

# SNAPSHOT 2022

An inflection point  
for digital learning?

JANUARY 2022

## About this report

This 2022 report is the third Snapshot produced by [Digital Learning Collaborative \(DLC\)](#).

From 2004 to 2016, the Evergreen Education Group published a series of annual *Keeping Pace* reports. The reports, which were sponsored by a range of organizations, including school districts, state agencies, non-profit organizations, and companies, provided reviews of practice and policy for the field of K–12 online, blended, and digital learning. Some of the reports included planning guides designed to help educators in the field with the establishment and growth of their digital programs.

In 2017 and 2018, Evergreen did not publish the annual report, as Evergreen and key partner organizations considered how to maintain the overall goal of *Keeping Pace*—to provide the foundational information that the field requires—while shifting to a new digital-first, financially sustainable model.

Starting in 2019, the *Keeping Pace* reports were re-imagined as the annual Digital Learning Snapshots under the umbrella of the Digital Learning Collaborative and the [Digital Learning Annual Conference \(DLAC\)](#). We published annual Snapshots in 2019 and 2020. Due to rapidly changing conditions during 2021 we focused on updates via blog posts, and delayed this current Snapshot to January 2022 in order to be able to report on enrollment data for online schools from school year 2020–21.

DLC membership is made up of the same types of organizations as the earlier *Keeping Pace* sponsors: individual schools, districts, state agencies, non-profit organizations, and companies.

DLAC was first held in April 2019, with subsequent gatherings in February 2020 and June 2021 (in a hybrid format, both online and onsite). In 2022 DLAC will be held in February, again both onsite and online.

We call this report the Snapshot for two reasons. First, we intend it to provide a snapshot of K–12 digital learning activity in the United States, using public schools as the primary focus. Second, it provides a glimpse into the far more extensive information available on the DLC website. Some of the text, graphics, and analysis are new to this report and will be made available on the website; parts of this report are executive summaries of full reports available on the website. In particular, much of the information in this report is based on our [state profiles](#) and reporting first published on the DLC [blog](#).

We welcome your comments, suggestions, and questions! Please email us at [info@evergreenedgroup.com](mailto:info@evergreenedgroup.com).



Parts of this report are executive summaries of full reports available on the website. In particular, much of the information in this report is based on our state profiles and reporting first published on the DLC blog.

[digitallearningcollab.com](https://digitallearningcollab.com)

# About the Digital Learning Collaborative

The Digital Learning Collaborative (DLC) is a membership group dedicated to supporting our members, and the field at large, by exploring, producing, and disseminating data, information, news, and best practices in K–12 digital learning. We provide webinars, offer online forums, and bring together members in a variety of ways—onsite and online—in collegial settings to further the K–12 digital learning field.

Our members include school districts, intermediate units, public agencies, non-profit organizations, and companies. Collaborative activities are primarily supported financially by membership fees.

The Evergreen Education Group manages the Collaborative. DLC members determine the topics that we explore, via monthly web meetings and individual discussions. Past topics have included:

- Best practices and strategies for success in a variety of online, hybrid, and blended learning settings (e.g., mainstream schools and classrooms, alternative education, online schools, credit recovery programs)
- Honest explorations and analysis of challenges and pitfalls that have plagued digital learning
- Implementation case studies exploring the varied settings discussed above
- Discussion of successful online content and technology platforms supporting digital learning
- Identification of professional development needs for teachers and strategies for success
- Policy issues including state funding and accountability systems, which benefit or hinder best practices in supporting students
- Annual reports documenting key issues in digital learning, including growth and trends.

## DLC Core Principles

### Members of the Digital Learning Collaborative believe the following:

Online, hybrid, blended, and digital learning encompass a wide range of schools, instructional strategies and practices that may be implemented across a state, district, network of schools, single school, or individual classroom.

Existing schools and programs demonstrate that many of these instructional strategies and practices are helping K–12 schools and students improve educational opportunities and outcomes.

Online, hybrid, and blended learning encompass practices that may be implemented well or poorly. Therefore, the theoretical question “does online/blended/digital learning work” is nonsensical in the same way as asking “do traditional schools work?”

Emergency remote learning, as implemented by many mainstream schools and districts during the COVID-19 pandemic, is fundamentally different than well planned and executed digital learning.

The technology used in online, blended, and digital learning always supports teachers and other professional adults who work with students in a variety of ways. There are no examples of successful, scalable educational programs in the United States that operate without teachers.

Although K–12 digital learning has a track record that extends over more than two decades, significant myths and misunderstandings are common. The DLC exists in part to counter these myths and replace them with data and accurate information.

Many different types of organizations have a valuable role to play in improving education. Digital tools, resources, and instruction are created and implemented by a wide variety of organizations that include individual schools, districts, regional public agencies, state agencies, private non-profit organizations, and for-profit companies.

Individual Collaborative members support these principles. Collaborative documents and resources build on these principles, but may not always reflect the views of individual DLC members.

# Introduction

We published the first two DLC Annual Snapshots to coincide with the Digital Learning Annual Conference (DLAC), which means that the 2020 Snapshot was published in February 2020. For this edition, we are writing in late 2021 for a release in January 2022, meaning it has been almost two years since our last Snapshot.

What a two years it has been.

During this time, a version of online learning—which we refer to as emergency remote learning—went mainstream. Prior to 2020, all forms of digital learning that introduced meaningful changes to the use of time and space in education (e.g., hybrid and online schools, supplemental online courses) were chosen voluntarily by students, families, and teachers. Starting in March 2020, most students, families, and teachers were forced into emergency remote learning by COVID-19.

The past two years have been a time of challenges around equity, access, and meeting the needs of all students. A silver lining of the pandemic, perhaps, was the spotlight shined on these issues of equity, as well as an increased recognition of the role of schools as pillars of our communities, supporting students in ways as basic as providing meals, as well as supporting mental and emotional health of students, families, and communities. These issues, of course, go far beyond digital learning.

With most of the country's 100,000 schools having shifted to remote learning at some point, it's easy to find example of any story that one would like to tell. There are countless examples of heroic efforts by teachers and school leaders. There are also many examples of students and parents frustrated by poorly implemented remote and hybrid learning. In a system like US education, all of these examples, on a continuum of heroic to abysmal and everything in between, could be found during the course of the pandemic.

We observed that in the early days of school closures, too many experienced online learning organizations were largely sidelined. As policymakers and mainstream educational leaders struggled to determine how to shift to remote learning, all too often they did not call on the experienced online teachers, online school leaders, state virtual schools, providers, and other organizations that have built this field over the past twenty plus years.

But as the pandemic surged through the summer, and then spiked in the fall of 2020 and winter of 2021, we saw experienced online and hybrid educators and organizations asked to take an increasingly important role in the response. Parents increasingly chose online schools for their children. Mainstream district leaders looked to experienced providers. Governors and state education agencies put stimulus funds into experienced schools and organizations, helping all students and teachers respond. In addition, the course of the pandemic and the education response revealed that the districts that had already been thinking about the ways that digital learning could meet the needs of all students were well situated to respond—and often led the way in their states.

