A whole-school approach to virtual learning

Why online learning should include more than just courses

MICHIGAN™ VIRTUAL

Over the last decade, K-12 online learning has surged. The same technologies that let us interact face to face at the press of a button, and enable companies to do business anytime from anywhere, are being leveraged to connect students to a high-quality education outside of the traditional classroom.

However, the increased adoption of online learning has also created something of a paradox. While virtual learning and the use of technology represents a step forward for education, it's often used in ways that can be seen as a step backward.

For decades, educators have strived to move away from instruction that equates learning with grades and views education only through an academic lens. We've finally come around to the idea that to truly prepare students for life means more than just giving passing grades. It requires educating the whole student, and providing them with the intellectual, emotional, and social tools to be successful in school and beyond.

And yet too often, online learning is being offered as ad hoc courses with little instruction, guidance, or support, with the hope that technology will pave the way to a passing grade. That approach is not only counterproductive to student success, it undercuts the benefits that online learning can offer.

Virtual learning can be leveraged to create a whole-school learning experience that solves many of the problems students, educators, and administrators face. But a comprehensive online learning experience should be more than teacherless courses. It should include:

- ✔ **Rigorous teacher-led courses for a variety of students and student needs**
- ✔ **Social-emotional learning (SEL)**
- ✔ **Professional development**

MORE THAN COURSES:

A whole-school approach to virtual learning

While 10 years ago the benefit of online learning was the ability to offer access to courses outside a physical classroom, it has developed into so much more. In the same way that technology has reshaped the way we communicate, shop, do business, and access entertainment, it s redefining K 12 education.

A quality online learning program addresses the whole student and includes:

Comprehensive online courses for a diverse student body

Social and emotional learning

Professional development opportunities that enable teachers to improve the classroom experience

ONLINE COURSES

The term *virtual learning* is usually associated with online courses, and for good reason. In the last 10 years, online courses have made the shift from novelty to norm in higher education – nationally, over **30% of college students have enrolled in at least one online course**.

That trend is mirrored in the business world, where companies routinely use online courses for professional training and certifications. In 2017, about **77% of U.S. corporations used online learning**.

In Michigan, the emphasis on online courses is in no small part due to the state requirement that all students must have an online learning experience to graduate. Since 2013, the **State School Aid Act** has also required Michigan public schools to honor parent or student requests for enrollment in up to two online courses per academic term.

All of that is to say that, while online courses are just one part of a whole-school K-12 virtual learning approach, in many ways they are the foundation. Proper implementation of quality, teacher-led courses can prepare students for success in school, higher education, and their career.

A comprehensive virtual learning program provides online courses for a variety of needs across the student population, including:

- ✓ **Advanced placement (AP)** and specialized elective courses for high-achieving students

- ✓ **Credit recovery** for students that have failed a class or dropped out and need to get back on track to graduate

- ✓ **Educational courses** that identify gaps students need to fill in order to meet college and career aspirations

But that's just a narrow top-line view of *who* benefits. Thanks to their ease of access and a learn-at-your-own-pace model, online courses offer numerous advantages, such as:

✔ **Providing districts without enough teachers an option for offering individualized instruction**

✔ **Expanding the range of courses available to students**

✔ **Offering flexibility to students with scheduling conflicts**

✔ **Giving elite athletes and performers, migrant youth, pregnant, at-risk, or incarcerated students, and students who are homebound due to illness or injury the opportunity to continue their studies outside the traditional classroom**

✔ **Helping students who are performing below grade-level catch up**

✔ **Offering personalized instruction for the needs of individual students**

✔ **Increasing the teaching of technology skills**

✔ **Preparing students for today's college and careers, which are increasingly relying on online work/interaction**

As with any service, though, not all online courses are the same. Some use teachers, some don't. Every platform looks different, engages with students differently, and uses its own content.

Because of those differences, not every offering may be appropriate for every student or be equally effective.

The effectiveness of online learning

Research has shown that online learning is effective and can provide alternatives for students who need greater flexibility to pursue education opportunities that fit their specific circumstances, needs, and goals.

