

THE FACTS ABOUT DIGITAL AND BLENDED LEARNING

There is a revolution occurring in America today that is too often unrecognized or trivialized. It is almost silent, perhaps by design.

Let's be honest, every attempt to empower parents, educators and lawmakers to transform the learning experience of our nation's children has been met with fierce opposition.

But today, the efforts toward improving education in the U.S. include a strong focus on online and blended learning, an approach that involves a myriad of delivery mechanisms via online tools for students, no matter where they live or attend school.

Innovation today is opening up classrooms to the world, and bringing the world into the once parochial classroom. Gone are the days when a school in a community would be limited by distance and cost from availing its students of every imaginable lesson that exists in the world to enhance their learning.

There is tri-partisan support for online and blended learning programs that has sparked a nationwide revolution that does not just mean the proverbial computer in the back of the classroom or a new "innovative" building, but entire classrooms and

schools delivering world-class education online, to students from all backgrounds and communities.

Yet, despite this support and the evidence that digital learning is here to stay and is growing in popularity and practice, students across the country are limited in their choices to transform their learning experience.

The proliferation of digital and blended learning opportunities requires the public's acceptance and understanding of these innovations. It requires policymakers to join the effort and it requires the media to understand the difference between [devices](#), [buildings](#) and [actual learning](#) to guide public discourse in an unbiased way.

First and foremost, it requires listening to the students and directing their educational experience in totally new ways - and then talking about it!

This toolkit aims to help the "adults" working on the frontlines of the digital learning revolution to change the public discourse and ensure the public acceptance of the widespread benefits of technology and true innovative delivery in education that is changing lives across the country.

IN THIS TOOLKIT YOU WILL FIND

- Answers to dispel the eight most common myths on digital learning;
- New public opinion data to help guide public discourse;
- Tips for working with the media, policymakers and community leaders to set the record straight; and
- Connections to some of the finest resources and organizations working to disrupt, transform and accelerate learning now.

MYTHS AND REALITIES

MYTH #1: We can just say “Innovation” and look like we’re doing something!

The truth is, most Americans still hold an early 21st century view of educational innovation. That’s a problem and probably the biggest myth. In a [recent poll](#) commissioned by The Center for Education Reform (CER) in October 2013, respondents were asked an open-ended question: “Name a promising new innovation in education you have seen, read, or heard of recently.” For many respondents, their answer was simple: technology, in the form of computers and the Internet. Some were more specific and named iPads and tablets. Additionally:

- 20 percent of respondents said they “do not know” and another 20 percent responded with “nothing” when asked to name an innovation in education that they have seen, read, or even heard about lately.

- Combined with the 23 percent who focused on computers and technology, clearly there is much work to be done to bring Americans into the mainstream conversation about new practices, approaches, and full alternatives to conventional education.

Interestingly, “innovation” was processed by most of these respondents as something that already exists and is being assimilated. **The plurality looked at the previous 15 years, rather than looking ahead to the next 15.**

Innovation in and of itself is meant to be “disruptive.” Merely introducing devices in the classroom or breaking ground on a new building only focuses on inputs and not the outputs our students need most. For a more informed view of “innovation” in action see <http://www.christenseninstitute.org/publications/hybrids/>.

MYTH #2: Online Learning is a Short-Term Trend

Online learning is one of the fastest growing sectors of education. It is estimated that over four million K-12 students participate in some kind of online schooling, such as taking an online class in their conventional public school, attending a blended learning program, or enrolling in a completely virtual charter school. Currently, some type of online learning opportunity is available to students in 48 of the 50 states plus Washington, DC. (iNACOL, [A National Primer on K-12 Online Learning](#), 2010)

The number of students attending full-time online schools has grown from approximately 200,000 in 2009-2010 to 310,000 in 2012-2013. (iNACOL, [Fast Facts About Online Learning](#))

Arizona, Kansas, Florida, Minnesota, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin have stood out recently as states that offer a wide variety of full-time and

supplemental online options for students across most grade levels. (ibid) In fact, states are coming under more scrutiny as to what sort of digital and blended educational options are offered. Online and digital learning is a major component of [The Parent Power Index](#), with organizations like [Digital Learning Now](#) issuing policy report cards entirely devoted to digital learning.

MYTH #3: Online Learning is Only for Gifted Students

In the past, online learning was seen as a tool for gifted students who needed to surge ahead, or for child athletes and actors who had to be away from home for long periods of time. That is simply not the case anymore. Digital learning is individualized to students' strengths, and thus is a great tool for all types of students, including at-risk, those who live in rural areas and don't have many school choice options, or those with special needs. Online learning is a great tool for students who may be behind in their classes, because students can work at their own pace and review subjects that may be difficult for them.

