

Student Perspectives on Blended and Online Learning

FEBRUARY 2020





About Future of School

As the first-ever public charity focused on access to quality education, Future of School is dedicated to mobilizing change in American K-12 education from a one-size-fits-all system to one that ensures all students reach their unbounded potential.

Our Student Scholarship Program rewards students for their courage to forge new learning pathways, giving them greater financial means to continue their education in whatever post-secondary school they choose.

Through the Innovative Educator Prize, we empower pioneering educators with grant funding that enables them to bring programs and tools into the classroom to transform the learning experience.

By amplifying technology's impact on students and educators, we inform, inspire and spearhead much needed change.

Future of School is an organization of the people, by the people and for the people that calls on students, parents, educators, and employers to band together to embrace and inspire the future of our society and prepare the workforce of tomorrow. Join the movement at futureof.school.

Introduction

In 2016, Future of School (FoS)¹ commissioned a study to better understand why students were selecting online and blended learning options, with a goal of helping educators, policymakers, and others to better understand the value of new school and course opportunities. Researchers initially expected that online and blended schools would have robust data regarding why students had selected their schools. They found, however, that although educators had a general sense for why students chose their schools, few were able to share data that would shed light on this topic.

In the absence of existing data, the researchers began developing their own findings. They visited blended schools to hold student interviews and focus groups, spoke with teachers and school leaders in online and blended schools, and connected with parents of students in these schools. Because of limitations in how many students they could reach in this way, they did not feel that quantitative findings were representative of students nationally. Instead, they created a taxonomy exploring and explaining the reasons that students chose these alternative educational opportunities, and how their online and blended schools met these needs.

The findings were released in a study titled *Why do students choose blended and online schools?*² The taxonomy is described further below.

In the three years since that study was completed, FoS has implemented its scholarship program, which is described in the next section. As part of its scholarship application process, FoS requires that each applicant submit an essay describing their experiences with online/blended learning. In some cases, students have been enrolled in online or blended schools; in other cases, they took an online course while attending a traditional public school. One outcome of this process is that FoS has created a robust data set describing reasons that students select online or blended schools or courses. This report

One topic, two studies

This report explores why students selected online or blended learning opportunities—either an online or blended school, or individual online courses while enrolled in a traditional school. For simplicity, this report refers to this range of opportunities simply as “online/blended learning.”

A companion report examines how schools are meeting these student needs. It details the reasons that Future of School scholarship winners selected online/blended schools or courses, and provides insights from the schools regarding why and how they were able to provide these opportunities to their students.

¹ At the time Future of School was operating as the Foundation for Blended and Online Learning.

² *Why do students choose blended and online schools? The “end of average” requires personalized learning environments.* January 2017. The Foundation for Blended and Online Learning and Evergreen Education Group.

uses this data set to answer the question—why do students seek an alternative option? — in a quantitative way.

In the following sections, this report reviews the following topics:

- The *Why Students Choose* taxonomy created in the earlier study
- The Future of School scholarship program
- Findings from a new data analysis of the reasons that scholarship applicants sought an online/blended learning opportunity. This section, which makes up the majority of this study:
 - Lists the leading reasons that students gave for choosing a new educational option,
 - Explains those reasons, and
 - Explores correlations between these motivating factors (for example, a student may seek a flexible schedule due to pursuing an interest in the arts, or for health-related reasons.)

The end of average

The Future of School's 2017 report on why students select online or blended schools opens with a discussion of how no student is average. It builds on the findings of Harvard professor Todd Rose, who explains that many institutions, including schools, base their activities on their expectations of what an "average" person is, and assume that most individuals are similar to the average.

Consider how traditional schools have, in the past, designed their instruction around the assumptions of an "average" student. Traditional schools understand that students are different from one another, yet in most cases they group students in relatively large classes of comparable age, moving through the same assignments, assessments, and school year progression at a similar pace.

The key to understanding why students and families choose blended and online schools, and how these schools are meeting their needs, is first seeing students as individuals with unique interests and desires. These students usually feel that online and blended schools are able to meet their needs better than many traditional public schools. However, as detailed here and in the companion report, an increasing number of traditional public schools are responding by providing online and blended opportunities for students.

