Leading in an Era of Change: ON THE GROUND

How Districts and Schools Can Make the Most of Course Access

July 2015
Digital Learning Now is an initiative of the Foundation for Excellence in Education (ExcelinEd) and works to advance state policies that will create a high-quality digital learning environment to better equip all students with the knowledge and skills to succeed in the 21st century. The policy framework stems from the belief that access to high-quality, customized learning experiences should be available to all students, unbounded by geography or artificial policy constraint.

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# Table of Contents

Overview ................................................................. 01

Introduction ......................................................... 03

Districts in Course Access States ............................ 08

Louisiana ..................................................................... 09
  Ascension Parish, La.................................................. 10
  Winn Parish School System, La.................................... 12

Minnesota .................................................................. 14
  Socrates Online, Minn................................................... 15

Texas ........................................................................ 17
  Guthrie Common School District, Texas....................... 18
  Plano Independent School District, Texas ..................... 20

Florida ...................................................................... 22
  Palm Beach County School District, Fla....................... 23
  Pasco County School District, Fla................................. 25

Districts in Non-Course Access States .................. 27

  Alliance College-Ready Public Schools, Calif............ 28
  Quakertown Community School District, Pa................. 30
  Putnam County Schools, Tenn..................................... 32

Conclusion ............................................................... 35
Course Access is a state-level policy that provides public school students with expanded course offerings across learning environments from diverse, accountable providers. These emerging policies and programs promise to offer students expanded curricular opportunities and alternatives that meet their unique preferences, schedules and needs. Participating students have the right to enroll in qualifying courses and earn full class credit for courses completed through the program. Though many courses offered through Course Access programs are taught online, others may be delivered through live instruction and other learning environments.

Through Course Access programs, students take language courses from local universities, earn industry certification for workforce training and stay on course for graduation, even while pursuing time-intensive athletic or artistic activities. Taking place in small and large districts, rural and suburban, these cost-effective strategies harness technology to:

- **Offer students a broad and diverse set of courses.**
- **Ensure quality in content, instruction and support.**
- **Stretch limited budgets.**
**Leading in an Era of Change: On the Ground** profiles ten districts and charters in seven states utilizing Course Access or similar strategies. These districts are expanding course offerings in subjects such as foreign languages and Advanced Placement (AP). Others are using these programs to help offer difficult-to-staff subjects. Some districts have found this to be an opportunity to offer teachers more flexibility and new advancement opportunities. Regardless of the reason, communication with stakeholders, especially parents, is essential for creating awareness and confidence in the quality of Course Access offerings and for establishing foundations for student success.

This builds on a growing body of resources that explore Course Access, including:

- **Leading in an Era of Change: Making the Most of State Course Access Programs**: The paper defined key policy issues guiding the development of new Course Access programs, highlighted implementation challenges faced by states and made recommendations for the creation of a new multi-state network.

- **Course Access: Expanding Equity of Access**: ExcelinEd’s Policy Summary provides policymakers with eight fundamental principles to developing a strong state level course access program, providing for a rigorous state review process and giving students access to a wide range of quality providers.

- **Model Legislation**: ExcelinEd’s Course Access Model Legislation, driven by our Fundamental Principles, gives legislators a starting point in creating a quality Course Access program that defines student eligibility, outlines funding, authorizes providers and reports on student success.

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Districts and schools operate in widely varying contexts. Size, setting, geography, demographics, politics, governing structures and the local workforce all deeply inform decision-making. What works for a suburban district may not work in corresponding fashion in a rural or urban setting. Despite these differences, all district and school leaders share a common goal: supporting their students’ success in school and beyond.

Today, that common goal motivates many new initiatives to improve quality and rigor in public schools, including new standards and assessments, new approaches to teaching and learning and a renewed focus on opportunity and achievement gaps. But, though there are many new initiatives to implement, districts still have to maintain traditional functions such as budgeting and personnel management. Accomplishing all this requires creativity, flexibility and a willingness to innovate – all with an unrelenting focus on students’ success. Increasingly, it also requires collaboration and support from a variety of stakeholders: local and state agencies, public and private entities and schools and families. In a handful of states across the country, these interests and actors are coming together through new “Course Access” policies and programs that allow students access to courses that supplement the offerings at their schools.

**WHAT COURSE ACCESS CAN LOOK LIKE:**

- **Students in Louisiana** pursuing industry certifications as welders or electricians at state approved training centers.
- **Students in rural Texas** districts preparing for admissions to the University of Texas by taking online Spanish courses that their local schools otherwise wouldn’t be able offer.
- **Students in Minnesota** off-track in credit attainment receiving support from highly-trained online teachers to recover needed credits.

Course Access is a state-level policy that provides public school students with expanded course offerings across learning environments from diverse, accountable providers. These emerging policies and programs promise to offer students expanded curricular opportunities and alternatives that meet their unique preferences, schedules and needs. Participating students have the right to enroll in qualifying courses and earn full class credit for courses completed through the program. Though many courses offered through Course Access programs are taught online, others may be delivered through live instruction and other learning environments.
To support successful development and implementation of Course Access policies, ExcelinEd and EducationCounsel published *Leading in an Era of Change: Making the Most of Course Access Programs* in July 2014. That paper reviewed the opportunities and challenges faced by early adopters, emphasized the potential of state collaboration and offered seven recommended core components of successful state Course Access programs:

- Meaningful and rigorous state review of prospective providers and courses.
- Strong monitoring systems.
- Flexible and sustainable funding models.
- Alignment with the state’s broader education systems.
- Deliberate and sustained engagement with districts and schools.
- Effective communication with students and parents.
- Clearly defined student eligibility.