School districts make online learning opportunities available to their students in order to offer courses not otherwise available, as well as to provide opportunities for students to recover course credits. Credit recovery is especially important in urban environments where 81 percent of schools indicate this is an issue (iNACOL, [Fast Facts About Online Learning](#)).

Fifty-four percent of low-income Americans said they would be more likely to send their child to a school that offered blended learning, according to CER's 2013 [America's Attitudes Towards Education Reform](#). Thankfully, blended schools are offering new opportunities to low-income or at-risk students in inner-city areas of California, New Jersey, Ohio,

Illinois, Colorado, and many other states. None of these schools existed ten years ago (KPK12, [An Annual Review of Policy and Practice](#), 2013).

Two National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) studies found that more students with disabilities are choosing to enroll in virtual public school programs. Survey respondents identified a number of benefits to serving students with disabilities in virtual public school environments. Virtual learning is appealing to parents of students with disabilities and other disadvantaged students because it provides individualized programs and pacing, as well as extensive opportunities for parental involvement (NASDSE, [Virtual K-12 Public School Programs and Students with Disabilities: Issues and Recommendations](#)).

MYTH #4: Online Learning is Only Available to Families with Computers

Danial and Jay, two Friendship Collegiate Academy Public Charter School students in Washington, D.C., who collectively are halfway to completing a bachelor's degree before completing high school thanks to innovative course offerings, are clear examples of students making the most of their better-for-them schooling option. Unfortunately, in D.C. and districts across the country, the conventional thinking is "those kids" do not need innovation or technology in the classroom. In fact, this same argument was used to deny applications for new charter schools in the Nation's Capital just this past year.

Online and blended learning options, contrary to conventional thinking, does not eliminate families without a home computer or Internet access. Many schools that offer blended learning, meaning that one or two classes are online and the rest are in classrooms, provide the proper technology, access

and computers within the school to facilitate learning. Complete online school programs, offered in partnership with providers such as K12, Inc. or Connections Academy, provide each student with a computer and access to the web so no child is turned away for their socioeconomic status.

MYTH#5: Online Learning is Cheaper

People believe that because online schooling does not require physical buildings, this option will be much less expensive than traditional schools. However, online schools do not exist in a vacuum. An online school needs to develop its technological infrastructure, and computers and computer programs are costly. In addition, many online programs maintain student-teacher ratios similar to the ratios of traditional schools. For these programs, as with physical schools, a major cost is in teachers and other personnel, and these costs increase in a linear fashion with the increase in the number of students.

Funding of online education is a complicated and sometimes controversial topic and education policy regarding per-pupil funding has not yet caught up with the reality of the times.

Today, online charter schools receive a total of about 30 to 50 percent less in total funding compared to total funds received by traditional schools to educate a full-time student. The amount varies widely across states. It is estimated that the national average for traditional public schools is about \$11,300 per pupil and only between \$6-7,000 per pupil for online students and close to \$9,000 for blended learning students. (iNACOL, [Fast Facts About Online Learning](#)). Clear and equitable guidelines for funding digital and blended learning need to be established in states so that school districts understand and comply with the policies.

MYTH #6: Online Learning Has No Real Accountability

Online schools that function as public schools, or public programs, are held to the same state and federal standards as other public schools, including participation in state assessment tests, attendance requirements, and other accountability mandates. Online courses are aligned to the same state standards as conventional public schools. They require active participation, require that students take tests, and take attendance. Their teachers are state-certified and must meet existing state standards; their accounting operations must all be documented and audited. Concerns of cheating online are not warranted thanks to online plagiarism protection programs. Reports from virtual learning teachers also indicate that online learning causes higher accountability and engagement in students (iNACOL, [Transforming K-12 Rural Education through Blended Learning: Barriers and Promising Practices, 2013](#)).

MYTH #7: Online Learning Isn't Getting Positive Results

According to a study by the U.S. Department of Education in 2010 that did a meta-analysis of online learning studies, it found that students in online conditions performed modestly better, on average, than those learning the same material through traditional face-to-face instruction, with an average effect size of +0.20 favoring online conditions. (U.S. Department of Education, [Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies](#), September 2010)

A 2013 study conducted by iNACOL reports on the implementation of blended learning programs in the state of Idaho. Through teacher-reported data, the study showed that allowing self-paced learning has positive correlations with: 1) quality of student

work; 2) interest level of students during instruction; 3) general excitement of students during class; and 4) student perseverance. Seventy-seven and one-half percent of teachers also indicated that their ability to monitor student learning was either better or much better with blended learning. (iNACOL, [Transforming K-12 Rural Education through Blended Learning: Barriers and Promising Practices](#))

The media unfairly represents online learning, particularly if a school does not make AYP. Because online schools are viewed as a single K-12 entity, if one subgroup fails to make AYP, then the entire school will not. In school districts, because they have a much larger population, one benchmark can be missed without affecting the district's overall AYP score. Additionally, online schools are seeing a rise in the number of students that are entering below grade level and/or behind in credits after failing in their local school.

