

Digital Learning “Frequently Asked Policy Questions”

prepared for the Education and Local Government Interim Committee

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Introduction

As part of its work plan, the Education and Local Government Interim Committee (ELG) acknowledged the likelihood that new topics might arise over the course of the interim and determined to allow room in its meeting schedule for “emerging issues.” One such issue identified by the committee is digital learning. This policy review is intended to provide committee members with definitions of terms, an overview of “frequently asked policy questions” related to digital learning, and answers to these questions for Montana as a way of reviewing current Montana policy. It also may serve as a reminder of the governance structure of K-12 education in Montana with authority shared between the Legislature, Board of Public Education, Superintendent of Public Instruction, and local school district Boards of Trustees. The policy questions contained in this review are not an exhaustive list, but attempt to capture often examined issues. The review draws on resources recommended by the Education Commission of the States, and in particular, two national organizations: Keeping Pace with K-12 Online & Blended Learning¹ and Digital Learning Now².

Selected terms/concepts

Badging or Digital Badging—similar to badges earned through scouting; online “points” or “certificates” used by some education providers to acknowledge/reward educational progress

Blended learning—learning that combines traditional face-to-face learning with online learning

Course choice—refers to the ability of a student to take supplemental online courses from multiple state-approved online providers without restriction, with state funding following the student to the provider at the course level; several states have developed policies to offer varying degrees of course choice

Digital learning vs online learning—not clear consensus on these terms, but generally digital learning is the larger umbrella for instruction that is facilitated or enhanced through technology, while online learning fits under that umbrella and is distinguished by instruction that utilizes the internet; see also supplemental online learning vs. fully online schools

¹ Keeping Pace has published annual reports on K-12 online education since 2004 and “strives to add to the body of knowledge about online education policy and practice, and make recommendations for advances.” <http://kpk12.com/>

² Digital Learning Now has the goal of “advancing state policies that create a high-quality learning environment to better equip all students with the knowledge and skills to succeed in this 21st-century economy.” <http://digitallearningnow.com/>

Flipped classrooms or courses—courses in which instruction typically delivered by the instructor during class time is made available online and students receive this instruction outside of class time and/or outside of school; class time is then utilized for application/homework, projects, group activities, or personalized instruction

Khan Academy—an educational website offering free video tutorials and other resources in numerous subject areas worldwide

MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses; Udacity, edX, Coursera, etc.)—an internet-based course of study made available for free to an unlimited number of people

Supplemental online learning vs fully online schools or cyberschools—distinguishes online learning that *enhances* the traditional education environment from that which *replaces* the traditional, brick-and-mortar school environment

Synchronous vs asynchronous—distinguishes content delivery and learning-related communication in real time (ex. online live video, chat, Skype) from communication not necessarily in real time (ex. email, online discussion boards)

Policy FAQs

- 1. Do all Montana students have access to online learning through a State Virtual School (SVS)?** Yes, the Montana Digital Academy (MTDA) offers *original credit* courses as well as *credit recovery* courses, both types available to Montana students free of charge. These courses are also available to private school and home school students but require the student to enroll through the student's local public school district. Currently MTDA offers a variety of courses primarily for high school students.
- 2. Are online courses aligned with state standards? Taught by licensed instructors?** Yes. All online courses taken through Montana accredited schools must be aligned with state content standards. All MTDA instructors are Montana licensed and endorsed teachers currently employed in Montana school districts. For non-MTDA providers either the online instructor or the in-building facilitator must be licensed and endorsed, see Question 8.
- 3. Are there caps on online learning?** Not at the state level. MTDA does limit *credit recovery* courses to one course at a time, but does not limit enrollment in *original credit* courses. A school district may limit the number or type of courses its students enroll in at MTDA or with other providers. For example, a district may adopt a policy to not accept MTDA credit for a course currently offered at the student's school.
- 4. Are students allowed to enroll in a course at any time?** For *credit recovery* courses at MTDA, yes. *Original credit* courses at MTDA are offered on a semester basis; summer

sessions are also offered. For non-MTDA providers, enrollment schedules would be determined by the district and the provider. See Question 8.

- 5. Is there a statewide graduation requirement that students take at least one online course?** No. Minimum graduation requirements are established by the Board of Public Education; individual school district Boards of Trustees may establish additional requirements. Several states are implementing graduation requirements for students to take one or more online courses.
- 6. Are there any statewide “fully online” public schools in Montana?** No. Most “fully online” schools in other states operate as “virtual charter schools” and Montana has no charter schools. While students may take multiple courses at MTDA, the Digital Academy does not enroll students full time; students remain enrolled at their local district.
- 7. Is course completion tied to competency measured by statewide standardized assessment?** No. While course completion may be tied to competency, there are no statewide standardized assessments for individual courses. However, SB 175 (2013) amended 20-9-311, MCA, to allow districts to count, for ANB purposes, those students who have “demonstrated proficiency in the content ordinarily covered by the instruction as determined by the school board using district assessments” in an effort to move away from “seat time” requirements and allow completion tied to competency.
- 8. Do students have access to multiple online learning providers?** Maybe. Access to providers is determined at the district level in Montana. Digital learning that *supplements* instruction in traditional courses has no restrictions at the state level and is determined by the district as with other supplementary resources. A district that chooses to utilize non-MTDA providers for *full courses* must ensure: (1) the course content is aligned with state content standards, (2) the course is taught and/or facilitated by an instructor licensed and endorsed in the area of instruction who has completed an accredited professional educator preparation program, and (3) that the facilitator of an online course has received training in online learning. Districts are required to report annually to OPI regarding all online courses and providers. Providers are required to register with OPI annually and provide a similar report.
- 9. Does Montana ensure equitable access to online and digital learning through support of digital learning infrastructure?** Maybe. It’s important to distinguish between supplemental digital learning that may take place occasionally within classrooms (for example a teacher utilizing a Khan Academy video with a class, or students utilizing tablets for a collaborative project) versus more robust and widespread online learning (for example a significant number of students simultaneously accessing individualized online courses or modules). Most if not all schools have the infrastructure (devices, projectors, bandwidth, etc.) to support occasional supplemental digital learning, while a number of schools and districts likely lack the infrastructure to support robust online learning. Federal and state programs (ex. E-rate, Quality Schools Grant Program) provide some

support for digital learning infrastructure, but Montana presents some unique geographic challenges.

Final questions

In its “10 Elements of High-Quality Digital Learning” report in 2010, Digital Learning Now stated that “Digital learning is the great equalizer.” Digital learning is a powerful and relatively new tool that holds great promise in helping to fulfill Montana’s constitutional goal “to establish a system of education that will develop the full educational potential of each person” and constitutional guarantee of “equality of educational opportunity.”³ The potential is great, but a tool alone has never achieved profound change. Keeping Pace with K-12 Online & Blended Learning offers this caution in its 2013 Annual Report, “For students, there is a substantial difference between going to school in a state committed to quality online and blended learning opportunities, and a state without. This difference is large and growing, and threatens to open a new educational digital divide: one separating students who have access to 21st century learning opportunities, and those who do not.” This raises two questions: (1) is Montana as a state committed to quality digital learning? and (2) how can the various Montana education policymaking bodies ensure that each school district shares and has the means to act on this commitment?

³ Montana Constitution, Article X, Section 1(1).