To that end, Michigan policy leaders have nurtured an environment that fosters more online learning options. That has created a competitive market from which Michigan school districts can choose online learning providers. But while choice is good, not every option is the same, and not every online course is equally effective.

Consequently, there have been mixed outcomes for Michigan K-12 students taking online courses. Michigan's K-12 Virtual Learning Effectiveness Report for 2018-19 reveals increasing enrollment but declining pass rates.

> **In fact, the statewide pass rate for online courses dropped from a high of 66% in 2010-11 to 55% in 2016-17.**

Additionally, the report indicates that:

- Schools tend to enroll students who are struggling academically in traditional courses or for a subject in which a student has failed

- These students continue to struggle in online courses

- In some districts, struggling students are being enrolled in online courses in large numbers – **over 12,550 students took five or more online courses and failed every one**

- While the **overall pass rate for virtual courses was 55%**, almost half of the virtual learners passed every online course they took

- Some districts are more effective in using virtual learning than others – **26% of districts had virtual pass rates of 90% to 100%**

So what can be made of these numbers and what's behind the divergent results? Are online classes simply not as effective as those conducted in a traditional classroom?

Given the success that many students – and over a quarter of the districts – had with online learning, that's clearly an oversimplification. However, the results do seem to suggest that, in terms of performance, trends that exist in a brick-and-mortar classroom carry over into online learning.

Strong, motivated students continue to excel, while weaker students continue to struggle.

That trend is likely exacerbated by the decreased structure and learn-at-your-own-pace model of online learning. Just as in a traditional classroom, students with certain traits perform well in online learning.

Profile of a successful student

Students who have a successful, satisfying experience learning online tend to share several critical characteristics.

GOOD TIME MANAGEMENT
The student creates and maintains a consistent study schedule throughout the semester and is able to do so without significant prodding from a teacher.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION
The student knows when and how to ask for help and is able to clearly describe any problems she/he is having with the learning materials using email, texting, and/or the telephone. This includes seeking help from the online instructor, a mentor, or even other students in the online course.

INDEPENDENT STUDY HABITS
The student studies and completes assignments without direct supervision and maintains the self-discipline to stick to a schedule.

SELF-MOTIVATION
The student has a strong desire to learn skills, acquire knowledge, and fulfill assignments in online courses because of an educational goal and can maintain focus on that goal.

ACADEMIC READINESS
The student has the basic reading, writing, math, and computer literacy skills to succeed in the class.

TECHNOLOGICALLY PREPARED
The student knows how to open, create, and/or save a document; use various technology tools (e.g., dictionary, thesaurus, grammar checker, calculator); and identify various file formats (e.g., .docx, .xlsx, .pdf, .jpg).

START WITH ONE TO TWO COURSES
Students enrolled in traditional schools tend to perform better in their online courses when they only take one or two online courses at a time. Unless a student has already proven they can be successful taking one or two online courses, it is not advisable to provide them with more.
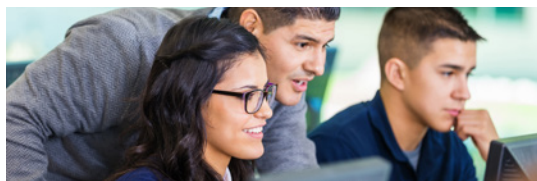
Teacher-led vs. teacherless online courses

While there is a particular type of student that tends to excel at online learning, it's not the only success factor.

> **One of the most interesting statistics is the decline in passing grades in online learning.**

It seems at odds with advancements in technology that should help *more* students pass. The sharp divide in performance suggests that those declines aren't merely a product of more students enrolling in online courses.

However, an increase in enrollment could be indirectly contributing to falling pass rates. As online learning has surged, so has the number of online learning platforms, which range in quality and effectiveness, and include:

Teacher-led online courses that use certified teachers to provide students with guidance, support, and individualized instruction in tandem with a mentor.

Teacherless online courses that more or less rely on the platform to provide guidance and instruction, along with the support of a mentor.