For new models like online schools and blended schools, academic growth is a better and more reliable measure of performance, however many states have not enacted a sophisticated growth measure. Many online schools and providers do use assessment tools to measure growth and have shown students are making positive academic gains. More scrutiny is needed when analyzing academic achievement of online schools compared with conventional school districts to make sure an apples-to-apples comparison is taking place.

Besides high marks in academics, parents are also extremely satisfied with online learning. In a survey of parents, Connections Academy found that 95 percent of parents are satisfied with the program, and 96 percent believe the curriculum is of high quality. K12 also receives equally high marks from parents. According to their survey, 96 percent of parents are satisfied with the program and curriculum.

Public opinion polling from CER's 2013 [America's Attitudes Towards Education Reform](#) reveals 64 percent of Americans support digital learning. Support of digital learning from parents is even more favorable, with 68 percent of U.S. parents viewing digital learning positively.

MYTH #8: Online Students Have No Social Interaction

Students have as much, if not more one-on-one interaction with their teachers and students in online courses because they are receiving some individualized attention. Shy students thrive in online environments because they feel they can contribute in class without fear of being bullied by other students. Online students also participate in physical education and other extra-curricular activities or field trips with other students. Many online programs are part-time, meaning that the students take only one or two courses online while receiving the rest of their classes in their physical school. This keeps students involved with their classmates to engage face-to-face.

For example, [Odyssey Charter Schools](#), a K-12 school in Clark County, Nevada, have used a blended learning model since opening in 1999. Their instructional model combines a fully online, distance-based curriculum with required on-site attendance. Students attend classes on campus one day a week for four hours, receiving face-to-face instruction and mentoring with highly qualified teachers in classrooms equipped with computer and online access.

PUBLIC OPINION DATA TO GUIDE PUBLIC DISCOURSE

- Over 60 percent of Americans favor the terms digital and blended learning
- 68 percent of parents support digital learning
- Digital learning has tri-partisan support, with 61 percent of Republicans, 65 percent of Independents, and 67 percent of Democrats in favor
- 54 percent of African Americans, 38 percent of Hispanics, and 54 percent of low-income Americans would be more likely to send their child to a school that offered blended learning

BOTTOM LINE: IT IS ABOUT OPTIONS AND CHOICE

Students in online or blended schools choose to enroll. Online schools provide students more public school options and give parents the freedom to choose - regardless of where they live or their socioeconomic status. No student is required to enroll, nor is any student required to stay. Parents make the decision that they believe is best for their children. [Parent Power](#) is the most important element in ensuring a student's success in school.

INFORMING YOUR COMMUNITY & COMMUNICATING WITH THE MEDIA

Staying on Message

Given the negative media surrounding digital learning and school choice in general, it is important that you both speak out, as well as make clear and compelling arguments, using only facts in your communications. You want to share the good news, but don't forget to temper your comments with a call to action: we need to use the data we have, and continue to accumulate data to get a true picture of online learning and its success! We recommend these talking points when speaking about digital and blended learning:

- Online learning is quickly growing across the country and millions of families are making a choice to take advantage of the individualized programs they are able to access with success, that are often not available in their zoned school

or even amidst some of the available choices.

All choices are important because all children learn in unique ways. Additionally, 64 percent of Americans view digital learning positively.

- Attempts to discredit academic progress of those engaged in online learning modalities are premature. State data systems are broken, and attempts to compare students in traditional schools with students in online classrooms miss wide variables and benchmarks. More data is needed that reveals individual growth levels and more research is needed on the work being done altogether.
- Myths abound about how and whether children learn in online learning environments. Speak to the myths and the realities that we know exist.

How to Inform Your Community

Whether you run a brick and mortar charter school, lead a grassroots group, a think tank or are “just” a citizen, it is important that people in your community with whom you interact know that there are places to go for good information about this issue.

- You might start by directing your friends and colleagues to [Digital Learning Now!](#), a project of several leading education and reform groups uniting dozens of experts, policymakers and opinion leaders behind making digital learning possible for every child!
- Many parents have rallied behind this issue and formed a group called the [National Council for Public School Options](#) to help inform one another and you about the potential and information regarding online learning.

Social Media Strategy:

How to Inform Your Online Networks

Your social media online communities can consist of a wide spectrum of people, from neighbors, to media, to family members, to those involved in local or even state policy. Understanding how to engage your online networks can be a powerful tool for changing the conversation and conventional thinking about digital and blended learning education innovations.