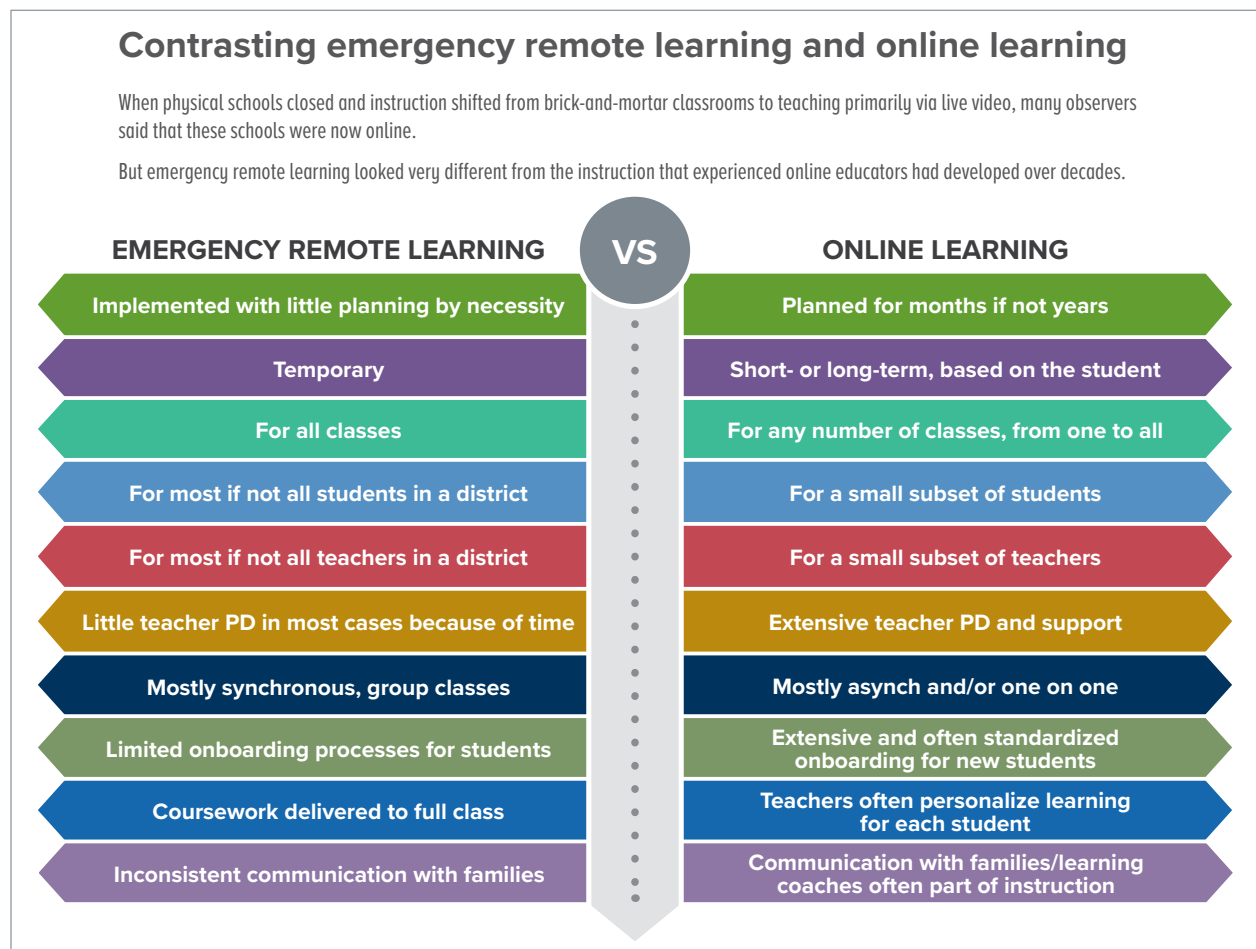
This report seeks to illuminate not only the digital learning response during the pandemic, including aspects of emergency remote learning, but also to look at prior data, and to anticipate a post-pandemic education future. As such, it is organized around three overarching data sets and themes:

- Online course and school data from the final pre-pandemic year (2019–2020), to provide the last online enrollment numbers in the digital learning trajectory before COVID chaos broke loose.
- Data from the 2020–2021 school year, when available, to demonstrate the spikes in online learning demand among online schools and course providers. These are incomplete because full data are not yet available.
- Findings and lessons from a year in which digital learning went from a niche to being a key element of education for almost all students.

What lessons may come out of the education response to the pandemic? What changes to education may stick around in the long term? As of late 2021, we don't yet know. But it seems possible that digital learning, in all its forms, will be forever changed.

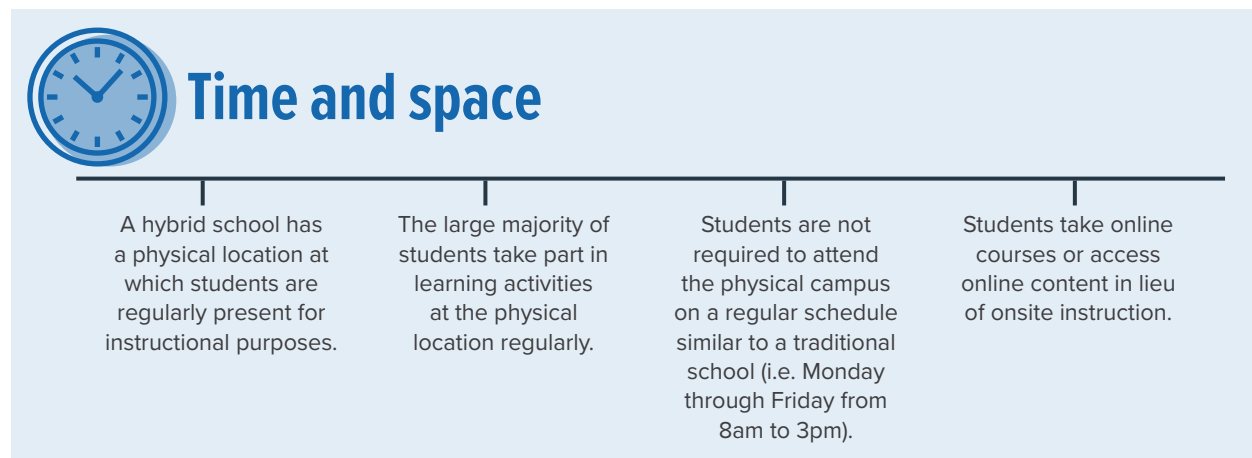
To be clear, emergency remote learning was a rapid response to a pandemic that very few people anticipated. District leaders did what they could on incredibly short timelines, and under tremendous pressure. In addition, they often had to first figure out how to address students' basic needs, including food and mental/emotional health.

But these often-heroic efforts, when extended to emergency remote learning, should not be conflated with the online and hybrid learning that was implemented by online schools and course providers prior to the pandemic.



## Understanding hybrid learning

We have previously characterized hybrid schools in the following ways:



However, “hybrid” in the emergency pandemic learning context, often meant “room and Zoom”—the teacher instructing a physical classroom with some students, while also being on video for students watching from home.

That approach, by and large, did not work. It is incredibly difficult for teachers, requires greater technology investment than K–12 schools can make, and doesn’t produce strong results for students.

This document discusses hybrid schools further down. The pandemic stole the term “hybrid learning” from its best definition within the digital learning field. We’re stealing it back.

### Key terms

Even before the pandemic, confusion existed about some key terms in digital learning. We address some of these terms here. We purposely call these key terms descriptions and characterizations instead of definitions, because the focus should be on the value and effectiveness of instructional practices, not on whether a certain practice fits a specific definition.

**Online learning** encompasses a wide range of educational activities, tools, and resources that are delivered via the Internet. These can be schools in which the large majority of curriculum is delivered online, and interaction between students and teachers, and between students, is mostly or entirely at a distance.

We characterize **hybrid learning** as combining onsite and remote learning. Hybrid schools, for example, allow students to attend an onsite location (from one to five days a week) to interact with teachers and students, while also providing extensive online learning opportunities. Online learning in a hybrid school includes communication with teachers and other students through both synchronous and asynchronous tools.

