

COURSE CHOICE

A review of policy
and practice

SEPTEMBER 2019

About the Digital Learning Collaborative

The Digital Learning Collaborative (DLC) is a membership group dedicated to exploring, producing, and disseminating data, information, news, and best practices in digital learning. Our current members include school districts, intermediate units, public agencies, non-profit organizations, and companies. Collaborative activities are supported financially by membership fees. DLC members determine the topics that we explore, via monthly web meetings and individual discussions.

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Executive summary

Course choice (also commonly referred to as “course access”) describes a set of state-level policies and programs that allow students to choose an online course from one or more providers, and have their public education funds flow to the online course provider to provide payment. The key element of the policy, as the term suggests, is that students and parents have the right to choose a course, with relatively few restrictions on their options imposed by the state or the student’s district of enrollment.

Course choice is one policy strategy to fill a critical need for students who do not have access to a wide range of courses—or access to a specific course they are seeking—within their school. Another common policy strategy to meet shortcomings in available courses is supporting a state virtual school or other programs to provide online courses at below-market rates. In other states, no significant state-level policy exists to address a lack of course availability.

The key elements of course choice are:

- The student chooses one or more online courses from one or more providers.
- The student retains control over the choice with limited restrictions. In much the same way that open enrollment laws allow students to choose schools other than those in their districts of residence, course choice allows students to choose a single academically appropriate course from outside their district of enrollment.
- A significant portion of the student’s public education funding (pro-rated to the per-course amount of funding) flows to the provider of the online course.

Key characteristics of specific course choice policies and programs that vary by state include:

- Whether students choose courses through a statewide source such as a common online course catalog, or alternatively find the course and enroll in it via the course provider or another source.
- The reasons that a district can deny a student’s choice.
- The recourse that a student has if the district denies the online course.
- Whether students can choose from a single provider or from multiple providers.
- The ways in which course providers are vetted by the state prior to offering courses, if at all.
- How the cost of the course is determined, and in particular whether the state sets a cost per course, or the cost is set by the provider.
- The tracking and reporting that the state does of providers, online course enrollments, and outcomes.

As of school year 2019–20, 15 states have or are developing some mechanism by which students can choose online courses, but the states vary in significant ways.

The wide variety of experiences in states that have some sort of course choice policy in place suggests that any findings across states must be generalized and will have exceptions. Still, a few observations appear to hold true.

- Course choice policies supported by a state program attract higher levels of enrollments
- Often a single entity, or a small number of organizations, has an outsized effect on supplemental course enrollments in a state
- Course enrollment data availability varies widely between states but is mostly lacking.

Introduction

Course choice (also commonly referred to as “course access”) describes a set of state-level policies and programs that allow students to choose an online course from one or more providers, and have their public education funds flow to the online course provider to provide payment. The key element of the policy, as the term suggests, is that students and parents have the right to choose a course, with relatively few restrictions on their options imposed by the state or the student’s district of enrollment.

Course choice is one policy strategy to fill a critical need for students who do not have access to a wide range of courses—or access to a specific course they are seeking—within their school. Another common policy strategy to meet shortcomings in available courses is supporting a state virtual school or other programs to provide online courses at below-market rates. In other states, no significant state-level policy exists to address a lack of course availability.

School districts are, of course, able to provide their own online courses or contract with a provider to offer online courses to their students. A wide range of providers exists, including many companies, non-profit organizations such as The Virtual High School (VHS, Inc.), districts such as the Launch program of Springfield (Missouri) Public Schools, other districts, and intermediate units such as the Capital Area Intermediate Unit in Pennsylvania. Students who are enrolled in these and similar districts often have a wide variety of online course options. However, students in districts that don’t offer online courses often do not have the option to select an online course, unless state policy compels online course opportunities.¹ In addition, some states fund schools based on seat time or other methods that discourage the use of online courses because either such courses don’t generate funding, or they must be taken under certain restrictive conditions, such as while the student is on a school campus.