Are students who are enrolled in teacherless platforms not getting the necessary guidance, support, and individualized instruction to pass online courses? Does the type of online course that districts choose factor into pass rates?

There is no data on the topic, but just as in a traditional classroom, the role of the instructor (if any) would seem to be critical to student success. If nothing else, schools should carefully consider their options when choosing an online learning provider.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL)

Education is about more than academics. Historically, educators have primarily been charged with teaching students what they need to graduate and engaging their intellectual curiosity and imagination.

However, we now know that future success is contingent upon more than just strong grades. **It depends on addressing the "whole child**," not just academic standards.

> **Increasingly, schools are looking beyond students' academic needs to include their cognitive, physical, behavioral, social, and emotional needs.**

This approach, known as social-emotional learning (SEL), is gaining momentum for its ability to address a wide range of skills, attitudes, and behaviors that impact success in school and life.

Skills for the classroom and beyond

Bullying, gun violence, climate change – today's students are wrestling with big concerns on top of the usual issues related to hormonal and neurological changes, the pressures of school, and exploring their identity, independence, relationships, and sexuality.
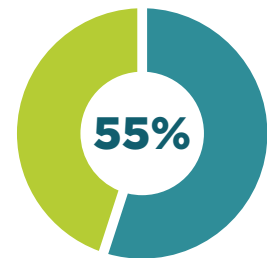
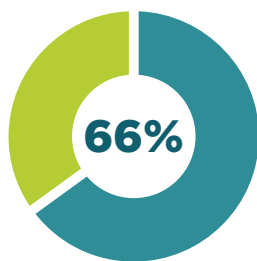It's a lot, and it's taking a toll. A 2018 Pew Research Center survey found that:
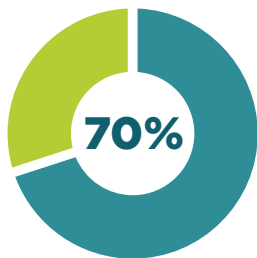
70%
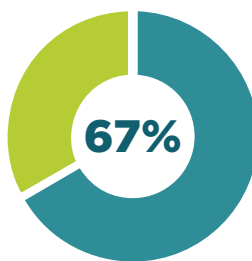think **anxiety** and **depression** are major problems for their peers
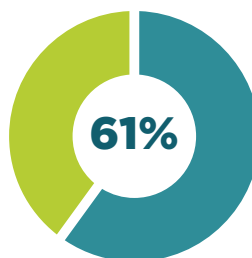
61%
feel a lot of pressure to get **good grades**
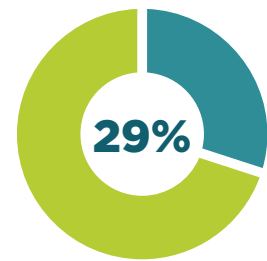
55%
feel **bullying** is a major issue

66%
said they feel at least some pressure **to look good**

67%
said they feel at least some pressure **to fit in socially**

29%
feel **nervous** or **anxious** on a daily basis (when those that responded "sometimes" are included, it soars to 74%)

It's not necessarily a new story, but it does seem to be worsening, creating increased distractions, pressure, and mental health issues for students.

While SEL programs themselves aren't necessarily new, they can now be offered as a comprehensive virtual learning program that helps teach a multitude of social, emotional, and coping skills, including:

- ✔ Self-awareness
- ✔ Critical thinking
- ✔ Managing emotions
- ✔ Conflict resolution
- ✔ Decision-making
- ✔ Teamwork

Although these skills aren't necessarily measured in academic tests, their acquisition is part of a whole-school, well-rounded education that impacts academic, career, relationships, as well as civic and community engagement.

In fact, **a report from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)** found that students who participated in SEL programs saw an 11 percentile point gain in achievement scores compared to students without SEL instruction.

But the benefits of SEL extend well beyond graduation. **A 2015 study from the American Journal of Public Health** found that a lack of SEL instruction is associated with an increased chance of unemployment, divorce, mental health issues, and criminal behavior.