**Blended learning** describes the use of online tools and resources in settings that are primarily onsite and face-to-face. Blended learning often occurs within mainstream classrooms, such as students using instructional math software for an hour per week in a class that otherwise uses face-to-face teaching, group activities, and a range of similar approaches that are common in traditional schools.

**Digital learning** encompasses online, hybrid, and blended learning and refers to any use of each of these.

**Educational technology** includes digital learning as well as additional underlying technologies that support instruction, such as student information systems, servers, and cyber security.

# Hybrid schools

No term was used more often during the pandemic, to mean many different things, than hybrid learning. Most often, hybrid learning was the term used to describe teaching that took place in a physical classroom with a teacher instructing some students face-to-face, with others watching online.

Examples of hybrid schools:

- Crossroads FLEX, Cary, NC
- Hoosier Academy, Indianapolis, IN
- Map Academy Charter School, Plymouth, MA
- Nevada Learning Academy, Las Vegas, NV
- Oasis High School, Aptos, CA
- Poudre Global Academy, Fort Collins, CO
- Springs Studio for Academic Excellence, Colorado Springs, CO
- Taos Academy, West Taos, NM
- The Village High School, Colorado Springs, CO
- Valor Preparatory Academy, Goodyear, AZ

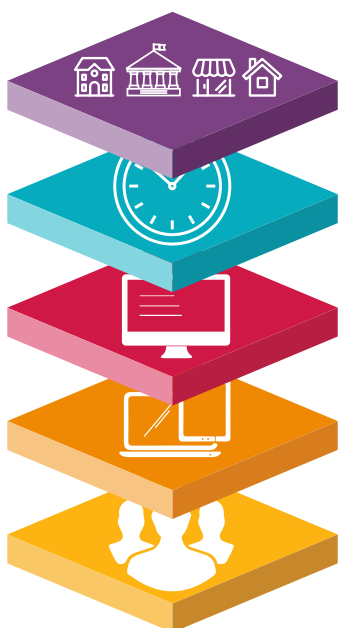
This is a partial list meant to demonstrate the wide range of approaches that hybrid schools take to scheduling, the physical learning center, mentoring, and other aspects of instruction and student support.

## What is a Hybrid School?

A hybrid school is conceptually simple: it combines online instruction with onsite, face-to-face interaction. But that simplicity masks a powerful concept—a hybrid school flips the script of a traditional education by:

- freeing students and teachers from constraints of time and space,
- allowing teachers to focus on relationships with students, and
- encouraging students to envision and pursue their interests, linking academics to careers, jobs, internships, sports, arts—or whatever captivates each student.

Imagine a school built on these five core principles, each of which is explored in more detail on the following pages.



**SPACE:** A physical school building combined with students learning from home, libraries, coffee shops, etc.



**TIME:** A combination of onsite and online, in almost any combination that's not 100% of either. Most hybrid schools are somewhere closer to the middle of the continuum, or have options for students to be along the middle of the continuum.



**CONTENT:** Online content supports learning to free some teacher and staff time to focus on 1) harder concepts and 2) relationships. Content includes SEL and PBL components.



**TECHNOLOGY PLATFORM:** Supports teacher understanding of student's academic status in a class, and "champion" understanding of student's academic standing across classes, as well as "life status."



**RELATIONSHIPS:** Hybrid schools prioritize relationships between students and adults, who serves as students' champions, mentors, and supporters. These adults may be teachers, counselors, or have other titles.



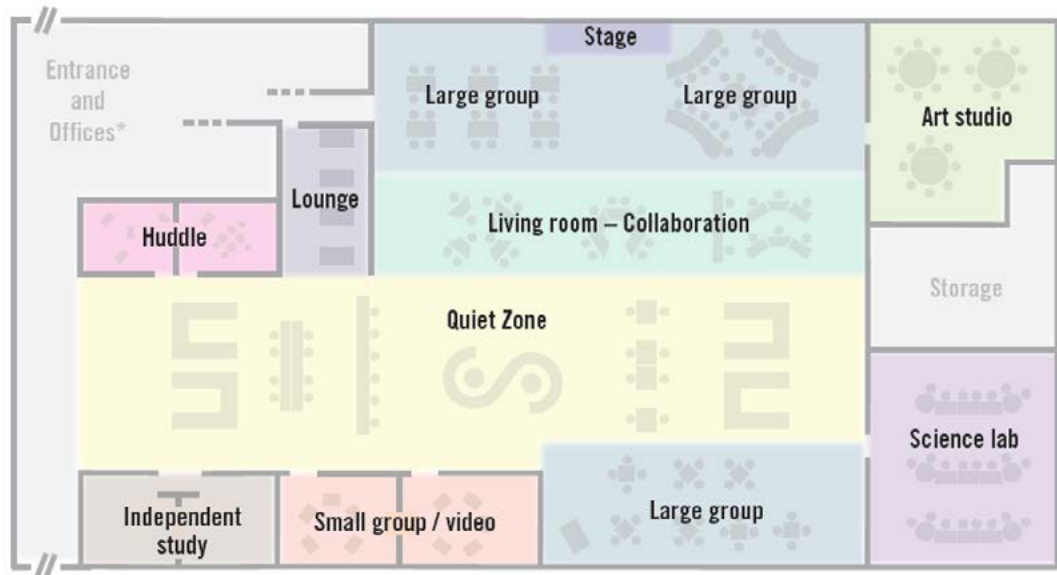
## Space

A hybrid school has a physical building, which may be repurposed or new. It may look like a traditional school, or like something very different.

Hybrid schools like Springs Studio for Academic Excellence in Colorado Springs often include large and small group instructional areas, informal collaboration spaces, and areas designated for science, art, or other specific topics or pursuits. Springs Studio takes the name of a “studio” to evoke a professional studio, similar to an architecture firm or art studio.

Springs Studio enrolls 500 students in a much smaller space than a traditional school would need, because students split time between working at or away from school. Other hybrid schools find that they can also use a physical space that is considerably smaller than a typical school size for a given number of students.

**Floor plan of Springs Studio for Academic Excellence in Colorado**







## Time

A hybrid school frees students and teachers from the constraints of time. Hybrid schools combine online learning with onsite instruction in a variety of configurations.

Some require that all students come in on one or two specific days each week, for most of the day, with a set schedule to work with their teachers during the onsite days. Poudre Global Academy (PGA) follows this type of schedule.

Among the benefits to the type of schedule used by PGA is that teachers have all day every Friday to work together—while also interacting with students online.

Other hybrid schools have fewer onsite requirements. Schools operating under California’s independent study law are required to meet with students face-to-face for only one hour per week, but many students work at the school much more because they prefer the school’s learning environment, or they enjoy interacting with other students. Still other hybrid schools set individual onsite requirements for each student based on the student’s interests, needs, and academic standing.

When students aren’t at school, they may learn from home, parents’ workplaces, libraries, coffee shops, or other locations.