- Make sure to have a concise message to portray to your audience.
- Have a call to action - tell your audience what your goal is and what you want them to do next.
- Stay up to date with what other organizations or people are doing via social media.
- Tweet at individuals using their twitter handles to connect them to the conversation.

- Create your own hashtag or use a preexisting hashtag to connect with members of your community.
- Write a blog post to further explain your call to action, and then share it via social media platforms.

Educating the Media

Increased media attention to online learning is coming from a variety of sectors, most notably complaints by those in the education establishment or even disgruntled employees that believe their departure is related to the idea of digital learning and not their own skills. However, make no mistake – the increased attention to digital learning has more to do with increased opposition to school choice in general than with this specific kind of school choice, especially from larger newspaper outlets that have more of a political agenda than local, community newspapers, according to [The Media and the Digital Learning Revolution](#). This groundbreaking report on innovation in education uncovers key trends in news coverage of digital and blended learning, and the need to grow public understanding of these important innovations, while offering eight key strategies to change the discourse around this topic. It is important that anyone who supports education reform, particularly “digiformers,” makes sure reporters in their community know that there is a whole host of data available on digital and blended learning accomplishments.

- Give reporters you have worked with a quick call and let them know that many of these articles on digital learning provide false information; provide them with this fact sheet for their file.
- Find success stories about digital and blended learning, and make sure editors, reporters, and

syndicators are aware these success stories exist.

- Remember, it is okay if the reporter does not write a story right away – it is important that he or she have the information for future stories.
- Has your local newspaper featured negative articles on digital learning? Use this as a chance to visit your local editorial board.
- Find out who your editorial editor is, or who is in charge of arranging regular editorial board meetings, and request a time for you to come in and talk about this timely topic – remind them that the newspaper has been running articles on the issue. Bring along a parent, a local lawmaker or a teacher who can help strengthen your case.
- Draft an opinion-editorial about choice in general and the importance of digital learning as an option parents should have. Include any stories or numbers you have from local experiences. And remember – no matter how great a story you have to tell – keep it under 650 words!
- Write a letter-to-the-editor to your local paper with your three key messages – remember to include local statistics or public opinion statistics about digital and online learning provided in this toolkit. Keep the letter under 150 words. Identify and get to know the syndicated and larger networked newspaper companies to help you reach the more fruitful, local papers. See if there are patterns for your issue, your focus areas, or your ideas. Find strategies to dig into these larger organizations, like ensuring that all of your materials are reaching their key personnel and getting to know their executives.
- Think outside the box – communicate facts and stories about digital and blended learning to

business journals and other trade outlets that are likely to be read by people like innovators, entrepreneurs, or school district administrators and officials.

- Go online to tell your story. Not surprisingly, digital news and newsletters cover the issues at a much higher rate than traditional media. While that is shifting, media outlets with no boundaries and whose resources have a much longer shelf life online have the potential to reach a larger potential circulation and ensure more long-term access than traditional media.
- Having trouble identifying the right media? Need a second look at your opinion-editorial? We are here to help. Call CER at (301) 986-8088.
- Encourage parents to write a letter to their local newspaper when they read negative coverage on school choice.

Engaging Lawmakers and Community Leaders

As you well know, our lawmakers read the newspaper, too. It is important that they know that there is more to digital learning than a couple of newspaper articles!

Write a letter to your local city council members, mayor and state legislator informing them of new, exciting research on online learning. Include local statistics as well as anecdotal stories that support the message that school choice schools, including online ones, are doing a great job serving kids in their community.

Make sure that your allies in the state legislature or city council have a fact sheet on online learning data, so that they can strengthen future testimony with credible research.

And remember, thank these lawmakers for all they have done to provide an environment in which school choice can succeed, and encourage them to take the next step (removing restrictive caps, allowing alternative charter authorizers, or providing equal funding, to name a few).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR INFORMATION ON DIGITAL AND BLENDED LEARNING

[iNACOL, The International Association for K-12 Online Learning](#), is a non-profit organization that facilitates collaboration, advocacy, and research to enhance quality K-12 online teaching and learning.

[Digital Learning Now!](#) is a national campaign to advance policies that will create a high quality digital learning environment to better prepare students with the knowledge and skills to succeed in college and careers.

[Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation](#) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think-tank dedicated to improving the world through disruptive innovation.

[Getting Smart](#) is a site focused on innovations in learning. It covers developments in research, technology, learning entrepreneurs, and strategies.

[The Learning Accelerator](#) cultivates solutions to overcome the barriers to implementing blended learning in schools and works directly with districts and states to develop implementation strategies that can be scaled and shared with school districts nationwide.

QUESTIONS?

[CER](#)'s research, media, and policy experts are available to offer advice or answer any questions you have. Call us at (301) 986-8088. We're here to help you get the message out.

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