Building on that effort, this paper shifts focus from state policy to district implementation. It profiles leading districts and charter schools in an effort to create more awareness of what Course Access can mean for districts, schools and students in a variety of settings and in pursuit of several different educational goals. It includes seven district examples in four Course Access states, and three innovative programs in non-Course Access states – including one leading charter provider – that are pursuing similar goals without the support of a state program. The paper represents an effort to begin the development of a collection of lessons learned that can guide state, district and school policy development in coming months and years.

Although still emerging, lessons to guide Course Access efforts are starting to develop from early adopters. It is clear in our research and elsewhere that success will depend on many factors: academically rigorous course offerings within a high-quality curriculum, strong approval and monitoring systems for providers, support for student success, attention to the needs of special learners (including students with disabilities and English language learners), research on what constitutes quality digital learning, effective system integration, proactive engagement with a variety of stakeholders and – like most innovative education initiatives – a lot of learning by doing.

Of the many interests that districts must serve, Course Access programs reflect the importance of three key priorities:

### Offering students a broad and diverse set of courses:

- Districts will benefit from Course Access in different ways. More rural and remote districts tend to use Course Access to offer core curriculum (particularly for hard-to-staff subjects like world languages required for college admissions), while larger districts tend to use Course Access to serve certain populations of students more effectively (e.g., students wanting to accelerate by taking Advanced Placement or dual enrollment classes, students needing to catch up, students with specialized interests in career and technical education).

- Communication with stakeholders, especially parents, is essential for creating awareness and confidence in the quality of Course Access offerings and for establishing foundations for student success (e.g., initial student engagement with online instructors and regular check-ins on student progress). The districts profiled here have created a variety of strategies, including monthly parent forums and standard in-person parent meetings to discuss each student’s enrollment options.

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1. These examples may not operate in Course Access states, but they are pursuing similar goals and strategies and working to balance the same competing interests. Because most district programs in Course Access states are still developing, these examples are provided to show what is possible in a school after a program matures. Our hope is that, with state support through Course Access policies, these models may be easier to scale so that more districts and students can benefit.
Ensuring quality in content, instruction and support:

- Though digital learning programs can be more flexible and can provide certain efficiencies of scale, they nevertheless require significant investments of time and resources. Quality instruction and well-trained staff – both the online instructor and a caring adult at the student’s home school – are essential to helping students succeed. State support can provide essential foundations for quality control, including common standards, course and provider review processes and resources for continuous improvement.

- State support can help districts and charters grow their programs and maintain focus on instruction and student supports by taking the lead on other issues such as negotiating pricing, ensuring credits transfer and providing an online catalog of all course options from approved providers.

- Course Access programs can create flexibility and new advancement opportunities for teachers, which could improve retention and create greater student access to quality educators. Districts with online programs can hire highly effective instructors in part because those instructors could work from anywhere. And Course Access programs provide a district’s own teachers with a new opportunity for more professional responsibility, flexibility and income. As a result, online offerings may help retain effective teachers who need a reduced or more flexible schedule and can help expose more students to excellent classroom teachers.

Stretching limited budgets:

- Hiring staff to meet student demand in hard-to-staff subjects, to teach courses for a small number of students, or to serve new student needs is a complex and expensive endeavor, in part because it requires a district to do something that it may not have done before. This can be particularly true for course offerings traditionally outside the scope of a high school curriculum, such as training for professional credentials through career and technical education programs. Several districts also benefitted from tailoring existing content or online offerings to their own programs.

- Districts with unique programs can increase student enrollment and even have an opportunity to create new revenue streams as Course Access providers by enrolling out-of-district students in online programs.

These lessons are described in more detail in the profiles on the following page. Each profile contains a brief review of key demographics and relevant context for each district or charter, a description what Course Access looks like for participating students, evidence of outcomes and potential lessons for others. The chart and map on the following page provide an overview of the profiles in this paper. Districts in Course Access states are listed first, followed by the models in non-Course Access states. Given the importance of setting, the paper purposely includes a variety of geographic, demographic and policy contexts.

Districts were selected for inclusion in this paper based on recommendations from state leaders, partner organizations, national experts and other stakeholders. To develop this paper, ExcelinEd and EducationCounsel conducted interviews with leaders in each district to understand their unique perspectives on Course Access and how it was adapted to meet the unique needs of their students. These interviews were supplemented with information from other publications and materials, including data from state and district systems. The images in the profiles were supplied by the districts.
Ascension Parish, Louisiana
- Large, suburban district between New Orleans and Baton Rouge
- Ascension Parish is home to innovative career and technical opportunities delivered through in-person instruction at a local industry certification provider. Students have the opportunity to graduate with both a high school diploma and an industry-recognized certification.

Winn Parish, Louisiana
- Small, rural district in northern Louisiana
- Winn leverages Louisiana’s Course Access program to expand offerings for its students, particularly in hard-to-staff subjects such as foreign languages so students are eligible for state college scholarships.