### Poudre Global Academy (Colorado) daily schedule

| Day of week | On campus  | At home                              | Office hours & other activities  |
|-------------|--|--------------------------------------|--|
| Monday      |  | All students studying online         |  |
| Tuesday     | All K–12 students on campus<br>WIN sessions (see note 1)   |                                      | Fine arts day for grades K–8   |
| Wednesday   | Grades 9–12 on campus<br>STEM enrichment activities and Yearbook<br>SST meetings for K–5 students (see note 2) | K–8 students studying online         | Optional teacher office hours for grades 6–8   |
| Thursday    | K–8 students on campus<br>WIN sessions (see note 1)  | Grades 9–12 students studying online | Optional teacher office hours for grades 9–12<br>Physical education day for grades K–8 |
| Friday      | Teacher professional development, collaboration, and SST meetings (see note 2)                                 | All students studying online         |  |

*Note 1: WIN is What-I-Need sessions. There are 17 WIN sessions each week, organized by subject area.*

*Note 2: SST is Student Support Team. There is a SST for each grade and the goal of an SST meeting is to identify students who need extra help, review supporting data, and discuss intervention strategies.*



## Digital Content

Hybrid schools use digital content and online courses to support instruction, but in varying ways. Some hybrid schools have students enrolled in online courses for a significant part of their schedule. For example, at Crossroads FLEX Academy in Cary, North Carolina, students typically take their elective courses online—including using online teachers—and their core courses face-to-face.



## Technology Platform

The Learning Management System (LMS) and Student Information System (SIS) combine to provide the technology platform that underpins a hybrid school. The LMS houses course content, student communications, teacher resources, and related instructional materials. The SIS holds all student information and is tightly coordinated with the LMS. Together the systems provide views at the student-, course- and school-level.



## Relationships

We have interviewed many students about their experiences at hybrid schools, and the story we hear over and over is simple: “my teachers know me, and I know my teachers, so well at this school. That’s why I love coming here.”

It may seem counter-intuitive that a school that appears to be based on technology is, in fact, prioritizing relationships. But that’s exactly what we find at hybrid schools.

Hybrid schools cultivate relationships in a couple of ways. First, teachers are freed from much of the time-consuming work that they have to do in a traditional school tied to classroom management, grading, taking attendance, and other mundane tasks. They can put their time and efforts into working directly with students one-on-one and in small groups.

Second, many hybrid schools ensure that each student has an adult in a mentor, facilitator, or “champion” role. The adult may be a teacher, school administrator, or in another role at the school. He or she often becomes the student’s advocate, helping the student understand and reach for her goals—academic or otherwise—while navigating challenges from health, family, or other issues.

## What happened with hybrid schools during the pandemic?

As mentioned previously, during the pandemic the term “hybrid” was commonly used for any combination of teaching online and onsite. Often, this meant simulteaching—the teacher in a physical classroom addressing students in the room, while simultaneously instructing students watching online in real-time.

Still, an unknown number of districts did employ hybrid approaches more consistent with our definition. For example, some districts split students into groups that would attend a physical school every other day, in order to facilitate social distancing in classrooms, and allow for extra cleaning time.

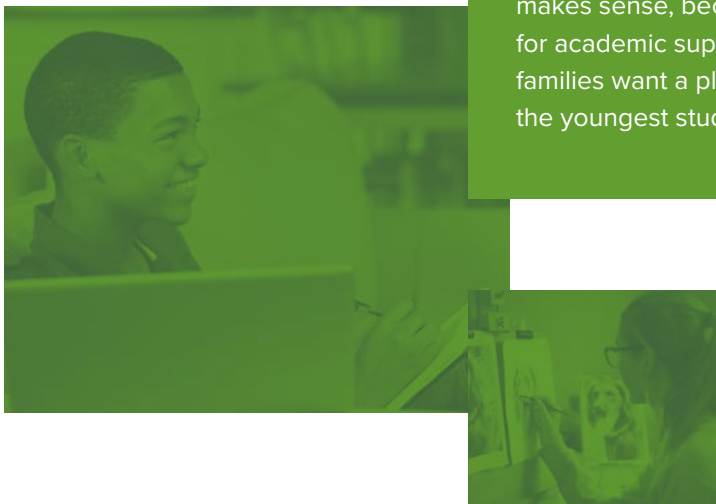
Although the goals of these hybrid schedules were very specific to the pandemic, the schedules looked quite similar to schedules used by some existing hybrid schools.



## What's the post-pandemic outlook for hybrid schools?

We believe that many hundreds of districts, and perhaps more than a thousand, are launching what they are calling their own “online” or “virtual” schools for the first time. This estimate comes from our own tracking of such new schools, a handful of state agencies reporting on new districts schools, and a study from Rand.

These districts are calling their new schools “virtual,” but it appears that many—possibly most—are in fact hybrid. This makes sense, because most students want to have a place for academic support and social interaction, and most families want a place for their children to go (especially for the youngest students.)



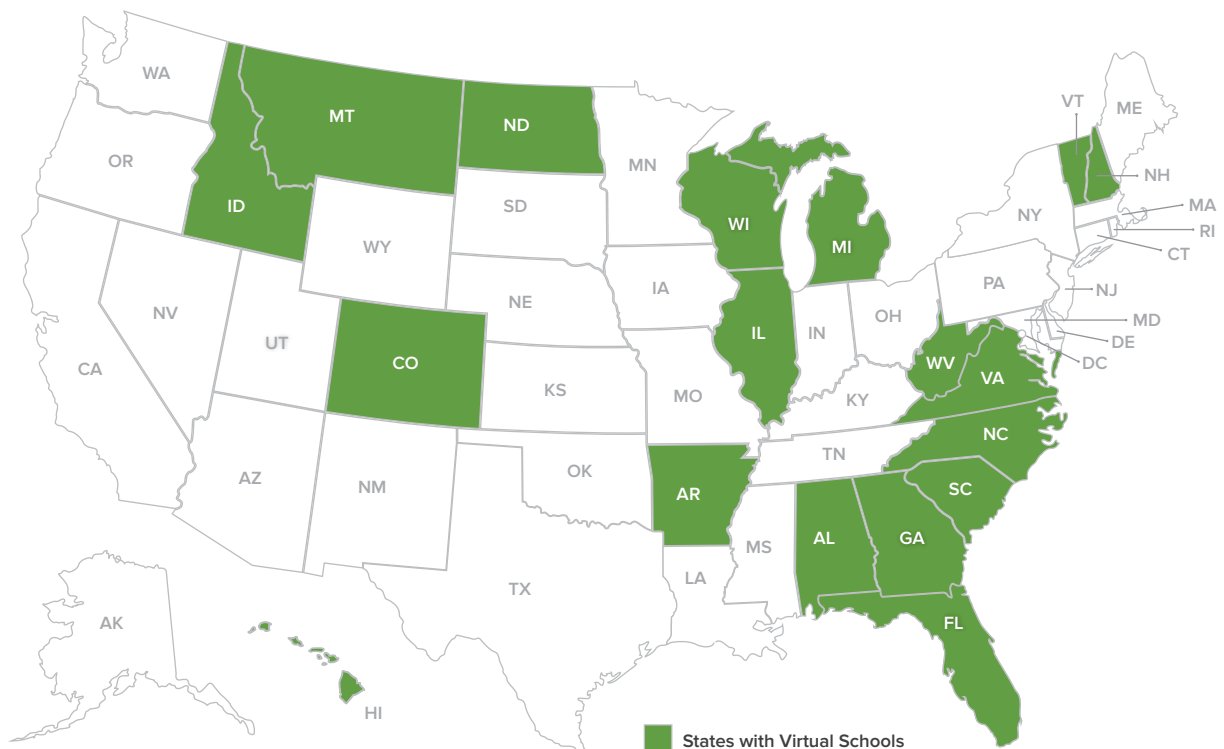
# State virtual schools



The data for this section were provided by *The Virtual Learning Leadership Alliance (VLLA)*, a 501c3 educational nonprofit organization consisting of leaders from innovative online learning programs in the US.<sup>2</sup>

State virtual schools are an important part of the online learning landscape, collectively serving just over one million supplemental online course enrollments in 23 states during the 2019–20 fiscal year (before the effects of COVID-19 on enrollments). Typically, they are among the largest and most recognized providers of online courses, instruction, technology infrastructure, professional development, and other online learning related services to schools and districts across the states in which they operate.