Course choice policies and programs are highly varied and therefore difficult to compare. This report attempts to identify states that have course choice policies and/or programs, and to report on how many students are taking courses via those policies and programs when data are available.

What’s in a name? “Course choice” versus “course access.”

The terms “course choice” and “course access” are interchangeable. Some reports and organizations use one or the other, or both. One reason that some use the term “course access” is to emphasize that one of the purposes of such policies is to create equity of access to curricular offerings across the state.

We prefer “course choice” because we believe that this term is more accurate than the alternative, in that it describes students and families being able to choose a single course at no charge to them. In this regard course choice is related to school choice, which refers to the ability of students and families to choose a school from among several options that are publicly funded.

Methods

Information in this report comes from two main sets of sources. First, we reviewed the websites and online documents of course choice programs and state education agencies. This report includes extensive footnotes documenting these sources. Second, we spoke with one or more people in each state referenced in this report, and often received the enrollment numbers from these people. Some, but not all, of these contacts are listed on the state education websites. (We did not include the date when we accessed the websites as they were all in June, July, or August 2019.)

¹ To our knowledge, no data exists showing how many students are enrolled in districts that offer online courses.

Supplemental vs full-time online learning

Course choice programs and policies support supplemental online courses, which are courses that students take while enrolled in another school, which is usually a brick-and-mortar school. Students may access supplemental online courses from home, school, or other locations such as libraries.

Full-time online learning refers to situations in which students attend a school that is entirely online, and receive most or all of their education via the online school. The online school is responsible for students' grade advancement and graduation, scores on state assessments, and other accountability measures similar to all public schools.

conflicts, or to create flexibility in their schedules, perhaps to meet the time demands of a job, sport, or other extracurricular activity. In some cases, students choose to take an online course during the summer to meet a curriculum requirement or gain credits while freeing up time during the school year. Although most policies supporting course choice reference shortcomings in available courses in some schools, anecdotal evidence from states in which students can choose online courses suggests that many students are choosing online courses for reasons of convenience and personal preference.

Many schools that are located in rural or urban areas have fewer courses available than affluent suburban schools. In particular, schools often lack advanced courses in math and science, challenging electives, and world language courses. An analysis of course equity and access by the [Foundation for Excellence in Education](#) (ExcellinEd) in its report [College and Career Pathways: Equity and Access](#), contributes valuable data points. Using data from the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), ExcellinEd found:

- “nearly 1.4 million students attend public high schools that do not offer Algebra I or the subsequent progression of math courses expected by many colleges and universities for enrollment.”
- 1.5 million students “attend public high schools that do not offer Biology or higher.”
- “not a single state offers Algebra I or Biology in all high schools.”

The study goes into much more detail and notes that this is not a problem limited to rural areas but also afflicts many urban schools and students. In fact, “as the percentage of minority populations in schools increases, access to courses decreases.” Further, “as the percentage of low-income populations in schools increases, access to courses decreases.” In addition, although the data points highlighted above focus on basic math and science courses, students are often motivated by electives which allow them to explore different topic areas, and which are much less likely to be offered at small schools.

In addition to these critical shortcomings, even in schools with a wide range of available face-to-face courses, some students choose to take a course online because of scheduling

What's an online course?

For this report, we define supplemental online courses as semester-long courses that carry core or elective credits, use online content, and are taught by a remote instructor who communicates with students via online tools and/or telephone.

We are not including online content that is offered as a stand-alone option without a teacher, nor are we including online content used by a teacher working face-to-face with students.

A brief history of state-supported supplemental online courses

Policymakers in most states recognize that online courses can fill the gaps for students who are attending schools without a wide range of available courses.