District Consortium with Socrates Online, Minnesota
- Approximately 17 small to mid-size districts in central Minnesota
- Socrates Online partners with its districts to offer a variety of curricular offerings that are used to supplement course catalogs within its partner districts, most commonly for credit recovery.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local Education Agency</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Student Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guthrie Common School District</td>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>Very small, rural district in the Texas panhandle</td>
<td>Guthrie is a leading provider in the Texas Virtual Schools Network (TxVSN) of Spanish, social studies, math and English, with health sciences programs in development. Guthrie students now have access to language courses needed for college admission, and most graduate with college-level Algebra thanks to online offerings through TxVSN.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plano Independent School District</td>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>Large suburban district outside Dallas</td>
<td>Plano developed a suite of online learning opportunities for its own students and those throughout the state through TxVSN. It is especially focused on students with scheduling issues, those who wanted to advance or graduate early and students with special needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palm Beach County School District</td>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>Large, urban district in south Florida</td>
<td>Palm Beach created a variety of online learning options for every grade level as part of a full- or part-time course schedule, including expanded course options, accelerated course completion, credit recovery and options to address extracurricular time constraints and family circumstances (e.g., full-time travel, active community service).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pasco County Schools</td>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>Midsize district in the Tampa Bay Area</td>
<td>Pasco County created a suite of expanded course options and middle and high school credit recovery. It serves students in Florida outside the district offering unique online classes, including German and American Sign Language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alliance Charter Schools</td>
<td>California</td>
<td>Large charter management organization in Los Angeles with 26 schools</td>
<td>The Alliance Charter Schools place a strong focus on online and blended learning, including both credit recovery and advanced learning options such as dual enrollment, to help students be prepared for persistence in college (not just access).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quakertown Community School District</td>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>Midsize, suburban district outside Philadelphia</td>
<td>Quakertown created its own online and blended offerings intended to prevent high-risk students from dropping out of the system. This also provides more flexible curricular options for students with out of school commitments and those wishing to accelerate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putnam County Schools</td>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>Midsize district in central Tennessee</td>
<td>Putnam County tailored existing content from Florida Virtual Schools to create its own online and blended offerings intended to provide credit recovery, to help students who have fallen behind catch up and to provide new options for advanced students or homebound students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Though motivated by similar goals, each state Course Access program has unique program components. This section starts with brief state policy summaries, followed by profiles of districts within each state. The profiles in this section provide a diverse set of examples of how districts are starting to enhance their support for student success through Course Access opportunities.

These profiles also show that Course Access programs can facilitate sharing successful online offerings among districts in the state, which can also create new revenue streams at the districts offering unique learning opportunities.
Louisiana’s Course Access program – locally known as the “Supplemental Course Academy” – offers hundreds of online and face-to-face courses. The program is considered a critical component of the state’s plan to allow every student a pathway to college and a professional career. State funds for the program are targeted in five areas:

- Career and technical preparation.
- Academic work required for eligibility for the state’s postsecondary scholarship program.
- Advanced coursework not available at the school due to limited resources.
- Dual Enrollment.
- Intensive remediation for students struggling to stay on pace for graduation.

Louisiana’s program provides for significant diversity and flexibility, allowing participating providers to offer online, blended and in-person instruction, with a focus on filling unmet curricular and student needs. Louisiana uses a flexible funding model, with different funding levels per course negotiated by the Louisiana Department of Education depending on the nature of the course and the necessary course materials. Prices ranged from $275 per credit for online elective courses such as Sociology to $1,325 per credit for more resource-intensive, in-person welding courses.3

Increased funding from Louisiana’s legislature has led to a dramatic enrollment increase. In the 2014-2015 school year, students enrolled in 27,500 courses, an increase from 2,362 course enrollments in the program’s prior year pilot. Of those courses, 20,000 were “dual enrollment” at Louisiana’s post-secondary institutions. For the 2015-2016 school-year, a stakeholder task force has recommended an additional increase in the per-pupil funding for Course Access to help meet the demand for dual enrollment and other course choices.

To drive quality in a diverse portfolio of courses, Louisiana developed a rigorous application review process that involves an application documenting basic capabilities, an in-person interview, a third party review by external stakeholders and review and approval by the State Board. Approved providers are then subject to regular reporting and quality control requirements. As a result of these steps, Louisiana’s requirements for courses and providers are less prescriptive but more rigorous than those in many other states.

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2. In its first year of implementation, the Louisiana pilot program offered only high school courses, though the authorizing legislation allows for full K-12 participation.
Ascension Parish is a large, suburban school district between New Orleans and Baton Rouge that has been in the midst of a boom in skilled industry for over a decade, with long-term employment opportunities available to those with the requisite credentials.

Given the opportunity, there was a large demand for students to be able to graduate from high school with the skills and credentials to begin careers as industrial craft workers. Due to the expenses associated with developing an industrial lab space and hiring skilled instructors, very few high schools were able to provide such an option.

Ascension Parish Schools had an existing relationship with a local industry certification provider, the Pelican chapter of the Associated Builders and Contractors, Inc. (ABC), which had provided night classes beginning in 2001 for a small number of students. In 2013, ABC completed the state Department of Education process to become a certified course provider and operate career and technical education (CTE) programs for students at multiple centers across the state. The district has arranged for juniors and seniors in the CTE program to take Math and English classes in the morning at their regular high school and then transport them to the ABC training center where they take classes in pursuit of industry certification.

During the first two years of program implementation enrollment has grown to over 80 students in the 2014-2015 year. The first graduates will complete the program this year, and the district plans to look closely at their certification exam passing rates.

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Offering students a broad and diverse set of courses: Ascension Parish school leaders became increasingly aware of the long-term career opportunities available for skilled welders, electricians and other positions fueled by a local boom, and were concerned that interested students would not be able to compete for those jobs without appropriate credentials. Partnering with an approved provider means schools don’t have to create necessary facilities or hire specialized instructors. Ascension created awareness and understanding of opportunities, through efforts like hosting young professionals in various fields to speak with students and their parents. The district also relies on its own teachers in lower level career and technical education courses to identify prospective students for Course Access courses leading to credentials.

Stretching limited budgets: Ascension Parish Schools’ Superintendent, Patrice Pujol, has emphasized the importance of thinking creatively, specifically utilizing the cost-efficiency of working with external partners when the same program in-house might be too expensive to set up or operate effectively.
Winn Parish is a small community in north-central Louisiana with eight schools (including three PreK-12 schools). Historically, the local school district has found it challenging to hire and retain staff for specialized courses, particularly world language courses.

Louisiana’s comprehensive public college scholarship program – the Turner Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS) – offers Louisiana students who successfully complete required courses full funding for their college education within Louisiana. TOPS eligibility includes a requirement of at least two years of world language courses, which has been a challenge for some rural students to fulfill.