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 are not “schools” as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics, as they do not grant diplomas and are not responsible for many of the functions performed by schools (such as administering of state assessments, state and federal reporting, counseling, etc.). Instead, they supply online courses, teaching, and related services to schools, often including professional development for teachers. Students are usually enrolled with district approval, with the exception of states with course access policies (which are described below). Even then the school or district plays an integral role in counseling, mentoring, and enrolling students in the state virtual school.



**States with state virtual schools in SY 2020–21.**  
**Note that the program in Illinois is expected to close in 2022.**

| Program Name                                 | Year started | Grades served  | Semester course enrollments | Full-time enrollments | Students served through services including sharing content, courses, and/or LMS; not including teaching | Professional Learning Service enrollments |
|--|--------------|----------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|---|---|
| ACCESS Virtual Learning (AL)                 | 2006         | 7–12           | 71,351                      |                       | Service provided; number unavailable  | 3,211                                     |
| Virtual Arkansas                             | 2014         | 7–12           | 31,437                      |                       | 12,529  | Service provided; number unavailable      |
| Colorado Digital Learning Solutions          | 2015         | 5–12           | 4,353                       |                       | Not provided  | 100                                       |
| Florida Virtual School                       | 1997         | K–12           | 502,232                     | 60,142                | 98,145  | 3,107                                     |
| Georgia Virtual School                       | 2005         | 6–12           | 57,703                      |                       | Service provided; number unavailable  | 20,000                                    |
| Idaho Digital Learning                       | 2001         | 6–12           | 35,286                      |                       | Service provided; number unavailable  | Service provided; number unavailable      |
| Illinois Virtual School                      | 2001         | 6–12           | 9,338                       |                       | Service provided; number unavailable  | 1,258                                     |
| Michigan Virtual                             | 1998         | 6–12           | 32,689                      |                       | Service provided; number unavailable  | 178,000                                   |
| Montana Digital Academy                      | 2010         | 6–12           | 6,772                       |                       | 209   | 150                                       |
| Virtual Learning Academy Charter School (NH) | 2008         | K–12, Adult Ed | 26,609                      | 4,207                 | Not provided  | Not provided                              |
| NCVirtual                                    | 2007         | 6–12           | 102,368                     |                       | Service provided; number unavailable  | 50,000                                    |
| North Dakota Center for Distance Education   | 1935         | K–12           | 5,850                       | 535                   | 2,879   | 280                                       |
| VirtualSC                                    | 2006         | 6–12           | 84,148                      |                       | 4,335   | 13,344                                    |
| Vermont Virtual Learning Cooperative (VTVLC) | 2009         | 6–12           | 2,131                       |                       | 150   | 4,200                                     |
| Virtual Virginia                             | 2002         | 6–12           | 35,338                      | 413                   | 52,000  | 17,000                                    |
| West Virginia Virtual School                 | 2000         | 3–12           | 22,583                      | 1,742                 | Not provided  | 5,000                                     |
| Wisconsin Virtual School                     | 2000         | 6–12           | 9,291                       |                       | 901   | 409                                       |

State virtual school summary table. Enrollment numbers are for 2019–2020 (pre-pandemic).

State virtual schools may be administered by a state education agency, or may be separate nonprofit organizations, charter schools, higher education institutions, or regional service agencies contracted by the state education agency. For example:

- Georgia Virtual School, Virtual Virginia, and other state virtual schools are part of their state departments of education.
- Idaho Digital Learning is a governmental entity separate from the state education agency, and was created by legislation with a Board of Directors responsible for oversight.
- Montana Digital Academy is administered by the state university system.
- Michigan Virtual receives legislative funding, but is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization with a Board of Directors providing oversight.
- New Hampshire's state virtual school, Virtual Learning Academy Charter School, was created through charter school rules.

Although state virtual schools have different organizational and governance structures, most share similar characteristics. They provide teacher-led online courses, have administrative staff, enroll students, hire and train teachers, and maintain technology infrastructure to deliver and support online courses. They may create their own online course content, license content from vendors, use open educational resources, or combine content from various sources.

State virtual school courses and services are generally funded totally or in part by legislative line items. Districts may be required to pay all or part of the cost of the courses in which their students enroll. In some cases, courses are provided at no cost to schools and districts, or for nominal fees to help cover costs. State virtual schools may receive federal or private foundation grants, but the bulk of state virtual school funding comes from the state allocation and/or course fees based on course enrollments.

## What happened with state virtual schools during the pandemic?

As a category—but not necessarily for all individual organizations—state virtual schools saw several changes during the pandemic. These included:

- Substantial increases in teacher-led course enrollments, up to a doubling from the previous year.
- New and/or increased offerings of content/platform-only options, with teachers provided by the district instead of the state virtual school. For example, pre-pandemic Colorado Digital Learning Solutions (CDLS) had 4,343 enrollments in teacher-led courses. During the pandemic, it had ten times that number of students in courses in which CDLS provided the course content and platform, but not the teacher.
- An increase in the number of full-time online students, including in Florida, New Hampshire, and West Virginia.
- Substantial increases in professional learning course enrollments for teachers, as the state virtual schools played a central role in the states' responses to mainstream district needs during the pandemic. Examples include Michigan, South Carolina, and Virginia.



## What's the post-pandemic outlook for state virtual schools?

Over the past decade or so, the overall number of state virtual schools has decreased, mostly because some of the smaller, less-funded state virtual schools have been shuttered. At the same time, even pre-pandemic, the number of enrollments in state virtual schools increased slowly but steadily.

With the pandemic making clear the expertise and values that state virtual schools could provide, their outlook in a subset of states is bright. It's likely that in states including Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina, South Carolina—and others—state virtual schools will build on their central role during the pandemic and play a larger role in providing digital learning opportunities for mainstream schools and the students in those schools.

## Course choice

The support of a state virtual school is one policy mechanism by which a state may support the ability of students to take one or more online courses while enrolled in a physical school. Another mechanism, with the same goal, is referred to as course choice.

Course choice 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.

Despite the increased focus on online learning during the pandemic, relatively little changed among course choice states. The main exception is Utah, which has experienced a significant increase in enrollments via its course choice program, called the Statewide Online Education Program (SOEP).

As course choice remains an important policy level, but little has changed in the past year, we provide below information that was first published in the 2020 Snapshot, with minor revisions.

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.

