LEVERAGING THE PROMISE OF VIRTUAL LEARNING

Policy Brief

ExcelinEd Policy Toolkit - 2023

INTRODUCTION

Education systems have seen unprecedented expansion of technology use over the past three years. It began in 2020 when schools and districts scrambled to implement emergency remote learning in response to the pandemic. On short notice, educators and families made Herculean efforts to provide resources for emergency remote learning and to support students at home. Those efforts included distributing 1:1 devices and coordinating funding to facilitate broadband access for families, in addition to providing online instruction.

While no one wants to return to those days of emergency remote learning, many scenarios of thoughtfully planned virtual learning can greatly benefit students. State policymakers have an opportunity to leverage the silver lining of the pandemic – which is increased access to broadband and educational devices – to establish policies and practices that provide effective, sustainable virtual learning options for all students.

What is virtual learning?

Virtual learning and virtual education mean that technology is the method used to deliver instruction, which can be independent or teacher-led, or both. Virtual education that is intentional and student-centered offers numerous benefits, including:

- Providing advanced or unique courses not offered at a student's school;
- Supporting students who need extra help with remediation and/or tutoring; and
- Serving as a backstop to help all students stay on track during periods of inclement weather, disasters or damage to school facilities or other disruptions.

ACTIONS FOR STATE POLICYMAKERS

There are clear steps state policymakers and practitioners can take to ensure student-centered, high-quality virtual learning.

1. Engage Stakeholders to Set a Vision

Students' individual needs should be at the center of all decisions about virtual learning. A 2022 report from Edmentum and Whiteboard Advisors termed this approach *A Human-Centered Vision for Quality Virtual Learning*. The report

emphasizes the role of people, good instruction and a culture of accountability in establishing effective virtual learning programs.

To establish a clear vision for virtual learning and ensure key stakeholders are on the same page, state policymakers can engage in collaborative conversations with educators, families and other constituents affected by and interested in virtual learning.

- **Utah** established a vision for Digital Teaching and Learning in 2012 through a stakeholder engagement process that included state and local education officials, broadband providers, and legislators. This process culminated in a Master Plan that has driven state investments in infrastructure, devices, professional learning and digital resources over the past decade.

- **North Carolina** worked with 54 stakeholders throughout 2022 to craft its Digital Learning Plan. That group included teachers, librarians, school and district leaders, technical staff, and more from across the state. The legislature provided funding for the plan and aligned grant funding for districts to put the plan into action.

- **Texas** established a 13-member Virtual School Commission charged with meetly publicly, gathering evidence, and producing a report with recommendations on the delivery and funding of virtual education by the state. The Commission provided a forum for productive conversation on the benefits and challenges of virtual education and the role it can play in meeting students' needs.

2. Ensure Device and Broadband Access for Participating Students

For students to be successful with virtual learning, they must have consistent, reliable access to digital devices and home broadband. Unfortunately, those students who might benefit most from expanded access to virtual learning are often the least likely to have these resources available. There are multiple approaches and funding streams state policymakers can use to close this gap and increase students' ability to benefit from virtual learning.

- Raise awareness of broadband subsidy programs, ensure state broadband expansion grants prioritize educational needs and regularly report on broadband needs for education. ExcelinEd's *Closing the Digital Divide in Education Act* and policy brief offer methods for establishing such requirements.

- Create equitable access to educational devices by providing funding for 1:1 devices through the state education funding formula. ExcelinEd's model policy *The Digital Devices for All Act* serves as an exemplar. It includes recommended practices for funding, efficient and sustainable purchasing models and district implementation.

- Provide a route for families to obtain the devices that meet their students' needs through microgrants, as **Idaho** provided in 2022. ExcelinEd also provides blog posts summarizing state actions.

- Lower the costs for districts to purchase broadband, devices, and software like Learning Management Systems by establishing optional state procurement arrangements. Excel*in*Ed offers a policy brief and RFI template with more information.

3. Provide Teachers with Ongoing Professional Learning and Resources

All teachers should receive both pre-service and in-service training on methods of integrating technology into their classroom instruction. Teachers who teach in a hybrid or virtual classroom require additional training on effective strategies in that environment.