The Winn Parish School System seized upon limited funding during the pilot program year of Course Access to provide 16 of its high school students with the Spanish and French instruction necessary for these students to qualify for their TOPS scholarships. These courses are online courses, with instructors and curricula provided by a state-approved course provider, Louisiana School for Math, Sciences and the Arts (LSMSA). The district used Course Access to enroll other students in AP Psychology and AP Computer Science, courses that were not otherwise available in the district.

As program funding expanded the next year, Winn Parish increased the number of students enrolled in LSMSA Spanish and French and the number of students taking courses for both academic achievement and credit recovery. Course Access enabled a cohort of students to complete an ACT Prep course to help its students prepare for college and career.

Lessons from Winn Parish

Offering students a broad and diverse set of courses: Superintendent Steve Bartlett has explained that Course Access is a common sense solution to give its students access to courses from high-quality, in-state providers that would not otherwise be available. The Course Access course catalog enables students to complete courses required to qualify for the state’s generous public college scholarship program – courses that would otherwise not be available to these students. Today, Winn Parish’s annual planning now includes Course Access course offerings that provide students with course offerings not offered within the walls of the district’s traditional schools.

Stretching limited budgets: Winn Parish lacks the resources that larger districts may enjoy. It likely would not have been able to add world language, Advanced Placement and ACT Prep courses acting solely on its own. Course Access has expanded the portfolio of quality course offerings available to Winn Parish students without any increase in the district’s fixed cost structure.
Minnesota has been a pioneer in Course Access, with its history going back to a public school funding program passed in 1985. Through the “post-secondary learning option” created in 1985, students could earn double credit at the high school and college levels by either being taught physically by college faculty at the college or through a dual enrollment program where the student stayed at the high school and was taught by a teacher certified to teach college curriculum. Today, Course Access in Minnesota has expanded to include: online and blended learning, alternative learning options (i.e., credit recovery) and charter schools and a dedicated line item of funding for Course Access.

Approved providers for online learning are local school districts, local charters and collaboratives formed by school districts. About 30 programs have been approved for online learning and about eight district collaboratives have been created. These district collaboratives, including Socrates Online (profiled below), operate under a “joint powers agreement” and they are generally unable to grant diplomas to students directly. Each collaborative has an advisory council of teachers, counselors and other key stakeholders to provide input on program implementation.

Notably, because Minnesota’s program is more mature than those in other states, it has developed a process for ongoing review and continuous improvement in addition to its initial provider approval process. Its Continuous Quality Improvement Process includes a three-year review cycle for all approved providers,6 a process implemented as a response to a 2011 state audit report, which charged the Minnesota Department of Education to make the re-approval process more meaningful. Building on providers’ required annual updates, the three-year review process requires providers to conduct a comprehensive self-study at the end of the cycle that is assessed by a four-member volunteer review team (all of whom must have relevant experience or expertise).

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Socrates Online (Socrates) is one of eight school district collaboratives in Minnesota that serve students interested in supplementing their curriculum at their home high schools through online learning. The Socrates collaborative is currently made up of 17 school districts based in South Central Minnesota.8

The Socrates program offers 9-12 grade courses to approximately 400 students across the network (according to enrollment during the 2014-15 school year). The typical student enrolling and participating in the Socrates program is a junior or senior in high school who is likely to be at-risk or off-track with respect to their course-work and credit accumulation. This student can utilize Socrates’ online course offerings to supplement their existing curriculum and obtain the credits necessary for graduation.

To enroll, students must apply to Socrates, who then notifies the enrolling district to receive approval that the course(s) meets graduation requirements. Students may enroll in up to 50 percent of their full course schedule for the term. Courses are typically structured during the regular school day at the local school, however, students can self-pace by taking courses anytime during the day or night. Courses are taught by online teachers with a Minnesota teaching license in the discipline they teach.

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7. Data were collected from: [http://rc.education.state.mn.us/](http://rc.education.state.mn.us/). Given the unique partnership with districts, demographic data includes information from all participating districts in the Socrates Online collaborative. The population size is the aggregate number of students across participating districts, and the other elements reflect averages across participating districts.

8. SOCRATES consortium school districts currently include: Alden-Conger Public Schools, Blue Earth Area Schools, Cleveland Public Schools, Janesville-Waldorf-Pemberton Public Schools, Lake Crystal-Wellcome Memorial Public Schools, Le Sueur-Henderson Public Schools, Mankato Public Schools, Maple River Public Schools, New Richland-Hartland-Ellendale-Geneva Public Schools, New Ulm Public Schools, Nicollet Public Schools, St. Clair Public Schools, St. Peter Public Schools, Tri-City United, United South Central Public Schools, Waseca Public Schools, Waterville-Elysian-Morristown Public Schools.
Socrates Online, Minn.

While the Socrates program is small, it has one of the highest completion rates in the state at 88 to 92 percent of enrolled students. Notably, this rate reflects students that actually complete Socrates courses with an earned credit, different from a traditional school that only requires attendance (“average daily membership”) to receive full state funding.

Lessons from Socrates Online

**Offering students a broad and diverse set of courses:** Obtaining stakeholder buy-in from the beginning is incredibly important and can impact the sustainability of any course access program. Districts came together early on and decided to pursue online and blended learning options as a group. They worked with Socrates to create regional policy guidelines, a parent handbook and an orientation process that every student is required to go through. Parents are engaged throughout enrollment. Communication to parents occurs early and often around the expectations for the program, and how to best support their student. They receive regular progress indicator reports on their student’s progress throughout the course.