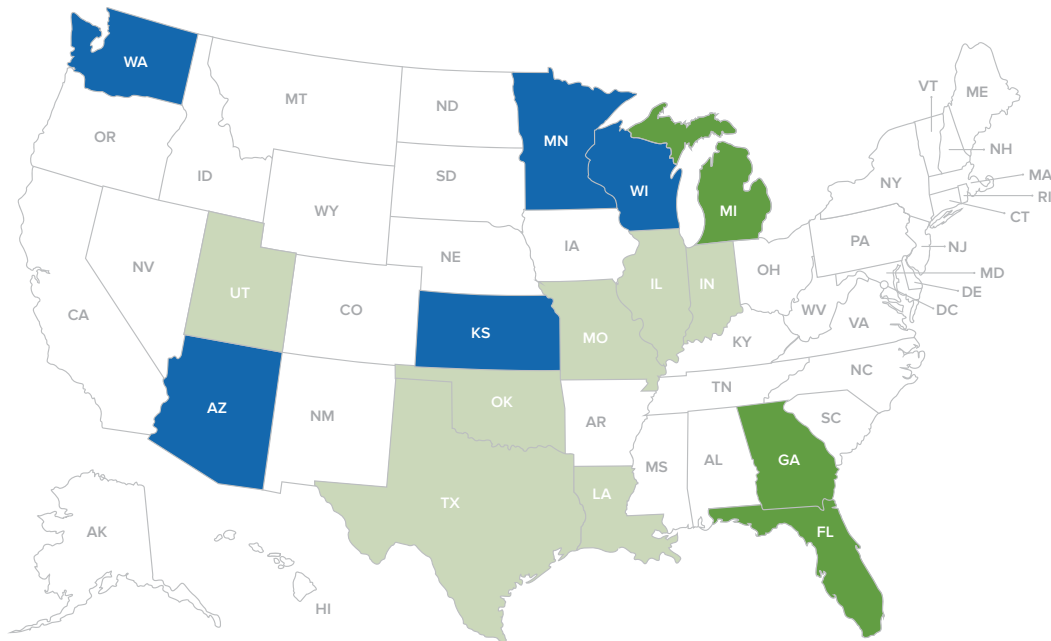
Key characteristics of specific course choice policies and programs that vary by state include:

- 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.



## 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.

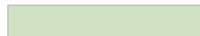


Course choice states



### 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.



### 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 began 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.



### 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.

## Full-time online schools

Throughout this report, we focus on the types of online, hybrid, and blended schools that existed pre-pandemic and will exist post-pandemic.

Full-time online schools are in this category, as they have existed for 20+ years pre-pandemic.

In most cases these schools have the following characteristics:

- They enroll students, receive FTE funding (ADA/ADM/PPOR etc.), and are listed as schools by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).
- Most are charter schools; some are authorized by or run by districts and serve students who were previously enrolled by a different district.
- Students receive all of their instruction online, including communicating with online teachers via online tools and telephone.
- Much instruction is asynchronous, augmented by real-time lessons.
- Most online schools (pre-pandemic) attracted students from across the entire state (or a region of contiguous counties in California).

Online school enrollments—meaning students enrolled in statewide online schools that existed prior to COVID-19—increased by 75% during the pandemic

During the pandemic, of course, most school districts offered remote learning for their own students, and for many students remote learning was the only option for extended periods. Those data are not included in this section because they were mostly temporary.

In school year 2021–22, many districts—likely more than 1,000—are reporting that they are creating or significantly growing their own online schools for their own students. We believe that in fact many of these district-run schools have an onsite component, such that we would label them hybrid schools. As of late 2021, there is little data regarding how many students are enrolled in these district-run online schools, and only limited data on how many districts (and which ones) are offering these online schools.

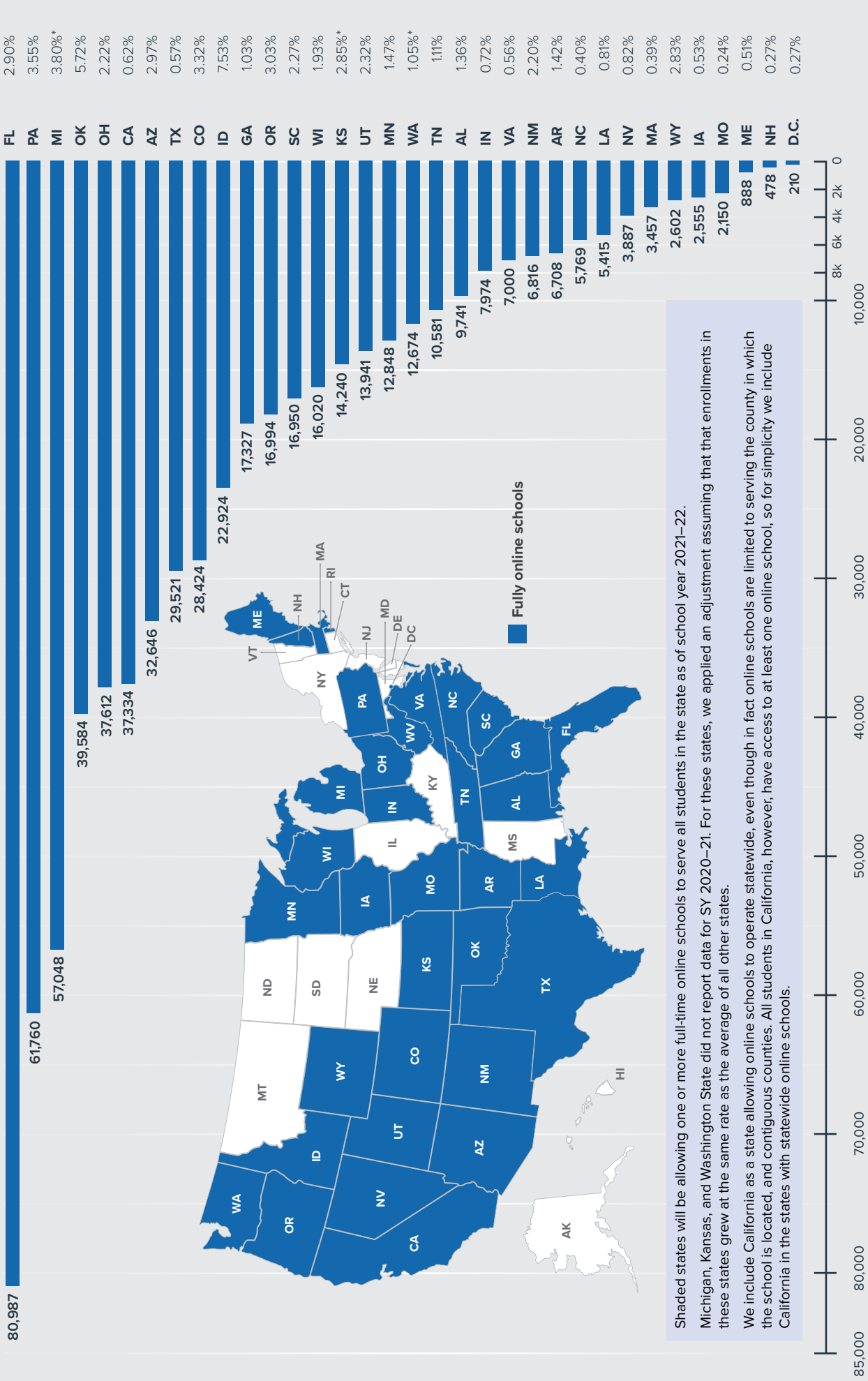
For these reasons, we continue to focus our reporting on the online schools that are serving students statewide, building on our pre-pandemic data sets. In our last Snapshot, we reported that 32 states allowed such online schools, and collectively they enrolled about 375,000 students, in school year 2018–19. Those numbers were flat for the year ending in 2019–20, and then grew by 75% in school year 2020–21, to 656,000 student enrollments, as hundreds of thousands of students left their prior district of enrollment and moved to online schools. The map on the next page shows the 35 states that will allow statewide online schools as of school year 2022–23, and the statewide enrollment numbers in school year 2020–21.

2021

# States with Statewide Fully Online Schools

Number of student enrollments by state and percentage of state's K-12 population

## Number of Enrollments in SY 2020-21



Shaded states will be allowing one or more full-time online schools to serve all students in the state as of school year 2021-22.

Michigan, Kansas, and Washington State did not report data for SY 2020-21. For these states, we applied an adjustment assuming that that enrollments in these states grew at the same rate as the average of all other states.