Students choose online and blended schools for a variety of reasons

The 2017 *Why Students Choose* study presented a taxonomy to frame the reasons that students gave for enrolling in an online or blended school. A total of 13 reasons fell into three major categories: *academics*, *social-emotional health and safety*, and *interests and life circumstances*. These reasons often overlapped. For example, a student's health issues might have caused her to fall behind academically. She would find herself needing a new school with greater scheduling flexibility in order to work within her health constraints and catch up.

Academics

These students typically are in one or more of three groups:

- 1 Students who are behind in school and need to catch up.
- 2 Students who are doing well in school but feel they are not challenged, and become bored and disengaged.
- 3 Students who feel that traditional school is “a bad fit” for a variety of reasons, leading them to lose interest in performing well academically.

Social-Emotional Health and Safety

Students in this category may have one or more of the following:

- 1 Physical health issues that interfere with the student's ability to perform well at a school on a traditional schedule. These may be: a debilitating injury, a serious illness, and short-term, long-term, or permanent.
- 2 Students who have experienced bullying.
- 3 Mental health issues that interfere with the student's ability to perform well at a school in a traditional social setting. A common example is anxiety.
- 4 Students whose traditional school is physically dangerous for them, for example because of gang violence.

Interests and Life Circumstances

Students in this category may have one or more of these interests and circumstances:

- 1 Moving/switching schools may require making up credits when the new school or state has different graduation requirements.
- 2 Jobs, internships, and college courses.
- 3 Some online students were formerly homeschooled, and the families have chosen an online public school option that allows the students to work primarily from home.
- 4 Travel or moving.
- 5 Non-academic activities (sports, dance, music, theater).
- 6 Death of a family member or another life-altering event.

The Future of School scholarship program

Future of School has three main programs: a student scholarship fund, a teacher grant program,³ and commissioned studies to help explain new schools and instructional systems to a wide range of audiences. The pool of student scholarship applicants has been growing (Figure 1), as has the number of scholarship winners (Figure 2).

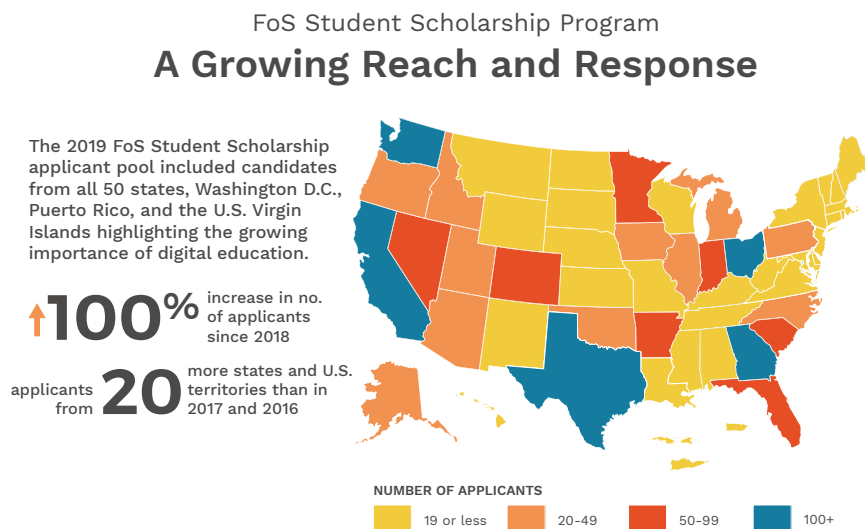


Figure 1: The reach of the Future of School student scholarship program is growing steadily

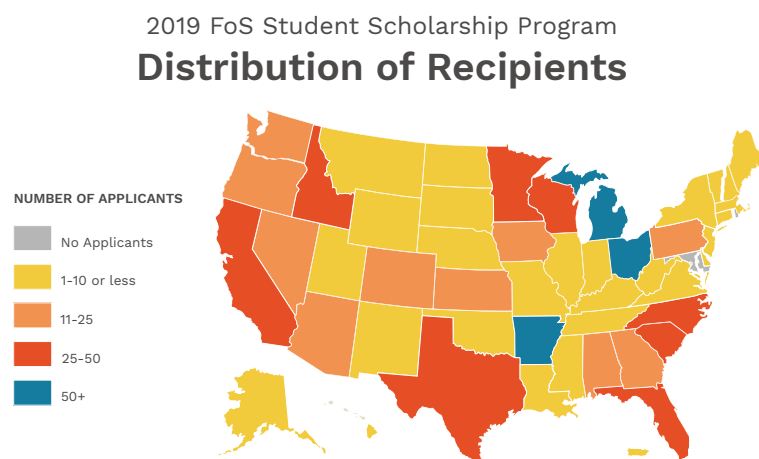


Figure 2: Future of School student scholarship winners represent 42 states and territories

³ The importance of teachers in school transformation is explored in the Future of School report *Teaching with Technology*.

