



Online Learning Can Improve Michigan Public Education

By Michael Van Beek

Summary

Online schools can increase student achievement and are less expensive to operate than conventional schools.

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Much of the discussion lately about Michigan public schools has centered on funding and costs. In the midst of this debate, it's easy to lose focus on schools' most important goal: boosting student achievement. But there's a way the state can help schools improve by both measures. If Michigan expanded online learning opportunities, schools would become more efficient and students could learn more.

Although the latest Michigan Educational Assessment Program results label more students "proficient" than ever before, by national standards Michigan students perform below average. Through online learning, more students can gain access to the type of high-quality instruction that is vital to improving student achievement.

Online learning allows for teachers to instruct and interact with students via the Internet. Some programs use this method exclusively (fully online), while others use a mixture of traditional face-to-face and online contact (blended learning). Fully online courses don't require students to regularly attend a conventional bricks-and-mortar school and are most appropriate for higher levels of schooling. They also hold the most promise for elevating student learning and closing achievement gaps, because fully online programs can help break down many of the barriers that limit a student's access to excellent teaching.

Research indicates that after controlling for socio-economic considerations, the number one factor contributing to student performance is teacher quality. Studies show that in a single academic year, a student with a high-performing teacher can gain as much as 1.5 grade level equivalents, while that same student with a low-performing teacher would only gain 0.5 grade level equivalents. Virtual schooling enables more students to gain access to the excellent teachers who can enhance their achievement.

Research also demonstrates that instructional quality is not watered down in online environments. In fact, recent studies suggest that online learning can be even more effective than traditional face-to-face instruction. Last year, the U.S. Department of Education analyzed 51 different studies of online learning in primary, secondary and higher education. The study concluded, "Students who took all or part of their class online performed better, on average, than those taking the same course through traditional face-to-face instruction."



The greatest potential benefit of online learning is the narrowing of the achievement gaps that have developed between urban, rural and suburban students. Urban and rural schools generally have a difficult time offering as much high-quality instruction or as many academic options to students because the best teachers tend to gravitate to the schools with the larger budgets and expansive opportunities. Access to quality instruction, therefore, has largely been tied to where a student resides, putting urban and rural kids at a distinct disadvantage. Online learning can make access to excellent teachers and instruction more equitable.

An added bonus of fully online learning programs is that they have been shown to operate more efficiently than conventional brick-and-mortar schools, meaning the state could save money for each student taking courses online. A study of the Florida Virtual School, the largest state-run program offering fully online courses, found it spent \$1,500 less per full-time pupil than Florida's conventional schools. Virtual charter schools in Pennsylvania, which also offer fully online courses, operate with only 73 percent of the revenue that the state's brick-and-mortar schools receive.

Virtual schools cost less on average because they don't have to provide noninstructional services and programs like food, transportation or athletics. Since they don't require a physical building to house students, they have significantly reduced capital expenditures as well. For some of these reasons, virtual schools and online courses might not be the right fit for every student, but it's important to remember that some of the money they save can be directed toward personnel. In the end, the money they save by not having to erect and maintain buildings enable virtual schools to attract high-performing teachers by compensating them well.

Unfortunately, Michigan's laws are stifling the growth of online learning. One such law restricts the number of fully online classes that students can take to two per year. Recent legislation allows for the creation of only two virtual charter schools, and arbitrarily caps the enrollment of these schools at 1,000 students. Fortunately, Mike Flanagan, the state superintendent of public instruction, created a special waiver that enables students to take as many online courses as they choose through the Genesee Intermediate School District's online program. This is a good start, but Michigan should eliminate all of these restrictions and allow more students to access online learning programs and high-quality instruction.

A lot of people talk about preparing kids for the jobs and challenges of the 21st century, yet the method for delivering this product is in large part stuck in the 19th century. It's time for Michigan to embrace, encourage and promote virtual schooling.

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