In the early days of K12 online learning more than two dozen states created state virtual schools to provide online courses to students in their states. In most cases, state virtual schools were and are funded based on state appropriations, often augmented by course fees that the state virtual school charges to the student or the student's enrolling school district. As of school year 2016–17, 23 state virtual schools provided a total of nearly one million course enrollments to 420,000 students. The largest are in Florida, North Carolina, and Georgia.²

The usual funding approach used for state virtual schools present policymakers with challenges related to growth of course availability, as follows:

- If the state virtual school is going to meet all student demand for online courses without charging fees, the state appropriation must grow to accommodate demand. In some cases, state legislators have become concerned that they feel they are funding students twice—because many students generate a full amount of funding from the state via their district of enrollment, and then in addition take an online course that the state is subsidizing, entirely or in part, via an appropriation to the state virtual school.
- If the state virtual school meets demand by charging fees, it either falls to the district or the student to pay. If the district pays, then the district usually retains the choice of whether or not to allow the student to take the online course. If the student must pay, then the online course is no longer fully publicly funded.

State virtual schools

State virtual schools are entities created by legislation or by state-level agencies, usually funded partially or entirely by a state appropriation, course fees, and/or grants. Most state virtual schools do not grant diplomas and are not responsible for many of the functions performed by typical schools (such as administration of state assessments, state and federal reporting, counseling, etc.). Instead, they supply online courses and related services to schools. Students are usually enrolled with district approval, and the school or district plays an integral role in counseling, mentoring, and enrolling students in the state virtual school. A state virtual school may be a provider under a state course choice policy, but the presence of a state virtual school does not suggest in itself that the state has a course choice policy.

² Digital Learning Collaborative. (2019). Snapshot 2019: A review of K-12 online, blended, and digital learning. Retrieved from <https://www.digitallearningcollab.com>.

Course choice policies and programs

Course choice policies and programs address concerns about supplemental course funding sustainability by allowing students to choose an online course, and have some portion of their funding be used to pay the online course provider. The key elements of course choice are:

- The student chooses one or more online courses from one or more providers.
- The student retains control over the choice with limited restrictions. In much the same way that open enrollment laws allow students to choose schools other than those in their districts of residence, course choice allows students to choose a single academically appropriate course from outside their districts of enrollment.
- A significant portion of the student's public education funding (pro-rated to the per-course amount of funding³) flows to the provider of the online course.

Key characteristics of specific course choice policies and programs that vary by state include:

- Whether students choose courses through a statewide source such as a common online course catalog and registration system, or alternatively find the course and enroll in it via the course provider, their district of enrollment, or another source.
- The reasons that a district can deny a student's choice, ranging from situations where the district has many options for denying the student's choice, to those where few reasons for denial are permitted.
- The recourse that a student has if the district denies the online course, such as appealing to a state organization.
- Whether students can choose from a single provider or from multiple providers.
- The ways in which course providers are vetted by the state prior to offering courses, if at all.
- How the cost of the course is determined, and in particular whether the state sets a cost per course, or the cost is set by the provider (usually capped at the pro-rated amount of the student's funding).
- The funding process, including whether funding is completion-based.
- The tracking and reporting that the state does of providers, online course enrollments, and outcomes.

As of school year 2019–20, 15 states have or are developing some mechanism by which students can choose online courses, but the states vary in significant ways (Figure 1). Because of the wide variation in programs and policies, which defy easy categorization, we look at each state from a student perspective: if a student wishes to take a publicly-funded online course, how easily can she find and enroll in one? We look at a combination of policies, programs, and students enrolled to answer this question.

³ It is important to note that the funding a full-time student generates pays for services and support that are not related to any individual courses, so determining the appropriate level of funding per course is more complicated than dividing the total per-student funding by the number of courses the student takes.

Three categories of course choice states

We place states into three categories. As with most taxonomies within digital learning, the lines are not completely clear and the value to the taxonomy is in applying a useful framework more than determining with great precision where each state falls.

