



Minnesota Online Learning Options Act Work Group Findings and Recommendations September 1, 2021

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Background

The Minnesota “[Online Learning Option Act](#)” (M.S.124D.095) first appeared in Minnesota Statutes in [2003](#). At this time, online learning was an unfamiliar concept to most people and the legislation was written to clarify funding, ensure equity of access, and establish quality online educational options. Since then, advances in technology and pedagogy have created new ways of providing instruction and numerous opportunities for students. Examples include easy access

to live videoconferencing, CTE partnerships and pathways, new developments in learning management system design and capabilities, and new digital tools and education resources that enable interactive learning.

Online and digital learning have been brought into sharp focus by the COVID 19 global pandemic. Our entire K-12 workforce now has experience with digital learning as do all families with school-age children. Not all of the experiences have been positive for students, families, or educators, but they have opened our eyes to new opportunities and highlighted tensions with existing policies and structures. As schools move forward with planning for the next school year and beyond, this is a good time to take stock in the experiences educators and students have had, evaluate lessons learned, and consider how to seize opportunities to provide public education in new ways.

The Minnesota Learning Commons (MNLCC), a partnership between the Minnesota Department of Education, University of Minnesota, and Minnesota State convened a group of education professionals experienced with online learning both before and during the pandemic to examine the existing Minnesota Online Learning Options Act and make recommendations on potential changes to policy to better meet the needs of Minnesota's students.

Recommendations

Topics for Immediate Action, Procedure Change, Guidance

1. Encourage and facilitate opportunities for collaboration and partnership between online providers and school districts.
2. Revise the three-year review process facilitated by MDE to create opportunities for online learning programs to work together in professional learning communities.
3. Improve communication and information for online learning options for families and districts so that barriers to participation are removed.
4. Create clear guidance regarding online learning service contracts with third-party vendors.

Topics for Law or Policy Change

1. Private and homeschool students should be able to access supplemental courses. (This would require eliminating the line “at a school building” in shared time aid statute.)
2. The current definition of residency/domicile/physical presence should be reevaluated.
3. MDE should make recommendations for restructuring the current law so it is sectioned in a way that makes it clear what students can do, what schools can do, and what MDE is required to do. MDE should also develop accompanying guidance that provides clarity for different audiences.
4. Remove barriers for school districts and charter schools to provide flexible learning options, including online instruction, to their enrolled students. Such a proposal must include clear guidelines for administrative control, alignment with Minnesota academic and graduation standards, and instruction provided by licensed teachers employed by the public school offering the program.
5. There should be extended year opportunities for credit recovery for all students without barriers that require site-based or synchronous attendance.
6. The Online Learning Advisory Council should be reinstated, along with a budget for its operation to bring to the attention of the commissioner and the legislature any matters related to online and digital learning. The advisory council shall provide input to the department and the legislature in online learning matters related, but not restricted, to: (1) quality assurance; (2) teacher qualifications; (3) program approval; (4) special education; (5) attendance; (6) program design and requirements; and (7) fair and equal access to programs.

Topics for Study

1. Online learning programs, MDE, and districts should collaborate to determine better/different accountability measures that better align with program outcomes.
2. MDE should study alternative funding models that are not based solely on seat time.

Online Learning Options Act Work Group Membership

Members of the Online Learning Options Act Work Group were recruited on the basis of their organizational affiliation, experience with online learning, and student groups represented by their organizations. Jeff Plaman, Online and Digital Learning Specialist at the Minnesota Department of Education has served as chair, and Mary Mehsikomer, Outreach Facilitator, Sourcewell Technology and Jon Voss, Director of Teaching and Learning, Intermediate District 287 have been co-facilitators for the group. Sourcewell Technology, as the administrator for the Minnesota Learning Commons, has assisted with planning, facilitation and communication. Members of the Work Group are listed below:

Krin Abraham, Superintendent, Houston Public Schools

Sean Beaverson, Digital Learning Specialist, Edina Public Schools

Jason Berg, Superintendent, Farmington Public Schools

Jocelynn Buckenthin, Digital Learning Specialist, Hutchinson Public Schools

Gigi Dobosenski, Director, EdVisions

Jenn Fuchs, Principal, Duluth Edison Charter School

Jenn Hegna, Technology Director, Byron Public Schools

John Iverson, Online Learning, St. Paul Public Schools

Shawntel Jenkins, Principal, K-12 Online Learning, Minneapolis Public Schools

Mary Mehsikomer, Outreach Facilitator, Sourcewell Technology, Co-Facilitator

John Olson, Science Specialist, Minnesota Department of Education

Jeff Plaman, Online and Digital Learning Specialist, Minnesota Department of Education

Tracy Quarnstrom, Director, Wolf Creek Academy

Christopher Reynolds, Special Education, Minnesota Department of Education

Holly Skadsem, Digital Learning Specialist, Bloomington Public Schools

Jon Voss, Director of Teaching and Learning, Intermediate District 287, Co-Facilitator

Kelly Wosika, Education Finance, Minnesota Department of Education

Process

The Minnesota Online Learning Options Act Work Group met six times between April 2021 and September 2021.

Over the course of the meetings, members discussed feedback from parents, students, and educators received during the pandemic, challenges with the current law, the role of commercial providers in online learning, and how students can benefit from online learning and expanded education opportunities.

Questions Considered

1. What are the key opportunities for students enabled by online learning?
2. What policy levers enhance the ability to provide these opportunities?
3. What policy levers inhibit the ability to provide these opportunities?

Findings

Key Opportunities for Students

1. Online learning provides access to a wider range of courses and learning experiences for students.
2. Online learning increases opportunities for student agency, voice, and choice in their learning.
3. Online learning opens new connections for students in skills development, internship, and other career-focused learning opportunities.
4. Online learning provides greater flexibility in time, place, path, and pace of learning for students.
5. Online learning provides an alternative learning environment for students who need or

are seeking a different learning experience than the traditional face-to-face classroom.

Conclusion

The Minnesota Online Learning Options Act Work Group is submitting this report to the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) and other interested organizations and individuals to stimulate action on the recommended actions.. With the rapid expansion of online learning during the COVID19 pandemic, increased interest from districts and charter schools in providing online learning and the continued health concerns that will impact the 2021-22 school year, now is the time to consider the future of online learning for our state.

The recommendations in this report require further conversation, consideration, and collaboration to be enacted. Some of the topics the work group has addressed do not require a change to statute or legislative action, but are well-worth considering in the context of our K-12 system. Ultimately, the focus is to remove barriers to opportunities and focus on sound teaching and learning practices.

In addition, the recommendations of this work group align with the work of the Minnesota Learning Commons, a partnership of the Minnesota Department of Education/K-12 education, University of Minnesota, and Minnesota State. The MNLC is adopting a multi-year plan to move Minnesota's education systems towards an adoption of the 60-year curriculum model. The 60 year curriculum model emphasizes flexibility and accessibility to learning opportunities for students of all ages from higher education institutions for the course of the student's lifetime.