**Ensuring quality in content, instruction and support:** Socrates currently has about 20 active teachers, all of whom must complete extensive training and development. It created a detailed set of Regional Policy Guidelines and a template for creating online course syllabi to ensure alignment and uniformity across course offerings. And Socrates has partnered with Leading Edge Certification to offer a certification program for online and blended teaching based on iNACOL National Standards for Online Teaching. (The program also meets state requirements for staff development and can count for graduate school credit.) Offered twice during the summer, the program begins with a one-day, in-person workshop followed by eight weeks of online instruction and two weeks of online portfolio development. Socrates instructors are required to complete the course and its course counselors are also encouraged to participate. Other teachers and leaders may also participate, even if they do not work with Socrates.

9. The Regional Guidelines are available here: [http://www.socratesonline.org/documents/OLL_Regional_Policy_Guidelines2014.pdf](http://www.socratesonline.org/documents/OLL_Regional_Policy_Guidelines2014.pdf); the course syllabus template is available here: [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1het2IsmgolZf4iw6TjimsqHMOO9m-vTHIyFkPzw7g/edit?pli=1](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1het2IsmgolZf4iw6TjimsqHMOO9m-vTHIyFkPzw7g/edit?pli=1).

## The Texas Virtual School Network (TxVSN)

The Texas Virtual School Network (TxVSN) was created by the state legislature in 2007 and launched in 2009. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) administers the TxVSN, sets standards for and approves TxVSN courses as well as professional development for online teachers, and has fiscal responsibility for the TxVSN. Education Service Center (ESC) Region 10 serves as central operations for the TxVSN, oversees the day-to-day operations of the network, and conducts the review of courses submitted for inclusion in the TxVSN. It also provides technical assistance and support for districts and schools.

Course Access is the foundation of one of two key components of the TxVSN: a supplemental course catalog for districts to contribute to and benefit from to serve the diverse learning needs of their students. (The other component is TxVSN’s online schools program.) Originally, only districts in Texas could serve as providers within the TxVSN, but, in 2013, new legislation allowed third party providers to participate as well, pending compliance with specific eligibility criteria and review. To be approved as a provider, a district or third party must comply with applicable Texas learning standards, accessibility requirements and INACOL online learning standards.

The catalog contains a variety of data and information designed to inform enrollment choices, including parent and student survey results for courses and providers. Success rate data is also available.

### Course Access

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Levels</th>
<th>Type of Eligible Courses</th>
<th>Type of Eligible Providers</th>
<th>Limits on Student Enrollment</th>
<th>Course Prices</th>
<th>Funding Source</th>
<th>Funding Disbursement to Provider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3-12</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>In-state districts, in-state charters, third party providers</td>
<td>3 yearlong courses per year&lt;sup&gt;11&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Flat fee (up to $400)</td>
<td>Varies, depending on type of provider</td>
<td>Varies (full-time online schools receive 100% on student completion, statewide catalog providers receive 70% up front and 30% on completion)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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11. Districts may charge a fee for a student taking a course beyond the three-course limit.
12. This summary was guided by information provided by TxVSN on its website, [http://txvsn.org](http://txvsn.org).
13. The catalog is available at: [https://catalog.mytxvsn.org/](https://catalog.mytxvsn.org/).
Guthrie, Texas, is the third least dense county in the United States, with a population of only about 100 students. The district is surrounded by other small rural counties, with the nearest shopping mall over one hundred miles away.

Given Guthrie’s small size and remote location, hiring strong educators to teach all subjects has been a persistent challenge, particularly in foreign languages. Guthrie Common School District needed a way to allow students to earn credits for foreign language – partly due to entry requirements for the University of Texas – but lacked the budget for a full-time teacher. Guthrie and six similarly situated nearby districts turned to the Texas Virtual School Network (TxVSN) as a creative way of funding the position: Guthrie would hire the teacher, and then receive payments from the other districts to support that hire through the TxVSN enrollment process. Guthrie students also participate in Course Access offerings from other districts through TxVSN. For example, 80-90 percent of Guthrie high school students now graduate with college-level algebra.

14. Data were collected from: [http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/snapshot/2013/district.srch.html](http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/snapshot/2013/district.srch.html)
15. Based on the most recently available data from 2011 and 2012.
Guthrie partnered with Rosetta Stone to develop Spanish courses aligned with Texas curriculum standards. (Rosetta Stone had been looking for a way into the Texas education market, but needed a district partner to create a curriculum to complement its interactive language exercises.) After successfully building Spanish I, II and III courses, Guthrie Virtual School (GVS) now offers programs in social studies, math and English, with a plan to expand into health sciences to meet new market demands. GVS now serves over 850 students state-wide and offers an array of courses for students to take, all managed by Texas certified teachers. Teaching virtual courses allows for increased flexibility for GVS instructors, including their residence location (most GVS teachers do not live in the Guthrie area) and their course load (one GVS teacher works part-time as she cares for her young family).

Since the program was created in 2008, both enrollments and successful completion rates have significantly increased, with GVS programs growing from serving the approximately 150 Spanish students from Guthrie and the surrounding area to now serving 850 students through 10 teachers (located in and out of TX). GVS is the largest provider in TxVSN, with approximately 30 percent of the market share, even though its courses are more expensive. Students routinely re-enroll in Guthrie courses.

**Lessons from Guthrie**

*Offering students a broad and diverse set of courses:* Guthrie has been able to scale. After success with the Spanish program, it is now working to expand as a provider of high-demand health sciences courses in medical terminology, world health research, anatomy and physiology and pathology. At the same time, Guthrie has been careful during program expansion. As the former superintendent, Nelson Coulter, observed, “Volume doesn’t always translate to quality.”

*Ensuring quality in content, instruction and support:* By partnering with Rosetta Stone for its Spanish programs, Guthrie was able to access unique, high-quality course content, allowing it to focus its own limited resources on instruction and student support systems. Guthrie has taken care to instill in its online programs the same school environment its local students enjoy, where students are known well by their teachers and school leaders. GVS teachers are carefully selected and given personalized assignments of students based on capacity.