We include California as a state allowing online schools to operate statewide, even though in fact online schools are limited to serving the county in which the school is located, and contiguous counties. All students in California, however, have access to at least one online school, so for simplicity we include California in the states with statewide online schools.

\*National trend applied because latest data not available

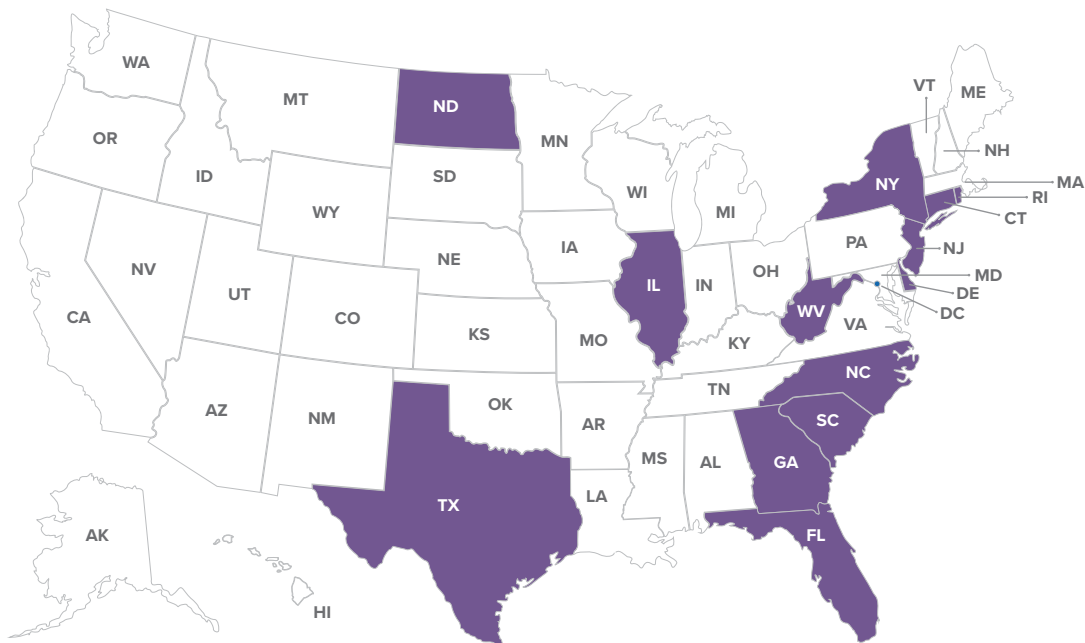
## Policy update and outlook

In the early stages of the pandemic, seemingly every publication and website declared that “COVID-19 changes everything.”

Whether or not the pandemic will have long-lasting effects on K–12 instruction remains to be seen. What is clear, as of late 2021, is that the pandemic had limited effects on policy, aside from the large amount of funding provided from the federal government to states and in turn to school districts.

In the five or so years leading up to the pandemic, changes in digital learning policy were generally incremental. In most years a state or two would allow full-time online schools for the first time. States with extensive online learning activity would create new policies that would tweak funding levels, change attendance accounting requirements, address quality and accountability, and so forth. Cases of clearly fraudulent activity (e.g. A3 in California) would result in calls for large-scale regulatory changes, and subsequently the legislature or other governing body would eventually recognize that new policies generally don’t hinder people who have shown they will ignore laws (and ethical considerations). States with state virtual schools generally supported these programs to provide supplemental online courses to students statewide, but very few states were adding new state programs to support digital learning.

Since the pandemic hit in spring 2020, we have had the final months of the 2020 legislative sessions (in some cases extended into special sessions to address pandemic-related issues), the full 2021 legislative sessions, and extensive activity by State Boards of Education. The end result, however, is much of the same, in the sense that the pace of change is about the same as it was pre-pandemic. Overall, most states that supported digital learning before the pandemic still do so, and most states that were restrictive still have those restrictions in place, despite the increase in interest in new options among students and families. These and other key policy changes—and in some cases, a lack of policy changes—are explored below:



**Key Policy Changes**



**North Dakota's** SB 2196 (2021) allows alternative measures for demonstrating mastery through waivers of instructional time requirements. This change is allowing districts to offer online schools and courses for the first time, although at this point it appears that the districts that are implementing new programs related to the law are more focused on competency-based learning than on hybrid or online learning.



**West Virginia** passed a law allowing two online charter schools for the first time, and two such schools will open for the 2022–23 school year.



**South Carolina** passed Proviso 1.103, which limits full funding to only 5% of a district's students who choose to enroll in a district-run full-time online learning option. Above the 5% threshold, the district loses almost half of the funding that the student would generate if in traditional face-to-face instruction.



**Texas** passed SB 15 in a special session of 2021. In some ways the law allows an expansion of online learning, but many restrictions are placed on digital learning options being offered by districts for their own students. The law allows districts to receive full funding for students (good), caps the number of students enrolled in online learning at 10% of district enrollment (bad generally, but possibly high enough to have little immediate impact), and stipulates a variety of other requirements, including some that would restrict access for many students based on prior attendance or state test scores. For a fuller explanation of the law we recommend the Texas Education Agency's ["To the Administrator"](#) memo and [FAQ](#).



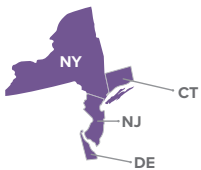
**Florida's** HB 5101 changes the previous requirement that districts offer three online school options to their students, reducing the requirement to one online option. It also significantly limits the number of online students that a district can enroll into its own online school from outside district boundaries.



**Rhode Island** has its first online school serving students statewide, having opened for the 2021–22 school year.



**Illinois** did not update its burdensome remote learning plan requirements to make serving students easier, despite interest from districts in having a path to create long-term online schools. In addition, the Illinois State Board of Education ended funding for Illinois Virtual, the state virtual school providing supplemental courses. In theory, the state's course choice program would allow students to select online courses. In practice, so far the course choice program has produced few online course enrollments.



Quite a few states that were generally restrictive towards digital learning by not allowing statewide online schools, not supporting supplemental online courses, and often requiring funding to be based on seat time, remain restrictive. These are generally in the Middle Atlantic region, including **Connecticut, Delaware, New York, and New Jersey**.



Most states that allowed online schools, supported state virtual schools, or both, pre-pandemic, continued to do so. Aside from the new South Carolina law, for example, most other southeastern states did not enact significant legislation. **Georgia, Florida, and the Carolinas** remain among the states with the most digital learning activity—even with the newly restrictive South Carolina law.

## Five steps to success

### Suggestions for new online/hybrid schools and programs, based on the experience of members of the Digital Learning Collaborative

We have seen a wide variety of implementations of online, blended, hybrid, and emergency remote learning, all with varying student outcomes. From this new data, observations, and studies about online and blended learning from the past 20+ years, we still see that the results demonstrate a need for planning and investment by schools, districts, and other organizations creating or expanding online learning opportunities for students.

Over and over, we hear from leaders of schools and districts starting new online learning programs and schools asking first what content and technology they should use to launch their program, when they need to take a step back and first ask, why and for who am I creating this program? Below are five steps we have found to support successful implementations of online learning programs/schools.

1

## Develop a plan

Ask yourself why are you starting this online program/school? In asking this question, many other questions will arise, helping to create a plan for a successful implementation that meets the needs of your students.