As if those statistics weren't reason enough for schools to pursue SEL as part of a comprehensive virtual learning program, consider the return on investment. **A study by Columbia University** found that the average return for SEL programs is 11 to 1.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR EDUCATORS

While professional development for educators isn't the first thing that comes to mind with student success, it's a critical link in ensuring a quality education. More than just a requirement for Michigan educators to maintain their license, ongoing education and training helps address the challenges of students and provide a better learning experience.

In *Why professional development matters*, Hayes Mizell writes:

> *In education, research has shown that teaching quality and school leadership are the most important factors in raising student achievement. For teachers and school and district leaders to be as effective as possible, they must continually expand their knowledge and skills to implement the best educational practices. Educators learn to help students learn at the highest levels."*

The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) has **created a program** by which educators can earn State Continuing Education Clock Hours (SCECH) through approved development activities that can be used for renewal of certificates and licenses.

Traditionally, professional development has included activities like:

✔ Conferences

✔ Inservice meetings and workshops

However, while those activities provide value, they may not address the specific needs of individual educators or address professional goals and interests that could advance their development and improve students.

Just as with students, online courses offer distinct advantages, allowing teachers to:

- ✔ **Pursue personalized professional development**

- ✔ **Choose relevant topics from hundreds of courses rather than having to pick from whatever is being presented at a handful of workshops and conferences**

- ✔ **Discover the latest in educational tools and tactics**

- ✔ **Earn SCECHs and meet professional development requirements during flexible times of their choice**

- ✔ **Meet district training needs with dozens of compliance courses**

Providing online professional development to educators makes sense for an education system that is increasingly embracing virtual learning for students. It also mirrors the trend in nearly every other professional field, where online training and certification has not only become the norm but an expectation.

In the coming years, many districts will likely come face to face with that growing expectation. With each collective bargaining agreement, more and more teachers are pushing for flexible professional development options that allow educators to pursue personalized learning opportunities.

A comprehensive virtual learning program that includes SCECHs-approved online professional development courses and micro-credentials not only satisfies that desire, it helps provide students with a better educational experience.

ONE ONLINE PROGRAM FOR MULTIPLE LEARNING NEEDS

As virtual learning continues to expand, it's critical for educators to begin to see it as more than just ad hoc online courses to be used under specific circumstances, for particular students, or to meet state requirements.

Online learning is a dynamic and powerful tool that, when leveraged appropriately, can deliver a deep, whole-school learning experience across the student population. It can be used to address a variety of academic, social, and emotional needs that can positively impact students in the classroom, in their careers, in relationships, and in society.

At the same time, comprehensive online learning programs can help schools solve problems related to:

- ✔ **Teacher shortages**

- ✔ **Student attrition due to a lack of course offerings**

- ✔ **Professional development opportunities for educators**

But not all online learning providers offer the same services. While some may only offer teacherless online courses, others might provide a mix of services of varying quality.

That's why it's important to engage with an online learning services provider that meets the current and future needs of your schools, including high-quality teacher-led courses, SEL instruction, and professional development.

When choosing an online learning provider, **consider these 10 questions:**

1 Are the online courses teacher-led by Michigan-certified instructors?

☐ YES ☐ NO

2 Has the provider partnered with relevant state agencies to develop their curriculum?

☐ YES ☐ NO

3 Do the courses align with Michigan standards, as well as nationally-recognized course quality standards?

☐ YES ☐ NO

4 What are the pass rates of students who take their online courses?

☐ YES ☐ NO

5 Do they provide math and ELA support solutions to help students meet grade-level expectations?

☐ YES ☐ NO

6 Do they offer a social-emotional learning (SEL) solution?

☐ YES ☐ NO

7 Do they offer mentor training and support?

☐ YES ☐ NO

8 Do they offer MDE-approved online SCECH courses for educators?

☐ YES ☐ NO

9 Do they offer micro-credentialing for professional development?

☐ YES ☐ NO

10 Do they offer resources for every support level, including parents, administrators, and school board members?

☐ YES ☐ NO

Give your students *more*

Jumpstart your whole-school virtual learning program with a free review and learn how to leverage today's online learning technology to position students for success in the classroom and beyond.

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