



DIGITAL LEARNING NOW!

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ONLINE LEARNING: MYTHS, REALITY & PROMISE



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The U.S. Department of Education's [National Education Technology Plan](#) calls for “an alternative to the one-size-fits-all model of teaching and learning.” Championing personalized learning, the report goes on to explain, “Personalization refers to instruction that is paced to learning needs [i.e., individualized], tailored to learning preferences [i.e., differentiated], and tailored to the specific interests of different learners. In an environment that is fully personalized, the learning objectives and content as well as the method and pace may all vary.”¹

From classrooms to legislatures, advocates for personalized learning are recognizing that online learning has the potential to advance educational opportunities for all students and to deliver on the promise of personalization — at scale.

In highly personalized environments, online learning will be a central strategy that benefits all students. As we see the proliferation of new learning models, an increasing number of students will use online learning as part of their learning trajectories.

Despite growth in online learning opportunities — from a range that includes school districts to private providers — organizations such as the International Association for K–12 Online Learning (iNACOL) continue to confront myths about what online learning is and is not. Left unchallenged, these myths stand to block student access to a growing pool of high-quality online opportunities. Fortunately, as online learning options grow, so too does the body of evidence that replaces outdated myths with a more realistic picture of student and teacher experiences with online learning.

“Online Learning: Myths, Reality & Promise” challenges current myths and replaces them with realities that will advance the field of online learning. In doing so, the authors are candid about the strengths of online learning and offer recommendations on aspects that need additional attention to further strengthen it.

MYTHS & REALITY

The paper's sections on myths and realities confront misconceptions about what online learning means for students, teachers and the system as a whole. Key topics include:

- The range of students served by online learning;
- The power of personalized online learning;
- The daily experiences of online learners and teachers;
- The role of technology; and
- Evidence in support of online learning.

Student success stories and teacher profiles are woven throughout this section to show “the faces of online learning.” In addition to countering individual misconceptions with myth-busting evidence to the contrary, this section of the paper also reveals additional realities about online learning, acknowledges its challenges and identifies areas of opportunity that can lead to additional improvements across the sector.

PROMISE

The promise of online learning can be characterized by three primary advantages to students — customization, motivation and equalization. At its core, online learning offers personalized learning for all. Building on various personalized learning frameworks, this section explores the potential of online learning to keep students at the center of the educational experience.

Extending student access to high-quality options is a necessary complement to shifting to personalized learning. Online learning reinvents options for students, as they are no longer bound to the limitations of their home zip code. This section acknowledges the importance of expanding access before reviewing trends in online learning such as district implementation, course choice policies, blended learning and competency-based learning that boost student access to high-quality options.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Building on the Digital Learning Now! policy framework, the recommendations section highlights state policy priorities necessary to support online learning. Recommendation areas include offering informed choices and setting an agenda for research and development.

Across the country, schools are implementing college and career readiness standards, preparing for the next generation of assessments, seeking ways to improve efficiency and productivity, exploring the potential of technology and extending student access to high-quality learning opportunities. With thoughtful implementation and an acknowledgement of its challenges, the shift to online learning has the potential to aid stakeholders across the system in taking on these interrelated challenges. Furthermore, online learning can deliver on the promise of personalized learning *to all students in a way that up to now has not been possible.*