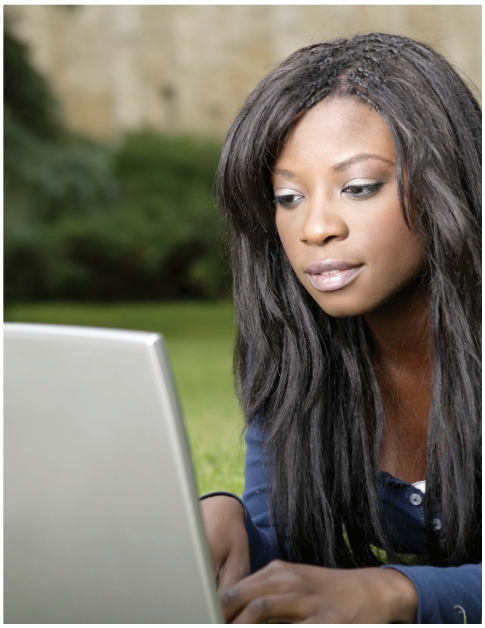
iNACOL
International Association for K-12 Online Learning

www.inacol.org

K-12 Online Learning: A Smart Investment NOW More Than Ever

In times of great economic challenge, citizens look to policymakers for solutions that lay the foundation for a brighter tomorrow. **In K-12 education, one of the most promising and cost-effective solutions is quality online learning**. Many states have made an important initial investment in online learning. Since every dollar spent this year must count even more than ever, now is the time to preserve and expand investments in online learning. Here's why:



States must overcome critical education challenges to survive and thrive in the 21st Century economy and provide quality educational opportunity to all students.

- The most valuable and often scarcest resource in education is good teachers. 40% of public school districts in America today say they need online learning resources because certified teachers are not available for traditional face-to-face instruction — an increase of 38% since 2006.[1] Online learning extends the reach of our best teachers across the state and creates economies of scale in rural areas.
- Math and science education are absolutely critical to our states' and nation's economic competitiveness — but expert math and science teachers are in short supply. 52% of middle school and 15% of high school mathematics teachers did not have a major or minor in mathematics, while 40% of middle school and 11% of high school science teachers did not have a major or a minor in science.[2] Online learning provides an opportunity for high-quality math teachers in all schools.
- Despite the rise of the global economy, only 44% of high school students in the U.S. studied a foreign language in 2002, while learning a second or third foreign language is compulsory for students in Europe and elsewhere. Students in online foreign language courses have been shown to perform as well as those in face-to-face classes, including consistent improvement in performance year over year.[3]
- Two thirds of jobs being created now require college or post-secondary technical education[4], and 90% of the fastest growing jobs require a college degree.[5] Online college prep, Advanced Placement, credit recovery, and dropout prevention programs ensure that more American students are ready for college.

40% of our nation's high schools — particularly those serving low-income, minority and rural youth — do not offer any Advanced Placement (AP) courses.

- Advanced courses prepare students for college success while saving college costs. While the number of minority students taking Advanced Placement (AP) exams has increased by 81% since 1999[6], as of 2006 more than 40% of our nation's high schools — particularly those serving low-income, minority, and rural youth — did not offer AP courses.[7] Online learning can provide access to every Advanced Placement course available to every student in a state.
- Our educational challenges are unevenly distributed. All of the issues described above are even more pronounced for our minority students, low income students, and students in rural areas. Online learning ensures equity and quality educational opportunities to every student regardless of zip code.

Today's students also face unique educational challenges.

- One in every three high school students and one in every two African American high school students fail to graduate from high school. These students face a lifetime of economic challenge, earning 29% less than high school graduates and half as much as college graduates.[8]
- Nearly half (47%) of those who drop out of high school say they did so because their classes were not interesting; 43% say they missed too many classes and could not catch up.[9] Online learning provides an engaging, educationally sound and cost effective way to recover credits and prevent dropouts.
- Only 32% of all students leave high school qualified to attend four-year colleges[10] and over a million incoming college students must take remedial courses to acquire basic academic skills in math and reading in order to take and comprehend entry-level college courses.[11] Online learning provides another opportunity for students to learn and acquire these skills before entering college.
- More than one in ten students has a learning need or disability qualifying him or her for special education. Despite significant investment in special education — involving costs up to double that of educating a non-disabled student — such students are twice as likely to drop out of school and their families are significantly less satisfied with their education.[12] Online learning provides another alternative for these students allowing them to learn with their peers in an environment removed from social, physical, and mental barriers and which also may meet their learning style that a traditional classroom may not provide.