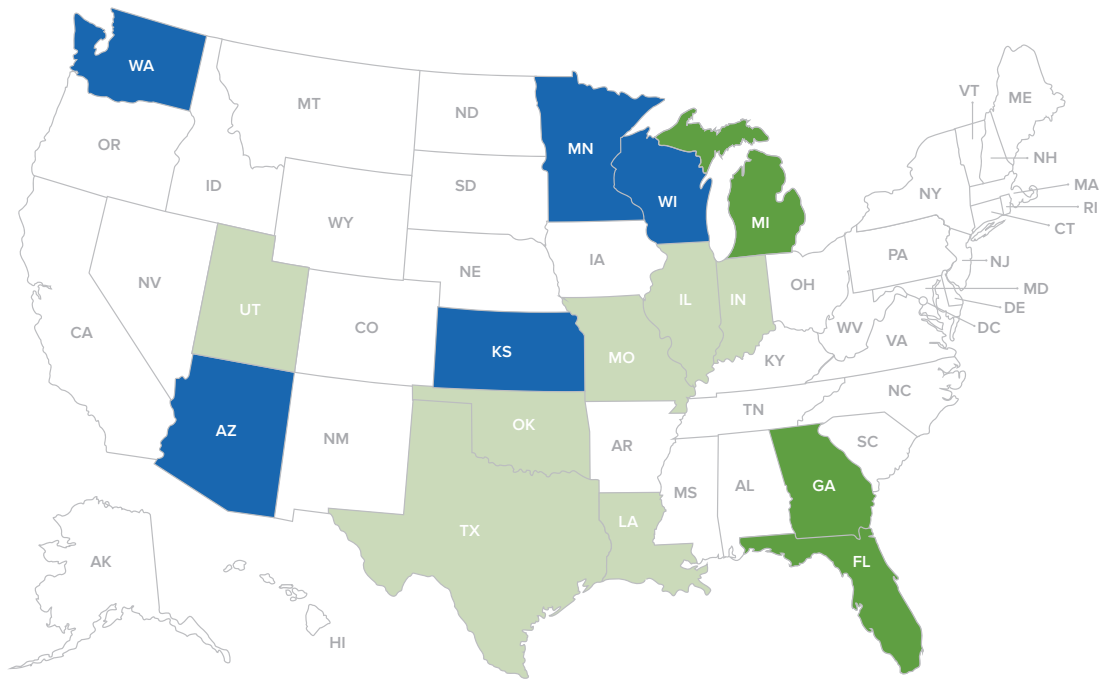


FIGURE 1: Course choice states



States that have course choice legislation and a prominent state virtual school that provides online courses

The first category is made up of states that have supported a state virtual school and allow students to choose an online course. These states are significant because they are among the states with the largest numbers of supplemental online course enrollments. Although there is some self-reporting in these data which calls the exact numbers into question, especially from Michigan, there is little doubt that these states are among those with the most supplemental online course enrollments.

Florida
Georgia
Michigan



States that have course choice legislation or rules and do not have a prominent state virtual school

The second category is made up of states that have passed legislation (or state board rule) that is clearly related to course choice, whether or not the law uses that exact term, and rely on a state-run course choice program and/or districts to provide courses. Utah and Louisiana, both of which have passed well-publicized course choice laws, are in this category. Indiana and Missouri have passed course choice laws more recently and are still developing their programs. The Illinois State Board of Education created a course choice program that will begin piloting in 2020. Although some of these states have a state virtual school, none of these schools are large enough to play a major role with regards to course choice implementation.

Illinois
Indiana
Louisiana
Missouri
Oklahoma
Texas
Utah



States that allow students to enroll part time, in effect allowing them to select a single online course

The third category is made up of states that do not have an explicit course choice policy, but allow students to enroll in a school as a part-time student and have schools that offer online courses. In some cases, these policies have been extended to allow students to choose from online course providers and not just schools. This combination of online course availability and part-time enrollment policy allows students to choose a single online course. Generally, these states allow students to be enrolled in two districts and apportion funding between the districts based on the student's time, courses, or attendance in each district.

Arizona
Kansas
Minnesota
Washington
Wisconsin

A state-by-state review

Each state is described in brief below, in alphabetical order.