GVS teachers often go the extra mile for student support by working hard to remain in contact with the student throughout online enrollment. Teachers are assigned to schools, not just students, to build lasting relationships. They provide at least biweekly updates on students’ progress to students’ home schools. Moreover, teachers make sure that they have an adult or other person on the ground – a parent, school contact or even a friend – who can nudge the student if he or she is not participating actively in the course.

*Stretching limited budgets:* Identifying and partnering with districts that had similar needs allowed the districts to pool resources in order to establish a virtual program with a certified teacher. And, because Guthrie’s programs have created a strong reputation across Texas (demand for its courses is currently higher than its enrollment capacity), it has created a sustainable program with the revenue generated by students enrolling from across the state.
Plano Independent School District (Plano ISD) is a large, suburban district outside of Dallas. It has been a leader in Texas on digital learning. In 2001, it became the first district in Texas to institute an online learning program. Plano’s original vision was to open high-quality online learning opportunities for Plano’s own students and to create opportunities for students anywhere and at anytime.

The Plano ISD eSchool currently functions as a provider through the TxVSN and a provider to students directly. It offers several courses for credit in Business & Information, English, Health and Physical Education, Math, Science, Social Studies, Spanish and Speech. Plano also enrolls some of its own students in TxVSN learning opportunities.

TxVSN and credit recovery enrollments in the Plano ISD eSchool are not tuition-based and are tied to the semester. Other Texas districts have taken advantage of Plano’s programs. For example, a small district that was temporarily lacking a certified Geography instructor enrolled all of its students in the program during one school year through TxVSN.

Plano ISD has been thoughtful about staffing their programs. Importantly, from the outset, the district’s curriculum, technology, communications and student services departments have been involved in the project. A dedicated district staff member has been vested with the sole responsibility of launching and maintaining the program. Having a full-time staff has contributed to an increase in completion rates by having dedicated personnel focused on keeping students on track and the partner schools and teachers involved. Beyond the district office, many new career opportunities have opened for teachers. Starting in 2014-2015, the eSchool has two full time teachers completely dedicated to online learning. It also has approximately 115 part time teachers, with 100 current Plano ISD classroom teachers who teach online courses for an additional stipend and about 15 “retired” (e.g., stay-at-home parents who wanted to teach part-time).

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16. Data were collected from: [http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/snapshot/2013/district.srch.html](http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/snapshot/2013/district.srch.html)
Plano ISD eSchool also enrolls students throughout Texas, the U.S. and the world directly through a tuition-based program. Students who pay tuition – which varies but averages about $300 per course – represent about three-quarters of current enrollments. Tuition students enjoy additional flexibility, including the ability to enroll at any time and to select variable course schedules at the outset (6, 9, 12 or 18 weeks). Today, common student tuition-based enrollees include those who need schedule flexibility to help them focus on demanding extracurricular activities (e.g., training for the Olympics), those who want to take an introductory course so that they can move quickly to more advanced offerings, a handful aiming to graduate early and few who may be homebound for a period of time.

The number of total participating students grew rapidly from 2001-2009 and has since then tapered off at around 3,500 enrollments annually, approximately 800-900 of which were TxVSN or credit recovery (and, therefore, not tuition-based). As of 2011-2012, the eSchool’s completion rate was between 86 and 89 percent for all population groups. Of those students who completed the courses, 96 to 98 percent passed the course.\(^{17}\)

Lessons from Plano

**Offering students a broad and diverse set of courses:** Plano ISD sought to expand options for its own students while also creating new opportunities for those outside the district. It played a particularly useful role for smaller districts in the state. At one time, a Plano ISD eSchool teacher served as a small Texas district’s virtual world geography teacher for a full school year. A strong communication plan has been essential. In particular, from the outset, Plano focused on making school counselors effective advocates of the program, helping inform students’ enrollment choices and informing program growth. Counselors have to approve a student’s course enrollment as part of his or her graduation plan.

**Ensuring quality in content, instruction and support:** State policy set the parameters for the development of the Plano ISD eSchool. All courses are aligned to Texas curriculum, to iNACOL standards and to new state guidance for students with disabilities. Moreover, working with Region 10 – the state’s technical assistance partner entity – has been helpful in ensuring that courses are high quality and aligned with state standards. For educators, Plano has invested in professional development for participating educators on how to translate their practice to an online setting – particularly on how to communicate effectively with students online. The district has also created clear protocols and processes for translating curriculum based on in-person classrooms into online courses. Plano ISD emphasizes that online learning does not mean that teachers are not involved – they are just involved in a different way. Teachers have 5-20 students at a time, depending on a teacher’s capacity and student need and demand.

**Stretching limited budgets:** Although the tuition-based model for some of Plano ISD eSchool’s offerings may create barriers to student access and enrollment, the consistent demand for Plano’s programs shows that districts can create sustainable programs. It also suggests that increased state support for the type of flexible online courses that Plano ISD eSchool offers are attractive to students and teachers alike – and that demand would only increase if supported by elevated state funding levels.

\(^{17}\) [http://www.senate.state.tx.us/75r/Senate/commit/c530/handouts12/1008-JeanParmer-1.pdf](http://www.senate.state.tx.us/75r/Senate/commit/c530/handouts12/1008-JeanParmer-1.pdf)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Levels</th>
<th>Type of Eligible Courses</th>
<th>Type of Eligible Providers</th>
<th>Limits on Student Enrollment</th>
<th>Course Prices</th>
<th>Funding Source</th>
<th>Funding Disbursement to Provider</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K-12</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>In-state districts, in-state charters, third party providers</td>
<td>Can enroll part time or full time</td>
<td>Set as portion of per pupil funding</td>
<td>Deducted from per pupil</td>
<td>100% of funding depending on student completion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Through its support for Florida Virtual School (FLVS), Florida has been a national leader in supplemental online learning. The state requires that all students graduate high school having taken at least one online course and that every school district offers at least three options for all grade levels through a Virtual Instruction Program (VIP). In the 2012-2013 school year, 7,800 fully online students were enrolled in districts’ VIP programs (notably, this was an increase of 56 percent over the prior school year). To fulfill state requirements for VIP opportunities, some smaller districts are partnering with other districts or regional education agencies to expand online opportunities for their students.