In 2019, 751 high school students applied for scholarship funding from FoS—the largest pool of applicants in the history of the scholarship program (Figure 3). Students from 49 states, Washington D.C. and Puerto Rico applied.

2019 FoS Student Scholarship Program
Distribution of Applicants

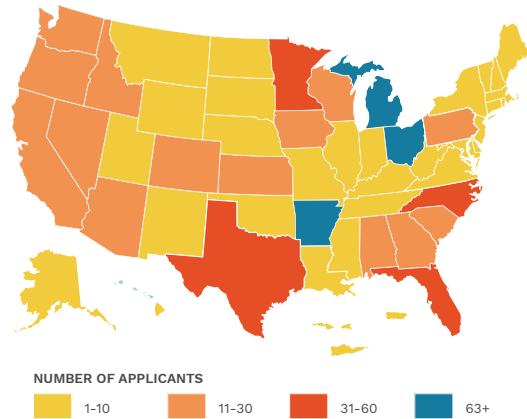


Figure 3: Geographic distribution of student scholarship applicants in 2019

Along with the increase in the overall number of scholarships has been significant growth in the *types of schools* represented by scholarship applicants and winners. In the first years of the program, most applicants were from online schools. Due to considerable outreach from FoS, the types of schools represented by applicants has grown to be more representative of schools in the United States. In particular, the number of applications from traditional public schools has grown considerably. Overall, FoS scholarship applicants represent traditional brick-and-mortar schools, online schools, blended schools, charter and magnet schools, private schools, and homeschool learning environments (Figure 4). In the 2019 application year, for the first time, a majority of applicants came from traditional brick-and-mortar schools.

Total Applicant Pool by Type

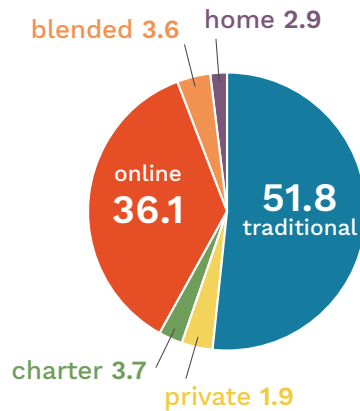


Figure 4: Scholarship applicants represent a variety of school types, with more than half enrolled in traditional public schools.

Scholarship process and research methods

The FoS scholarship program supports current high school seniors who have completed a minimum of five blended or online courses and plan to continue their education in college or vocational school programs. Students must demonstrate improved academic achievement, or personal improvement, as a direct result of their enrollment in the online/blended learning course of study.

Scholarship recipients are considered on the basis of:

- an essay detailing how blended/online learning has contributed to their postsecondary pursuits,
- academic improvement,
- demonstrated leadership and participation in school and community activities,
- honors and recognitions, and
- work experience.

For this study, applicants' essays—which are the most critical component of the applications—were examined for the top reasons why students are choosing online/blended learning options.

The study was conducted by a team led by a quantitative educational researcher at the University of Denver. Essays analyzed were from the entire pool of students who had submitted scholarship applications. First, the essays were reviewed to determine main themes that came up multiple times. The essays were then run through a program to identify key words and phrases, and to remove words that were common and did not convey useful meanings and distinctions, such as “school.” The results demonstrated, based on the data set, the most common concepts that students associated with their online/blended schools and courses.