- Over 60 educator preparation providers (EPPs) have taken the EPP Digital Equity and Transformation Pledge, which is a partnership between multiple educator quality-focused organizations and the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Technology. The Pledge indicates an EPP will "prepare teachers to thrive in digital learning environments" and to continuously grow their skills in using technology as part of good instruction.

- **North Carolina** has taken a further commitment to ensuring teachers are prepared to deliver quality virtual learning: they have launched the first state-wide partnership with the International Society for Technology Education (ISTE). This partnership provides teachers with professional learning modules and opportunities to deepen their practice, with the ultimate goal of earning recognition as an ISTE-certified educator.

In addition, states may need to adopt different approaches to approving digital-first instructional materials—as opposed to traditional textbook adoption procedures—to avoid unintentional barriers to innovation.

- The State Education Technology Directors Association (SETDA) provides case studies spotlighting effective state practices for procuring digital instructional materials and devices.

- In 2022, **Tennessee** considered legislation that would require all textbooks and instructional materials to be accessible electronically and able to support virtual instruction.

4. Prioritize Student-Level Outcomes for Families, Schools and the State

Virtual learning provides students with many more opportunities to customize their educational journey. However, it's worth remembering that just because learning takes place through technology does not mean technology replaces the role educators play. As Edmentum and Whiteboard Advisors identified, virtual learning requires a culture of accountability for student learning among all the adults involved: educators, parents and policymakers.

- Ensure families have access to timely data on their students' progress in a virtual learning environment – and that they know how to find it. State-provided virtual programs like Virtual Arkansas train parents on how to create "observer" accounts in their learning management system (LMS) to view their students' course progress and grades in real-time.

- Maintain state-level accountability for virtual learning programs by tying per-pupil funding to successful course progress or for students.
    - **Florida** only provides full funding for Florida Virtual School and other virtual programs in the state only for students who successfully earn course credit.
    - **New Hampshire** has an innovative model with its Virtual Learning Academy (VLACS): the virtual school earns funding when students meet certain competencies throughout their coursework, rather than placing high weighting on only the end-of-course assessment.

- Provide public transparency into the outcomes of virtual learning programs. States typically include full-time virtual schools in their state report cards, but it can be more challenging to find data on outcomes for students who take some courses virtually and others in-person. One way to ameliorate this issue would be to include part-time virtual students in annual reporting on outcomes for course providers in addition to their zoned school, as **Arkansas** established in the 2023 Arkansas LEARNS Act.

5. Plan for Sustainability

Implementing effective virtual learning opportunities takes time. Consistent state support through legislation and funding is critical to maintaining students' access to devices and broadband. That support is also needed for ensuring teachers continuously grow in their practice and providing consistent methods of tracking student outcomes. Policymakers can ensure that all technology-related needs are met so that virtual schools and programs can focus their funding efforts on instructional resources.

- In **Texas**, a 2022 report from the Virtual Schools Commission recommended that virtual schools receive full per-pupil funding to support ongoing infrastructure needs as well as technology and at-home resources for students.

- The national non-profit Digital Promise provides digital learning sustainability recommendations for schools and districts, such as conducting regular needs assessments and establishing funding plans for device repairs and

replacements. State leaders can support these best practices by incorporating them into regular district planning and monitoring processes.

- Both **Utah** and **North Carolina** enjoy consistent funding from legislative and executive leadership to implement their visions for digital teaching and learning. North Carolina has allocated funding to Digital Learning Grants for districts since 2017. Utah has a long history of funding for infrastructure needs through the Utah Education and Telehealth Network, which supports reliable broadband access in both urban and rural areas in the state.

CONCLUSION

Overall, virtual learning can be a valuable tool in K-12 education. It can create new possibilities for flexible and personalized learning experiences and increase access to education for students in remote areas. With investments in digital infrastructure and adequate resources and training for teachers, policymakers can ensure that virtual learning offers an effective and accessible option for students. By following these recommended steps, state policymakers can help to ensure that all students have access to the education they need to succeed in the modern world.