Florida’s existing options providing access to supplemental courses were expanded with the Florida Approved Courses and Tests (FACT) Initiative that was part of a suite of policies focused on expanding technology-based opportunities for students across the state. It has detailed requirements for courses and providers (which were recently revised with new legislation), and opened eligibility to a wide variety of providers and types of courses. The FACT Initiative will be fully implemented in 2015-2016. As of June 2015, Florida has approved a handful of providers to open its program. It also released a new application and renewal form for providers seeking to participate in its Course Access program through the FACT Initiative.

To facilitate awareness of options, the Florida Department of Education is responsible under state law to publish a list of approved providers and an online course catalog of all available digital learning courses that includes, for each course, access to the course description, completion and passage rates and a method for student and teacher users to provide evaluative feedback.

Palm Beach County School District (Palm Beach) is an urban district in South Florida. It is the eleventh largest district in the nation and the fifth largest in Florida with 185 schools that serve more than 183,000 students who speak 150 languages and dialects.

As part of a district-wide suite of innovative learning options for every grade level, Palm Beach offers supplemental online courses for grades 6-12 to support a range of student needs such as expanding course offerings, allowing for accelerated course completion, providing a more flexible schedule (e.g., for full-time travel, active community service or competitive athletics) and enabling credit recovery courses.

Middle and high school students in Palm Beach take advantage of part-time supplemental online courses in a variety of ways from different providers (including Palm Beach Virtual School, FLVS and other third party providers). Some individual students use these courses to take a subject that their schedule may not otherwise allow. Other courses are delivered to small groups with a shared curricular need as using an online course is more affordable than staffing a course for a limited number of students. Transfer students – including the children of members of the military – can benefit from supplemental courses that allow them to make up for any gaps in their transcripts to graduate on time with their class. Several courses are available in a more rigorous format, including advanced options for middle school and honors options for high school (students select whether to enroll in regular or advanced courses). High school options include several Advanced Placement and foreign language courses (Spanish, German, Chinese, Latin, French and Japanese).

Student can enroll in part-time virtual options through a centralized website that links to different providers.

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20. Data were collected from: [http://doeweb-prd.doe.state.fl.us/eds/nclbspar/year1314/main1314.cfm](http://doeweb-prd.doe.state.fl.us/eds/nclbspar/year1314/main1314.cfm).
Lessons from Palm Beach

**Offering students a broad and diverse set of courses:** Palm Beach recognizes that online education may shape the future of education through greater access to quality personalized learning models for students, real-time data regarding student performance and teacher development that focuses on differentiation of instruction and relationship building with students.

**Ensuring quality in content, instruction and support:** Palm Beach’s programs include several rubrics and scales that help students understand how to progress their mastery of course content. Palm Beach also engages parents in online learning programs. For K-5 students, parents serve as “learning coaches” and partner with the teacher to ensure their student is doing what they need to every day. While less active at the middle and high school levels, parents are still required to have periodic meetings and conference calls with teachers that may or may not involve the student. Palm Beach provides a variety of supplemental resources, including videos, online meetings and other resources to round out individual interactions with parents.

To support instructional quality, data are used to drive decision making at the school level, including regular reports on progress and outcomes by teacher to inform staffing decisions. Moreover, Palm Beach approaches professional and adult learning holistically through videos, online meetings and in-person sessions. Teachers also can receive rigorous online training through networks of teachers teaching the same content (i.e., lead-teacher led training).
Pasco County School District (Pasco) is located in a rapidly growing suburban community north of Tampa in west central Florida. It is home to just under a half million residents, having added nearly 100,000 residents over each decade since the early 1980s.

Pasco’s programs focus on offering expanded course options as well as middle and high school credit recovery. Approximately 7,000 unique students are served over the course of the year through both Pasco e-School and Florida Virtual Schools (FLVS). About two thirds of participating students access virtual options through Pasco e-School and the other third through FLVS. The district also serves about 200-300 students from other Florida districts who take classes that only Pasco offers, including German and American Sign Language. Full- and part-time courses are available for elementary, middle and high school students who meet eligibility criteria (e.g., having been enrolled in a Florida public school during the prior school year).

Parents enroll their students through the website and have an opportunity to meet with a school counselor and administrator to discuss their child’s options. Parents are also involved on orientation day and receive training on the learning management system used in the district. Once enrolled, parents and students receive regular updates on student progress.

Pasco tracks students’ rate of progress, focusing on the percentage of students drifting and off-track as well as those not successfully contacted by an instructor. Supports and interventions are provided according to analysis of this data, and communication with parents occurs if it is determined that alternate options should be considered. Pasco monitors course completion rates as well as learning outcomes of students on state assessments. This is a challenging effort to get disparate systems to talk with each other, but the manual effort is important to ensure the e-School content and instructors are effective.

22. Data were collected from: http://doeweb-prd.doe.state.fl.us/eds/nclbspar/year1314/main1314.cfm
Offering students a broad and diverse set of courses: Pasco was uniquely positioned to provide certain courses based on staff, capacity and resources. In addition to expanding course options within the district, Pasco also saw an opportunity to provide them to students outside of the district. As a result, 200-300 out-of-district students in Florida now have access to courses like American Sign Language and German.