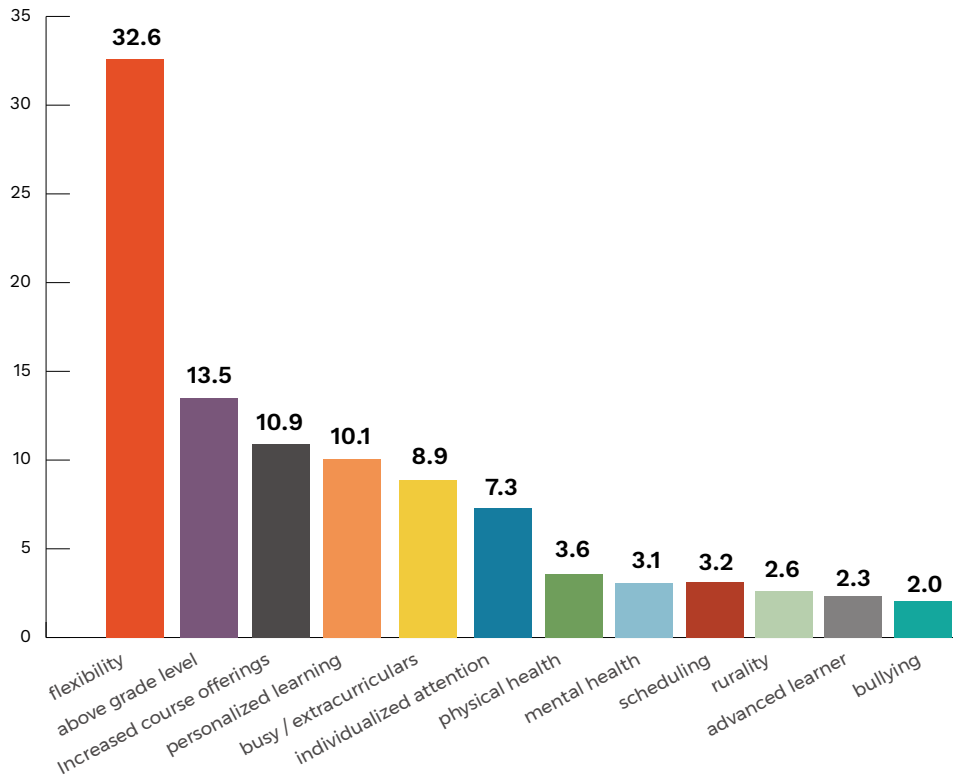


Figure 6: Reasons given by students for choosing online/blended learning. The x-axis represents the percentage of Future of School scholarship applicants who referenced each reason.

Researchers looked at the distribution of reasons given for seeking online/blended learning across school types (see Figure 7). The top three of these reasons (flexibility, above grade level, and increased course options) were strongly represented across all school types. Interestingly, “personalized learning,” “health,” “rurality,” and “bullying” were not represented across all school types.

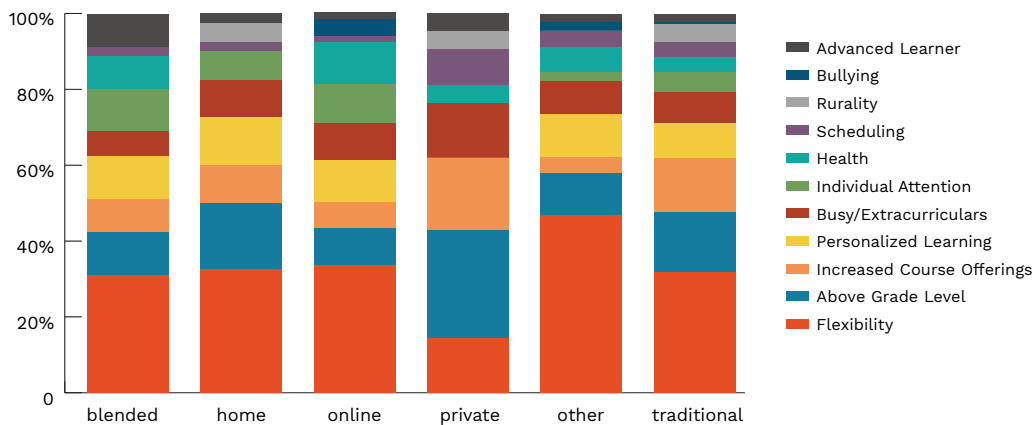


Figure 7: Reasons given for seeking online/blended learning across school types.

In order to better understand each of these 11 reasons that students gave for choosing a new type of school or course, word clouds were developed using the applicant essays that expressed each reason. The following pages go into each of these 11 reasons in more detail.

Rurality

Students in rural areas attend schools that are usually smaller than urban and suburban schools, and often do not offer as many course options. The “rurality” category covered any applicant essays that self-identified as being in a rural location which impacted their ability to succeed academically. This reason was also associated with the reasons of flexibility, above grade level courses, and increased course options. Identified key words included: “small,” “options,” “town,” and “community.”