Other questions to consider when developing your plan include:

- What problem are you trying to solve?
- Which students will you be serving?
- What is your pedagogical philosophy?
- What is most essential for students to learn?
- What is/are the best modalities for students to learn content? (Asynchronous, synchronous, offline)

For additional planning ideas see the [Digital Learning Collaborative Planning Guides](#)

2

## Set goals and formalize evaluation plan

Once you have developed a plan, setting short- and long-term goals will keep you on track during the implementation and expansion of your plan. Many people were forced to implement their plan quickly due to the pandemic shutting down schools; however, a phased approach is recommended. Don't try to solve every part of your plan at once. Prioritize each part of your plan and set goals to achieve each step.

No matter how big or small, each of your goals should be realistic, measurable, and manageable. Writing goals for processes, performance, and outcomes are essential, but be sure that your team and students will be able to achieve them. It is easy to get excited about your plan and set big goals, but be realistic about what it will take and how long it will take you to attain success.

If you can't measure your goal, how will you know you have achieved it? Include precise dates, amounts and information within your goals so you are able to measure your degree of success in reaching each goal.

Start with the overall goal of the program and break it down into smaller milestones that you will be able to achieve more quickly so you can see the progress of your team and students and can celebrate throughout the year to keep focus and momentum high.

### 3

## Adopt new methods of student and stakeholder support

As you arm your teachers with new tools to support students, consider how your entire team, the community, families, and students can be supported to ensure everyone is successful in this new model of learning.

Consistent and ongoing communication is essential to ensure everyone is on the same page and buying into your team's vision and goals. All of your community and stakeholders need to have a clear understanding of and believe in what you are doing as you build out your program. Reaching out to your stakeholders (families, students, community, teachers, parents, etc.) and inviting them into the planning process to better understand their needs, concerns, and fears so they can be addressed as you move forward can clear away many obstacles you may have faced without hearing their voices.

Because you will not be working with learners face-to-face on a daily basis, you must consider and rethink traditional ways of supporting your students academically, technologically, and emotionally. Consider some of the following supports other online programs have developed:

- **Minimum weekly check-ins** – with each student from assigned teachers and/or another member of the staff to check in on academics, health (mental and physical), safety, etc. and to build relationships.
- **Providing social activities** – clubs (debate, student government, etc.), e-sports, field trips (in person and online), in person meet-ups
  - **Physical activities** – Make sure students are moving. Provide activities they can do at home to move and exercise. Consider partnerships with local Parks and Recreation centers, gyms, YMCA's, etc. to provide discounted or free options to join classes or access equipment to keep them on the move.
  - **Tutoring or in-person academic support** – providing centers around a city or state for students to receive in-person support from an educator or tutor throughout the week. Many schools have partnered with local libraries, Boys and Girls clubs, YMCA's, etc. for space.

### 4

## Prioritize teachers

The teachers on your team are going to be the most essential piece of achieving your vision. Teaching in an online or hybrid environment requires a change in mindset from teaching in a traditional classroom. Several of the strategies used in a brick-and-mortar classroom can and will be used when teaching online, but in a different environment.

Educators new to online teaching will need extensive professional learning around both pedagogy and technology. Many schools start with the technology, but the pedagogy is most important. In your plan, you have thought about the pedagogy and how you will support student learning. Some questions to think about when hiring, supporting, and evaluating online teachers include:

- How can you model a growth mindset and get buy-in from your teachers as they begin teaching in this new learning environment?
- What are the skills that teachers need in order to engage students with the content, other students, and the technology? (Research has been done over the past 15 years on the competencies and standards teachers need to be successful in the new learning environments. [The National Standards for Quality Online Learning](#) can provide a framework and examples for creating and providing professional development and feedback to online educators.)
- What tools can you provide educators with to ensure their success?
- How will you support your teachers when they are first getting started?
- How will you provide educators on your team with ongoing feedback and instructional and emotional support?

### 5

## Look for examples of success and exemplars, but make it your own

As you develop your online program or school, make it your own. Develop it based on the needs of your community and students and stay focused on them. However, know that online learning has been happening around the world for K-12 students for over 20 years and there are thousands of examples of what can work, and what doesn't work. Do not try to start from scratch and re-invent everything.

Almost every state in the country has or has had at least one online program or school that you can reach out to. Most people in this field are happy to share lessons learned and successes with others. There are many local and national organizations, professional learning opportunities, and conferences to support you in your implementation and connect you to others. Reach out to your state virtual school, a full-time online district or charter school, private online school, or another district nearby or across the country who are doing similar things to what you are trying to achieve and listen to their stories and experiences, and apply them to your vision.

## Indicators of high-quality digital learning

Throughout this report, we have referenced the difference between emergency remote learning as implemented during the pandemic, compared to well-planned and implemented online and hybrid learning. As more and more districts are starting their own online and hybrid schools, however, they are asking—what exactly *is* high quality online learning? What does it look like?

This is a good question and perhaps not as easily answered as one might expect, because so many different forms of online and hybrid learning exist. Through case studies, implementation guides, surveys, and research across the field, we have found that some common, key indicators do exist. They include:

- An active role for teachers to identify and provide intervention, remediation, and enrichment to personalize instruction, whether they are online, f2f in a hybrid school, or both. This is the easiest indicator conceptually, because in 20+ years of studying the US K–12 online learning field, we have found that literally every successful school or program places a premium on teachers. (This shouldn't be a surprise because it applies to all physical schools as well.)
- “A premium on teachers” manifests as strong hiring practices, professional development, and ongoing teacher support. Professional development is combined with ongoing support that is embedded, uses student feedback and data to personalize instruction, and is offered consistently throughout the year.
- Courses demonstrate high levels of teacher-student and student-student interaction.
- Extensive student support is provided and relies on one or more professionals who are familiar with the student's interests—academic and otherwise—and challenges to be overcome.
- Communications with families is consistent and ongoing, for younger students in particular.
- Content that is acquired or developed is well organized, provides opportunities for a variety of ways for students to interact with it, is accessible, and aligns to quality standards such as the [National Standards for Quality Online Learning](#).
- A focus on equity and access ensures that all students are well served by the online/hybrid opportunity. Devices and Internet access are most often the focus of access and equity in online schools and programs, but access should extend to ensuring that special populations of students have the supports they need, and the focus on equity should extend to content and instruction.

Established online and hybrid schools also have indicators of success based on outcomes. As digital learning programs often serve students who are highly mobile, and/or arrive at the school behind on credit accumulation, measures such as scores on state assessments, and graduation rates, may or may not describe outcomes accurately. As educators and leaders see the opportunity to make systemic changes to our education system, we are seeing more online programs and schools shift to mastery-based learning, creating a need for additional indicators for accountability.



This list of ideas and indicators is not exhaustive! A more comprehensive list of indicators can be found in the National Standards for Quality Online Learning ([www.nsqol.org](http://www.nsqol.org)) which have been the most used and respected benchmark for states, districts, schools, and organizations aspiring to provide quality online courses, programs and teaching in the United States since 2007. The free and open standards provide a comprehensive framework, based on research, and practical experiences and observations over the past 15 years to help educators evaluate and improve online courses, online teaching, and online programs. Our list, and the national standards, are consistently reviewed and updated based on proven, innovative strategies and models being developed in online and hybrid schools across the globe as they affect everything from the success of your current students to the future growth and capabilities of your school or program.



Parts of this report are executive summaries of full reports available on the website. In particular, much of the information in this report is based on our state profiles and reporting first published on the DLC blog.

[digitallearningcollab.com](http://digitallearningcollab.com)

## Want to keep up with what's happening in K–12 Digital Learning?



Sign up for our blog post emails, which are published every Thursday



Check out the new state profiles



Join our webinars and other virtual events



Join us online or onsite at the Digital Learning Annual Conference