Arizona allows students to enroll full-time or part-time in school districts or charter schools approved as an Arizona Online Instruction (AOI) provider. The law⁴ designates that the student's funding will be apportioned between the schools providing instruction, with online course providers receiving 85% of the total per-course funding that a face-to-face school would receive. The state lists 78 AOI providers (district⁵ and charter⁶), although the state does not distinguish which providers allow for part-time enrollment and some accept full-time enrollment only. The state requires receiving districts to accept credits earned at a charter or district online school, but allows the receiving district to determine how the credit will be assigned (whether the credit will count as elective or core credit). AOI providers served 55,085 students (in terms of average daily membership equivalent) in school year 2017–18. Although the Arizona Department of Education does not track how many of these students were full-time online versus part-time online, a rough count of students in the main full-time online schools suggests that perhaps 40,000 students are accessing supplemental online courses

Florida is the best example of a state that has achieved the typical goal of course choice (allowing students to select a publicly-funded online course) by first creating a state virtual school. Florida Virtual School (FLVS) is the country's largest state virtual school, with several hundred thousand course enrollments. A key element driving the growth of FLVS in the early 2000s was the requirement passed by the Florida legislature that students could select an FLVS course as part of or in addition to their full-time schedule. When this law was first passed, students could take an FLVS course to exceed a typical 1.0 FTE, which helped create political support for the change. The requirement that all students graduate with one online course, added in 2011, has also supported growth of online courses.

Florida is unique in that all districts in the state must make available to all K–12 students full and part time virtual options, and students have the right to choose courses from FLVS or school district virtual options. In school year 2017–18, FLVS, FLVS district-run franchises, district programs, and consortia served slightly more than 600,000 supplemental course enrollments.⁷ This is the largest number of supplemental online enrollments in any state in the country. Students may choose courses through an online course catalog maintained by the Department of Education that includes a wide variety of providers.⁸ Funding is based on successful course completions; each provider receives a prorated portion of the student's FTE based on the number of successful courses completed.

Georgia is the other main state in which course choice is primarily achieved via state support of a state virtual school. Students in grades 9–12 are allowed to take courses from Georgia Virtual School (GAVS), the state virtual school. GAVS reported just under 70,000 course enrollments in fiscal year 2016–17.

The **Illinois** State Board of Education has announced the Illinois Virtual Course Program, and issued an RFP for course providers. The program is slated to begin implementation in January 2020, but no further details about the program are available as of August 2019.

⁴ A.R.S. §15-808, retrieved from <https://www.azleg.gov/ars/15/00808.htm>

⁵ List retrieved from <https://azsbe.az.gov/sites/default/files/media/UPDATED%202019%20AOI%20Districts%20List%20-%20revised%203.2019.pdf>

⁶ List retrieved from <https://asbcs.az.gov/sites/default/files/Distance%20Learning%20Schools%20List%20Revised%208-6-2018.pdf>

⁷ Summary of enrollments is available at <http://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/5606/urlt/Virtual-Sept.pdf>

⁸ <http://app4.fldoe.org/coursecatalog/>

Indiana's course choice program, which was established in legislation⁹, is run via the Indiana Course Access Portal (iCAP). The portal¹⁰ provides extensive information including a course list along with materials for students and schools. The law was passed in 2017 and school year 2017–18 was a pilot year with a very small number of enrollments. Enrollment data are not available for school year 2018–19 as of August 2019.

Kansas is similar to Arizona in that it allows students to choose part- and full-time options from state-approved providers, including virtual schools, charter schools, districts, and service centers. The state department of education maintains a site with information for families, schools, and researchers.¹¹ Students are considered “enrolled” at the school where they take the most coursework, whether that is face-to-face or virtual. The part-time school considers the student enrolled for the remaining minutes of that student's FTE. The state does not track the number of students taking online courses from a part-time provider.