Students wrote about how blended/online learning helped them have access to courses and content they would not have had available at their local schools. One Vermont applicant shared, *“I live in a very rural area, and online classes broadened my academic experiences far beyond what was available in my farming community.”*

School leaders feel that an additional benefit to online and blended learning is that if students can be shown that they can access a wide range of courses while attending their rural school, they may see other opportunities to remain in or near their hometowns after high school graduation, perhaps taking college courses online. Or, alternatively they may leave for a time in college, vocational training, the military, or another experience, but then be more willing to return to their small town.

Relationship between reasons for choosing blended/online

Among the benefits of having a relatively large data set is that the student responses showed five significant correlations between two of the reasons that students selected for choosing online/blended learning options. Three of these make sense, while the other two aren't quite as intuitive, as described below.

Above grade level courses ↔ advanced learner

Students who are advanced learners sought courses above their grade level, which is not a surprise. This finding shows the extent to which online and blended courses serve advanced students, in contrast to the views in some quarters that online courses are primarily allowing students to recover credits. In fact, online and blended courses provide the opportunity for any and all students to be advanced learners.

Increased course options ↔ health-related

This correlation is consistent with student quotes that explain how health issues often create challenges in keeping to a traditional school schedule. From applicants' essays it was evident that the wider range of course options provided by blended/online learning environments both filled gaps in students' educations due to health-related problems and allowed for health to be a high priority for students.

Busy/extracurriculars ↔ flexibility

Students who indicated that they are busy with extracurricular activities also expressed an interest in and need for scheduling flexibility. These are students pursuing arts, sports, jobs, internships, and other pursuits, which don't always fit well with the need to be at a traditional school from early morning to mid-afternoon.

Busy/extracurriculars ↔ rurality

The most surprising correlation was between busy/extracurriculars and rurality. It's not clear why this correlation would exist. One possibility is that the increased travel times in rural areas heighten the conflict between traditional school schedules and other activities. In an urban or suburban setting, a student may be able to get to her job or practice in fifteen minutes and fit that activity into an afternoon. If the travel time

between school and activity increases to an hour, the increased travel time may require adjusting the school schedule.

More Individual Attention ↔ bullying

Perhaps the most interesting relationship between reasons was between more individual attention and bullying. Applicants that selected these two reasons expressed how the added attention from teachers, counselors and administrators in their blended/online learning environments helped them heal from bullying and ensure that their academic success no longer suffered.

Blended/online learning in traditional public schools

As mentioned earlier, nearly six in ten applicants (59%) were from traditional brick-and-mortar schools. These traditional school applicants came from all across the country. Rural, suburban, and urban schools were all represented in the applicant pool.

A closer look at the students from traditional schools showed that collectively these applicants selected **all of the reasons** discussed in this study. The most common reasons given, however, were related to how the option for blended/online courses filled a gap in their learning or in their ability to attain a high-quality education.

For example, an applicant from Michigan said, *“online learning helped bridge gaps for me by allowing me to take classes I would not have been able to otherwise. Driving an hour to college was not practical but self-paced online learning was.”*

In addition, several applicants from small schools expressed how online/blended learning filled gaps in their learning experiences.

Arkansas applicant: “Online learning was a way to attend classes my small school was not able to offer and bridge the learning gap between high school and college.”

Texas applicant: “Online learning courses bridge learning gaps for students because of how much these classes have to offer. Bringing teachers of higher education through a computer screen to multiple students empowers everyone. Coming from a small school, I understand the struggle of getting a competitive education, and online courses have helped significantly.”

Ohio applicant: “First and foremost, many families in my school are like mine, first-generation immigrant families. Ultimately, what bonds us together is our struggling economic circumstance. What blended and online learning courses did for us is bridge the economic gap between students and directed us towards productive learning.”

Conclusion

Although educators working with online/blended schools and courses are generally aware of why students selected those options, for most educators their understanding has been based on limited experience from their own schools. This study provides findings based on a larger, more diverse data set, demonstrating the wide range of reasons that students are selecting new learning opportunities. The study shows that students have many reasons for choosing online/blended learning. These range from seeking advanced courses that are otherwise unavailable to them, to needing flexibility to pursue their passions, or seeking new options due to health issues. This report also demonstrates that online, blended, and traditional schools are all responding to students' interests and needs. As more traditional brick-and-mortar schools, in particular, harness the power of online and blended course offerings, stories like these are likely to become much more common.