Online learning ensures equity and quality educational opportunities to every student regardless of zip code.

- Another one in ten American students has been designated as gifted and talented by virtue of IQ and special skills. Online learning allows these students to accelerate their studies, take advanced courses, and concentrate on their special talents while covering their academic bases.
- Young people surround themselves with technology in all aspects of their lives, and education institutions focused on the future are learning to make constructive use of this fact. In one recent study, students who listened to classroom lectures via podcast actually outperformed those who'd attended in person.[13]
- Today's students need a unique set of "21st century skills" to thrive in the global economy. Such skills include technology skills, time management skills, and global awareness. Online learning has been demonstrated to develop these 21st century skills[14] so much so that several states, including Michigan and Alabama, now require all high school students to take at least one online course to graduate.

Our schools and districts cannot meet all of these challenges through traditional face-to-face instruction and are clamoring for increased online learning resources.

According to a January 2009 report by the Sloan Consortium:[15]

- More than 75% of schools and districts say they need online learning to offer courses not otherwise available.
- More than 75% of schools and districts need online learning to meet the needs of specific groups of students.
- Nearly 70% of schools and districts are looking to online learning to offer Advanced Placement or college-level courses.
- 60% of schools and districts say they need online learning for credit recovery and more than 50% need online learning to reduce student scheduling conflicts.
- Two-thirds of districts with students engaged in online learning expect their online enrollments to grow.
- The number of students engaged in online courses through their districts is now more than a million, a 47% increase since 2006.

More than 75% of schools and districts say they need online learning to offer courses not otherwise available.

The bottom line: Online learning is a SMART INVESTMENT with a proven payoff for students, schools and society.

Online learning has been shown by research to be academically effective, providing student performance "as good or better" compared to face-to-face instruction.[16] Online learning has also demonstrated that it can cost-effectively meet urgent educational needs by providing necessary courses that are otherwise unavailable, leveraging our best teachers, addressing the dropout crisis and serving students with unique educational needs. Preserving and expanding investments in online learning will help ensure a brighter future for our children and our nation as a whole.

Online learning extends the reach of our best teachers across the state and creates economies of scale in rural areas.

Endnotes

[1] The Sloan Consortium, K-12 Online Learning: A 2008 Follow-up of the Survey of U.S. School District Administration (January 2009).
[2] U.S. Department of Education, Schools and Staffing Survey, www.ed.gov
[3] Research Findings from the West Virginia Virtual School Spanish Program, 2006, http://wvde.state.wv.us/evaluation/pace_findings.htm
[4] Strong American Schools, http://www.strongamericanschools.org/sas-says-facts
[5] U.S. Department of Education, Expanding the Advanced Placement Incentive Program, http://tinyurl.com/czrh2j
[6] National Center for Education Statistics, Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Minorities, 2007, http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/minoritytrends/ind_3_13.asp
[7] U.S. Department of Education, Expanding the Advanced Placement Incentive Program, 2006, http://www.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/competitiveness/expanding-apip.html
[8] The U.S. Census Bureau as reported by the Heritage Foundation, The Cost of American Education, http://tinyurl.com/dxauuc
[9] Civic Enterprises for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2006, http://www.gatesfoundation.org/united-states/Documents/TheSilentEpidemic3-06FINAL.pdf
[10] Public High School Graduation and College Readiness Rates in the United States, 2002, The Manhattan Institute, www.manhattan-institute.org
[11] Strong American Schools, http://www.strongamericanschools.org/edin08pr/4188
[12] Students with Disabilities who Drop Out of School—Implications for Policy and Practice, National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, http://www.ncset.org/publications/viewdesc.asp?id=425
[13] iTunes University Better Than the Real Thing, New Scientist, February 18, 2009, http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn16624-itunes-university-better-than-the-real-thing.html
[14] Virtual Schools and 21st Century Skills, iNACOL and the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, www.inacol.org
[15] The Sloan Consortium, K-12 Online Learning: A 2008 Follow-up of the Survey of U.S. School District Administration (January 2009).
[16] NCREL Synthesis of New Research on K-12 Online Learning, 2005, North Central Regional Education Laboratory/Learning Point Associates, www.ncrel.org/tech/synthesis/