

Electronic School



Online learning 2.0

Digital learning continues to morph and grow

VALERIE TRUESDALE VIVIDLY RECALLS the day she knew that technology had truly shifted how students learn. The technology chief of North Carolina's Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools asked a sixth-grader what he liked about the Chromebook he'd received as part of a one-to-one program.

"He looked me straight in the eye, which most sixth-graders don't do, and said, 'I get to be curious anytime I want,'" Truesdale says. "That captured it in a nutshell. What he was saying is that he is master of his own learning, and it's because of the access that technology provides."

Knowing the benefits of that learning shift, Truesdale and educators nationwide continue to search for ways to meld traditional and digital learning for

all students. It's a combination that has proven full of promise, with more than a few lessons—and potholes—along the way for school boards, administrators, teachers, and communities.

And digital learning shows no signs of slowing soon. At least five states—Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Michigan, and Virginia—now require high school students to take at least one online course to graduate. Georgia, New Mexico, and West Virginia recommend that students take at least one online course, and others are following.

"Five years from now, we won't be talking about digital learning. We'll just be talking about learning," says Truesdale, who was superintendent of two districts and ran the policy division of the South Carolina State Department

of Education before coming to Charlotte-Mecklenburg in 2012. "Technology is transforming the way we live, work, and learn, and schools need to prepare digital learners in the way they learn best."

DOES IT DELIVER?

At a time when we are more connected than ever, technology also has managed to broaden the natural generation gap between teachers and students. Today's digital natives don't know what life would be like without smartphones, online streaming services, and anytime, anywhere access to texting and social media.

Integrating those tools successfully into classrooms and finding ways to keep students engaged is an ongoing challenge for educators. Combine that with an emphasis on disaggregating and analyzing data and it's no surprise that some teachers and administrators feel like their brains could explode from information and sensory overload.

"The one thing we know is that none of this is an exact science, despite the great potential and many, many good things technology has done for student learning," says Ann Flynn, NSBA's director of technology programs. "And efforts to get buy-in on a broad scale about what we call 'online learning' have been stymied somewhat because everyone has a preconceived notion about what it means to them."

Over the past decade, Flynn notes "online learning" has become a catch-all term to describe multiple types of initiatives. Virtual cyberschools, blended learning, and flipped classroom programs are just three variations that fall under its broad umbrella. However, despite anecdotal evidence of success and ever-expanding approaches by educators and for-profit vendors, research



ONLINE EXTRA

For more information and articles on school technology, go to asbj.com/topicsarchive/technologyfocus.

remains limited on the effectiveness of the various online programs compared to face-to-face learning.

Cyberschools are the best known, and have generated the most controversy even as their numbers grow exponentially. Today, more than 400,000 K-12 students are enrolled in at least 35 states. The largest, Florida Virtual School, has half of that enrollment, although most of its students attend only part-time.

“Online schools have gotten some bad raps,” Flynn says. “Under the right circumstances, they can provide students with opportunities they would not otherwise have, such as credit recovery, or especially in rural areas where the number of course offerings are low because there aren’t many resources or many students.”

Full-time cyberschools have come under criticism by the National Education Policy Center, which has found many “serious and systemic problems” that lead online-only students to fall behind their peers academically. In a 2013 report that has been the only comprehensive study released on virtual schools, the center concluded that, “At high cost to taxpayers ... new opportunities are being developed and promoted largely by for-profit entities accountable to stockholders rather than to any public constituency.”

The report says teachers in full-time cyberschools are paid far less than their traditional district counterparts. Even fewer teachers have the special education certification needed to help approximately 10 percent of cyberschool students who have a learning disability.

Virtual schools run by traditional districts, not surprisingly, are having more success due to the infrastructure already in place. Nevada’s Clark County and Colorado’s Jefferson County both use online-only instruction to help students recover missed credits during nonschool hours or get classwork done while out for medical issues. Flynn, who has led site visits to both districts, says students have claimed they would otherwise have dropped out without the credit recovery opportunities.

“The main questions are, ‘Do they deliver? Is there rigor?’ When you talk to some individual students, there’s no question they have been lifelines of success, but it really depends on the quality of the teacher and student connections.”

As an example, Flynn points to Randy Brown, a third-grade teacher at Frylands Elementary School in Monroe, Washington. Brown wanted to spend more one-on-one time teaching, so he created more than 500 instructional videos that students can watch while rotating from station to station. The videos allow Brown to give students instant feedback on their lessons and work with them until they truly understand the concepts.

“One of the challenges is to develop and create really good lessons that translate online, and that takes a lot of work and a lot of time,” says Flynn, noting that it took Brown more than two years to develop his videos.

Current technology makes it easier—and much less expensive—to create online content than it did in the past. But, she notes, some teachers who are excellent in a face-to-face classroom environment do not have the same success online.

“If you don’t have people who know what they’re doing in an online format,

then you have a lot of content that is thrown up in chunks and is not a particularly well-thought-out learning experience for students,” Flynn says, adding that districts should carefully decide whether it’s better to develop content in-house or use a commercial provider. “If you want to have a high-quality, high-end math class that is offered online, do you have the passion on your staff to do what it takes to be an online leader in an effective manner?”

ENGAGED AND EQUITABLE

Truesdale, whose official title is chief of technology, personalization, and engagement, says the latter two pieces of her title are just as important as the technology part. “What’s important about digital learning is whether being in an online environment feels cold to the students,” she says. “We have to find ways to keep them engaged and do so in an equitable way.”

Giving all students access to the proper tools remains a challenge, even in tech-savvy districts, but Truesdale says that access will be the ultimate route to equity.

“The advantage is that a mouse doesn’t know race, gender, or socioeconomic condition,” she says. “All we have to do is give the students the tools and engaging content and get out of their way. They’ll take care of the learning if we empower them to do so.”



Glenn Cook

Glenn Cook (glenncook117@gmail.com) is a Northern Virginia-based freelance writer and photographer, and former executive editor of American School Board Journal.