Louisiana's current version of course choice, the Supplemental Course Academy (SCA)¹², evolved from its state virtual school (the Louisiana Virtual School, which closed at the end of SY 2012–13) and then from the course choice program that was created in 2012 and served 2,196 course enrollments in SY 2013–14. Legal challenges to the program's original funding model were raised, and the Louisiana Supreme Court found in mid-2013 that the course choice funding model was unconstitutional; as an interim measure, the department of education reallocated about \$2 million in alternative funding for the SY 2013–14 pilot. Funding is now through the Minimum Foundation Program, provided as an incremental funding stream of \$59 per student in grades 7–12, in addition to the regular public education funding formula. Students select their own online, hybrid, and face-to-face course offerings from about 60 authorized providers¹³, including commercial vendors, Louisiana colleges and universities (including community colleges), and school districts. All course registrations require local school counselor approval. The state reports 54,494 enrollments in the SCA as of school year 2017–18¹⁴. Note that this includes online, hybrid, and face-to-face courses.

In **Michigan**, Section 21f of the state school aid act¹⁵ gives students in grades 6–12 the right to take up to two funded online courses per academic term. Students choose from Michigan Virtual School (the state virtual school) or from courses offered by districts, intermediate school districts, and community colleges. Online providers set the price for an individual course, however, districts do not have to pay more than 6.67% of the state minimum foundation allowance. School districts can deny the online course request only if it meets one of a small number of legislatively-defined criteria, including that the district believes that the online course is of insufficient quality or rigor.¹⁶ The Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute (MVLRI) maintains a “21f tool kit”¹⁷ that explains the law and how districts can meet its requirements and take advantage of its opportunities.

⁹ <http://iga.in.gov/static-documents/3/d/7/7/3d77c2e5/HB1007.06.ENRS.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.doe.in.gov/icap>

¹¹ <https://www.ksde.org/Agency/Division-of-Learning-Services/Career-Standards-and-Assessment-Services/CSAS-Home/Graduation-and-Schools-of-Choice/Virtual-Schools-and-Programs>

¹² <http://www.louisianabelieves.com/courses/supplemental-course-academy>

¹³ https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/course-choice/2018-2019-provider-list.pdf?sfvrsn=a2ee941f_20

¹⁴ https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/key-initiatives/louisianas-key-initiatives_course-choice.pdf?sfvrsn=5

¹⁵ [http://www.legislature.mi.gov/\(S\(eizxqrcqmwofbzct3dxq0po2\)\)/mileg.aspx?page=GetObject&objectname=mcl-388-1621f](http://www.legislature.mi.gov/(S(eizxqrcqmwofbzct3dxq0po2))/mileg.aspx?page=GetObject&objectname=mcl-388-1621f)

¹⁶ <https://mvlri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/21f-infographic.pdf>

¹⁷ https://mvlri.org/resources/21f/#_ga=2.119470154.253259341563980423-4617043571563659516

Michigan is among the few states that track data regarding online course enrollments, and the MVLRI reports 581,911 online course enrollments in school year 2017–18.¹⁸ This number is not directly attributable to the course choice law, as there is no mechanism to track enrollments triggered by 21f. However, the course choice law is a key component of state support of online learning that includes funding for the state virtual school; these and other elements have created more online learning opportunities and enrollment in Michigan than in most other states.

Minnesota is in the Arizona and Kansas mold, as it was among the first states to allow students to choose a single online course from among multiple providers. The state maintains a list of approved providers; as of June 2019, 34 listed providers represent a mix of programs from independent school districts, intermediate districts, charter schools, and multidistrict consortia serving students statewide. The state also posts a form¹⁹ to be used by students seeking to enroll in an online course from a provider other than their district of enrollment. These programs provided 16,212 supplemental semester course equivalent enrollments in school year 2017–2018.

Missouri has created the Missouri Course Access and Virtual School Program (MOCAP),²⁰ which replaces the former Missouri Virtual Instruction Program (MOVIP). State education statute describes the program²¹ and funding.²² MOCAP reported 1,689 course enrollments via the program in school year 2017–18. SY 2018–19 was a transition year in which the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) was focused on approving providers, reviewing course quality, and building other parts of the program. Students request online courses via their resident district. Districts may choose online providers other than those approved by DESE, but students have a right to select a MOCAP course. The district determines if taking the online course is “in the best educational interest of the student.”²³ A formal appeals process is prescribed in statute for situations in which the district denies the request.

