that blended and online learning modalities have unprecedented capabilities to collect data on teaching and learning, states should require transparent reporting on outcomes-based performance metrics.

States and authorizers should consider requiring each provider to have an approved quality assurance method to report on student learning outcomes (the amount of student learning per unit of time) and ask for entry proficiency level benchmarking and student learning growth on statewide valid metrics, at a minimum. Additionally, states and authorizers should require full-time online learning providers to report data on closing the achievement gap, success along learning progressions towards mastery of college and career ready competencies, and fidelity to student learning goals. States and authorizers requiring programs to transparently collect these metrics would assist the field in determining program quality based on multiple measures of data and in evaluating the inputs with relation to student learning outcomes.

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[11]   Worthen and Patrick (2014).

Recommendations

- Ensure transparency and accountability for the quality of online learning providers, using outcomes-based student learning performance metrics for full-time and supplemental providers.[12]

- Adopt an objective quality review process to ensure that online programs and courses offered in the state adhere to state academic standards and iNACOL National Standards for Quality Online Courses, Online Teacher, and Online Programs.[13]

- Reward high-quality programs and courses with performance-based funding models.

- Shut down schools and discontinue course providers that persistently fail to achieve positive outcomes.

Issue #4: Support Innovative Educators

States can catalyze educational innovation to help build capacity for student-centered, personalized learning programs.

Background

State policies can either enable or impede next-generation learning models. Many state regulations were drafted in an era before digital learning and should be reviewed and updated.

To build capacity in the field, future educators, administrators, and teacher leaders need ongoing, job-embedded professional development to transition to new models of learning and to create blended, online, and competency-based learning systems. Building capacity in the field is important for human capital development, planning, scaling effective models, and implementation quality. It is critical to support teachers and leaders to develop skills for planning, managing, and leading evolving system requirements in new personalized, digital learning environments and through learning opportunities that connect them with experts and colleagues.

Recommendations

- Establish an "innovation zone" to catalyze the development of new learning models. Provide the flexibility to waive certain regulations and requirements to schools and systems that are ready to implement personalized, competency-based learning.

- Prioritize whole-school competency-based learning models in school improvement interventions for low-performing schools.

- Ensure that schools receive technical assistance and resources they need so that all students have the learning supports necessary to stay on track to college and career readiness.

- Support professional development for teachers and leaders to implement personalized, competency-based, blended, and online learning environments.

- Provide true teacher license reciprocity for online teaching.

- Ensure that all pre-service preparation programs include training to teach in online, blended, and competency-based learning environments.

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[12] Patrick, Wicks & Watson (2012)

[13] iNACOL (2011a), iNACOL (2011b), Pape & Wicks (2009)

- Ensure that publicly created learning materials for public education have an open license (see http://creativecommons.org/licenses).

- Include OER on approved state instructional materials lists and support the development and maintenance of openly licensed instructional materials, devices, or infrastructure needed to help implement online curriculum and assessments aligned with state standards.

Issue #5: Support New Learning Models Through Connectivity, Data Systems, and Security

Provide adequate broadband telecommunications connectivity to support media-rich new learning models, with secure data systems that enable personalized learning and continuous improvement of learning and programs.

Background

The shift towards highly personalized, mastery-based online and blended learning models will be enabled by blended and online learning pathways that will allow each student to customize learning trajectories toward college and career readiness. To drive this vision, we must narrow the "digital divide" and equip our schools with high-speed broadband connectivity that meets the demands of media-rich, adaptive online instructional content, computerized adaptive assessment, and real-time data collection that supports personalized instruction accessible anytime, anywhere.

Next-generation accountability will require robust data systems capable not only of personalizing teaching and learning but also of "rolling up" data on teaching and learning for accountability that reflects actual student competency.

Within the proper safeguards, data collection is key to personalized learning. It is critical to enact balanced policies that provide good governance practices to ensure proper protection and use of personal and personally identifiable student data, while at same time enabling new learning models and modalities to personalize learning and close achievement gaps. Policymakers should take care not to stifle innovation through prohibitive policies on student data, which can result in unintended consequences.

Recommendations

- Expand and improve state broadband connectivity to ensure opportunities for anytime, anywhere learning:

  - Examine contracting strategies and pooled purchasing agreements to support statewide enterprise telecommunications services with multiple categories to aid cost-effective contracting for schools and districts.

  - State contracts should allow eligibility for any K–12 education program to buy off of statewide enterprise contracts to maximize telecommunications investments with public dollars and E-Rate funds.

  - Explore state strategies to make free or discounted broadband connectivity available to economically disadvantaged students at home and in their communities for anytime, anywhere learning.

- Improve state data systems to collect standards-based, baseline, and longitudinal data to measure growth over time. This would improve accountability and better measure student proficiency, productivity and program effectiveness in real time.

- Establish policies for data privacy and practices that ensure the secure, appropriate, and ethical use of data. Communicate on the importance of data privacy for meaningful use of data to support effective teaching and learning and appropriate data-use policies across systems for intended purposes only.

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