iNACOL
International Association for K-12 Online Learning

Online Learning: Top 5 Federal Policy Issues Brief

ISSUE 1: **Accountability should be based on individual student growth models to support student-centered, competency-based learning.**

Background:

Adequate yearly progress (AYP) has been the basis for school, district and state accountability for student performance under the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB). Adequate yearly progress (AYP) is not effective in measuring real individual student growth over time.

Accountability should focus on individual growth models based on student learning. Accountability needs to be from the ground up – with real-time data showing learning over time.

Recommendations:

- Ensure the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization enables individual student growth models that support competency-based learning in all learning environments, including supporting next generation learning models using online and blended learning.
- Build accountability tied to individual student success with incentives that reward states and districts increasing student learning the most for kids who need it most.

ISSUE 2: **Support performance-based systems of assessments**.

Background:

To help U.S. students become more globally competitive and college and career-ready, investments are needed in performance-based assessments that support competency-based learning.

In the United States today, there is a belief that "an assessment" at the end of the year (to measure adequate yearly progress) will provide adequate data on each students' learning. We believe that measuring student success is critically important, but there is a need to fundamentally rethink the concept of assessment -- not as a single point of time -- but as "systems of assessments" throughout the students' learning process that include: 1) formative, embedded, and adaptive assessments giving feedback, 2)

performance-based assessments demonstrating knowledge and skills, and 3) validating assessments to protect high levels of rigor. These systems of assessments provide data on performance from the "ground up". Ongoing and meaningful assessments provide students, teachers and others with the information to allow students to have individualized pathways, immediate interventions, and accelerated pacing for mastering material.

The state's role for validating learning through "summative" assessments is important. Student learning is ongoing, thus, assessment must also be ongoing. We must rethink "assessment" as a fixed, annual process done once in the springtime to a process of validating assessments that are more modularized and offered throughout the year. New systems of assessments allow students to take assessments when the student is ready to be assessed, not just at one point in the calendar year.

Finally, there is a need to invest in performance-based assessments that are internationally-benchmarked and require students to demonstrate knowledge and skills.

In summary, Federal requirements (and incentives) should encourage systems of assessments that support real-time data, formative, embedded assessments, adaptive assessments, performance-based assessments – allowing for multiple measures -- and validating assessments that are offered throughout the year, when students are ready. Student progress can be measured and reported from the "ground up" in performance-based systems.

Recommendations:

- Support performance-based assessments and systems of assessment that allow for students to demonstrate knowledge and skills.
- Encourage systems of assessments that support real-time data, formative, embedded assessments, adaptive assessments, allowing for multiple measures – and accountability from the ground up.
- Ensure validating assessments are offered throughout the year, so that students can move ahead when ready. End-of-course, or summative assessments, should be available when students have completed courses or modules to allow them to progress to the next level of their studies at any time of year – not fixed on a calendar.

ISSUE 3:   Support Federal Research for High Quality Online Learning

Background:

While a small body of research focused on the effectiveness of K-12 online learning was funded by the U.S. Department of Education from 2002-2011, more data collection and research is needed in the field of K-12 online learning. Online and blended learning provides personalized learning and increased access to high quality courses otherwise not available to students. There are, however, important gaps in the knowledge base in this emerging field. Data is needed on online course enrollments for all public schools,

whether public school districts or charter schools. The *NCES Distance Education in Public Elementary and Secondary Public School Districts* study (2005, 2007, 2011) has been published only three times. Policy makers need it annually.

There is also a need for research on pedagogical practice and interventions that study which programs and methods work best for particular students' needs in online and blended learning environments. This data and information can help inform the emergence of best practice teaching models and teacher pre and in-service training recommendations and priorities for online and blended learning.

Key topics include: research on effective online learning pedagogy, baseline student demographic data for K-12 online learning enrollments, and research on emerging practices – and what works – in teaching practice and program innovations.

Recommendations:

- Fund the development of baseline data on K-12 online/blended learning including: student demographics, number of course and program enrollments, and student access.
- Support research for effectiveness in new instructional models, approaches and implementations for online and blended learning.

ISSUE 4:   **Support human capital development through redesigned pre-service/in-service training for online and blended learning.**

Background:

More than 55% public school districts offer online courses. As the demand for online learning opportunities increases, so does the need for the human capital to lead innovative, large-scale change in districts and programs. Districts are having difficulty finding the people to lead initiatives in online and blended learning. School and program leaders need professional and leadership training support, programs that will help them plan, develop and implement effective online and blended learning environments that prepare college and career ready students.

Preparing and supporting online teachers is critical. Courses should be instructor-led and student-centered. There is a need to prepare the next generation of teachers with new methods, skills and tools necessary for teaching online with effective training and professional development. Teachers need to develop effective approaches to allow individualized instruction using data, digital content and tools to support collaborative, personalized, and competency-based learning models.

States, districts and individual schools are challenged to provide this human capital development. This is particularly so in rural areas and districts lacking resources who could benefit the most.

Recommendations:

- Provide support for leadership and educator development needed to facilitate transformation to student-centered, competency-based models learning models.
- Make professional development resources available to develop the cadre of online and blended learning teachers with the skills needed for competency based teaching in blended and online learning environments.

ISSUE 5: **Ensure reliable and ubiquitous student access to the Internet and quality learning materials.**

Background:

Reliable and affordable broadband connectivity is critical to educational and economic opportunities. Reliable connectivity and Internet access must be available to all students, no matter where they live. Both technology infrastructure and connectivity are lacking, especially in underserved communities and rural areas. The digital divide is widening.

Students deserve full access to the Internet and online courses, content and resources that will help prepare them to be college/career ready. There is a need for learning beyond textbooks to transform how content can be created, shared, and customized; how teachers teach; and how students learn. Learning materials developed with federal grants or public funding should be available as open educational resources for educators to share, access and collaborate.

Recommendations:

- Broaden E- Rate to support mobile, online and blended learning for any time, any place broadband access.
- Support new models of competency-based, online and blended learning as a key driver for broadband.
- Grant-funded and publicly-funded educational materials should be accessible as Open Educational Resources.
- Support the Federal Communications Commission and Department of Education Initiative to transition all public schools to digital materials within 5 years.

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