Oklahoma State rules²⁴ create the framework for the Oklahoma Supplemental Online Course Program (OSOCP), by which school districts offer supplemental online courses to students in grades K–12 and students have the right to enroll in “educationally appropriate” online courses. Although several providers have a statewide contract to offer online courses, districts may choose from any provider and are not limited to those with a statewide contract. Students may take up to five hours of supplemental online instruction at no cost to the student; funding is prorated to the prior year’s per pupil expenditure. Each school district is responsible for paying each course provider, “based upon continued course enrollment and subsequent course completion.” The state maintains a course catalog²⁵ of approved providers, but districts may use any vendor that they choose. “Educationally appropriate” is defined as any instruction that is not substantially a repeat of a course or portion of a course that the student has successfully completed, regardless of the grade of the student, and regardless of whether a course is similar to any currently offered in the school district. The state does not track how many students are enrolled in online courses.

¹⁸ Freidhoff, J. R. (2019). Michigan’s k-12 virtual learning effectiveness report 2017-18. Lansing, MI: Michigan Virtual University. Available from <https://mvlri.org/research/publications/michigans-k-12-virtual-learning-effectiveness-report-2017-18/>

¹⁹ https://education.mn.gov/mdeprod/idcplg?IdcService=GET_FILE&dDocName=004523&RevisionSelectionMethod=latestReleased&Rendition=primary

²⁰ <https://mocap.mo.gov/>

²¹ <http://revisor.mo.gov/main/OneSection.aspx?section=161.670&bid=35970&h>

²² <http://revisor.mo.gov/main/OneSection.aspx?section=162.1250&bid=8126&h>

²³ <http://revisor.mo.gov/main/OneSection.aspx?section=161.670&bid=35970&h>

²⁴ http://okrules.elaws.us/oac/title210_chapter15_subchapter34

²⁵ <https://osocp.ok.gov/courses>

All course choice activity in **Texas** is through the Texas Virtual School Network (TXVSN), which offers a statewide course catalog that includes courses provided by eligible Texas school districts and open-enrollment charter schools, regional education service centers, institutions of higher education, and private entities and nonprofits that meet eligibility requirements. Students may take up to three courses each semester at no cost to the student. Districts and open-enrollment charter schools may deny a student's enrollment request if the district or school offers a substantially similar course, although they may allow the student to enroll at their own cost in this circumstance, and they have discretion to select the course provider for the course a student requests. Funding is based on successful course completion; pricing cannot be determined by the state, only by the TXVSN course provider, up to a maximum of \$400 per semester course. Texas reports 7,861 TXVSN catalog course enrollments in school year 2017–18.

Utah's Statewide Online Education Program (SOEP)²⁶ is among the first and best-known course choice programs in the country. The program provides an extensive FAQ document²⁷ that explains that students have the right to take an online course from a provider other than their enrolling district. The program has grown steadily and reports 15,449 enrollments in school year 2018–19. This number includes only inter-district enrollments facilitated under SOEP statute so is not a direct comparison to enrollment numbers in other states including Florida and Michigan.

All students in Utah are eligible, including private school and homeschool students. They may enroll in up to six online credits per year. The state department of education also publishes an annual report on SOEP providers.²⁸

Washington is similar to other states such as Arizona and Kansas that have extensive online learning activity, and allow students to enroll part-time with a school to take one or more online courses. Therefore, the state allows students to access single online courses despite not having a policy or program commonly labelled as “course choice.” State statute²⁹ defines online learning for K–12 students, much of which (but not all) occurs under regulations for “alternative learning experiences.”³⁰ The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction issues an annual report³¹ that contains more detailed data than is available in most other states but does not break down course enrollments between full-time and part-time online students.

Wisconsin passed a “Course Options” law that was very similar to course choice in other states, and then 2017 Wisconsin Act 59 changed course options to part-time open enrollment. Wisconsin statutes³² now allow public school students to take up to two courses from a district other than the student's main enrolling district. The law and a brochure³³ published by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) explain that the resident school may deny a student's open enrollment application for only two reasons: the course conflicts with an IEP if the student needs special education, or the “cost of the course creates an undue financial burden on the resident school district.” Although the DPI provides an application form for parents, the application goes to the school district and the state has no data on how many students are taking online courses via part-time open enrollment.

²⁶ <https://www.schools.utah.gov/edonline>

²⁷ <https://www.schools.utah.gov/File/361b6bd8-90ef-49ff-bfaf-ce88b42deb4b>

²⁸ <https://www.schools.utah.gov/file/88bd9e0b-f934-4366-b9f9-1ba8680413ec>

²⁹ <https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=28A.250>

³⁰ <https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=28A.250>

³¹ <https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/communications/2018-12-UPDATE-Online-Learning.pdf>

³² <https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/statutes/statutes/118/52>

³³ <https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/open-enrollment/pdf/ptoe-brochure-2018-19.pdf>

Analysis and conclusions

The wide variety of experiences in states that have some sort of course choice (or equivalent) policy in place suggests that any findings across states must be generalized and will have exceptions. Still, a few observations appear to hold true.

Course choice policies supported by a state program attract higher levels of enrollments

This may seem obvious but still bears mentioning: a policy alone won't result in a substantial number of online course enrollments. Some states, such as Utah, have a course choice program that is maintaining an online course catalog and extensive information on a state website, and helping to spread the word about course availability to schools and students throughout the state. Such activities correlate with higher levels of course enrollments.

Often a single entity, or a small number of organizations, has an outsize effect on supplemental course enrollments in a state

Related to the previous point, supplemental course enrollments are often spurred by a single entity. In some states (e.g., Florida, North Carolina, and Georgia) this entity is a state virtual school. Michigan Virtual School is also a state virtual school, and MVS supports supplemental online learning not only as a course provider but also by reporting on, and being an advocate for, online learning across the state. In Missouri, the Springfield school district's Launch program is working with many of the state's districts to offer online courses. In Pennsylvania, the Capital Area Intermediate Unit provides online courses to many of its member districts.

Data availability varies widely between states but is mostly lacking

Very few states have complete and accurate data regarding how many students are taking supplemental online courses. Florida has long been the best state for online course enrollment data, in part because of the large role of the Florida Virtual School as the main provider, and in part because of the Florida Department of Education filling an important and separate data gathering and reporting role. Washington and Michigan are two other leading states in terms of data availability, although their reporting demonstrates the challenges of gathering consistent and high-quality data from individual districts.

Some states such as Utah have excellent data specific to their course choice program, but do not have data regarding district-provided online courses. A plausible theory—with some supporting anecdotal evidence—is that course choice programs such as in Utah have spurred district online learning activity, such that the course choice program enrollments reflect only a small percentage of a growing number of online course enrollments in the state.

Course choice is one of four policies that support supplemental online courses either directly or indirectly, and the presence of multiple policies spurs the most supplemental online course activity

Even accounting for data limitations, it appears that the presence of these policies correlates with a higher number of course enrollments:

- A state virtual school
- Course choice policy
- Online learning graduation requirement
- Full-time online schools

In addition to course choice, two other policies that appear to support online course enrollment are the creation, funding and support of a state virtual school (as discussed above), and the requirement that students take an online course (or something similar) in order to graduate from high school. A fourth policy—the support of full-time online schools—also appears to spur individual online course enrollments, perhaps by raising the profile of online learning generally.

States that have three or four of these policies in place tend to have the highest number of supplemental online course enrollments, and states that have none or one of these policies tend to have the smallest number of supplemental online course enrollments. For example, Florida and Michigan, which have all four policies in place, also appear to have the highest number of supplemental online course enrollments (both in terms of absolute numbers and in proportion to their student populations).

Given the data limitations, it is impossible to attribute the high level of online course enrollments to any one of these policies, but they appear to interact with each other to create an environment in which students and families are more aware of online course options, and choose them at higher rates than in other states.