Pasco works to create awareness of its options by increasing the frequency and diversifying its methods of parent outreach through both online and in-person efforts. And, during enrollment, Pasco takes time to meet with parents in person to discuss all of the options available to their individual child.

Stretching limited budgets: Florida requires each district to have a virtual learning program and funds courses 100 percent based on course completion. The state does not provide additional funding for them, so planning and budgeting are critical to enable high quality online and in person offerings. Pasco is developing improved forecasting models that allow them to estimate enrollment so sufficient staffing and other investments can be supported.
The charter network and districts profiled below do not operate in Course Access states, but they are pursuing similar goals and strategies and working to balance the same competing interests as districts in Course Access states.

The following examples show how school systems in three unique contexts used grant funding and investments of their own resources to expand course options for their students. These systems leverage online and blended offerings within their organizations, external course providers and partnerships with institutions of higher education.

These examples not only show what student outcomes can result from these investments, but also what it took to realize them. It is likely that state support through Course Access policies may make these models easier to replicate and scale by lifting such burdens as vetting and negotiating with providers as well as creating course catalogs and enrollment platforms.
California does not currently have a state Course Access policy or program, but it is home to many innovative districts, charters and charter management organizations leading the way in online and blended learning opportunities. Nationally recognized for its innovative school model and its students’ success, the Alliance College-Ready Public Schools show that creating the range of opportunities necessary for preparing students for college and careers often depends on creating a portfolio with various providers, complemented by intensive student support offered by school staff.

The Alliance College-Ready Public Schools (the Alliance) is the largest nonprofit charter organization in Los Angeles with 26 schools serving around 11,000 middle and high school students. The Alliance’s student population is primarily low income and minority, with a large English language learner population in its middle schools.

Though the Alliance has been successful graduating its students and getting them to enroll in college at high rates, it found that its students often did not persist in college. In response, it developed a network-wide blended learning model that opened several new opportunities that could help students personalize their learning pathways and prepare for the challenges of college and career. Two elements of the Alliance’s model reflect a similar purpose and design to Course Access efforts:

- The Personalized Alliance College Experience (PACE) model is an integrated technology blended learning model that allows courses to be taken online for three hours a day, Monday through Friday. These courses are targeted to student credit recovery needs and opportunities for acceleration (e.g., capstone projects, online courses and dual enrollment). All subject-area teachers are based in a lab-style, flexible learning space, supported by tutors and other staff to buttress student success. Students are expected to earn 30 college credits before graduation, through Advanced Placement as well as partnerships developed with a local community college and campus of California State University.

23. Data were collected from: [http://www.laalliance.org/pages_inc/annual_report.jsp](http://www.laalliance.org/pages_inc/annual_report.jsp).
• The model implemented in other Alliance schools offers credit recovery courses online during the summer, with a teacher-facilitator present in the room. Professional development is offered over the summer for 10-15 days, weekly and quarterly. Site-based coaches are district and home office based.

Due in part to these elements, the Alliance has been successful in closing significant learning gaps (e.g., supporting students’ progress from four to five grade levels below to grade-level proficient). Its success has also allowed it to expand. After opening two new schools in the 2014-2015 school year, the network has plans to open ten schools in the next five years.

Alliance College-Ready Public Schools, Calif.

Lessons from the Alliance Charter Schools

Offering students a broad and diverse set of courses: The Alliance demonstrates the importance of building a curriculum that will prepare students for success in college and career. And the Alliance shows that the best way to help students get there involves a wide range of courses. At least some offerings may need to come from outside providers, and in the Alliance’s case, external support for remedial, advanced and early college curricular programs provided new learning opportunities and freed up in-school resources to go toward more intensive support systems. Districts in Course Access states may find that they can manage a similar effort, particularly with state support for vetting and negotiating prices with external providers.

Ensuring quality in content, instruction and support: The Alliance learned the hard way that the top down curriculum decisions they made in the past were not the best way to support their blended learning efforts moving forward. Early on, they received significant resistance from teachers and administrators at the school sites because they had not been engaged in the selection process. Now, the Alliance works to empower new and veteran teacher-leaders who are excited about curriculum to get involved in the selection process early on. Districts in Course Access states may be spared this lesson as the state takes on the responsibility of approving and monitoring external providers.

Stretching limited budgets: The Alliance built a strong team to develop its school model, manage projects and seek outside grants to support its expansion efforts and secure partnerships. Not every district will be able to replicate these efforts, but scale is likely to be more feasible with state support for the foundations of these efforts, including quality assurance efforts, centralized course catalogs and enrollment websites and cost negotiation efforts on behalf of districts across the state.
Pennsylvania does not currently have a Course Access policy or program, but it is home to innovative districts leading the way on online and blended learning opportunities. Recognized nationally for its programs, Quakertown pursued an innovative approach to a common problem: attrition of student enrollments to other schools that offered more flexibility. Now with a robust selection of courses developed by its own educators and specialized providers, Quakertown represents how a district can reorient itself around online and blended learning to serve the needs and demands of its students – using its own instructions in new ways and leveraging outside providers for hard-to-staff subjects. Should Pennsylvania become a Course Access state, Quakertown could be a strong provider.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Population Size</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relevant Program Enrollment</td>
<td>741</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial &amp; Ethnic Composition</td>
<td>88% White, 2% Black, 5% Hispanic, 2% Multiracial, 2% Asian/Pacific Islander, .2% American Indian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free &amp; Reduced Lunch Rate</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language Learners</td>
<td>2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students with Disabilities</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation Rate</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Quakertown Community School District, Pa.

Quakertown Public Schools (Quakertown) is a small suburban district outside of Philadelphia that serves approximately 400 students per year through the supplemental online courses available in its blended learning program. Located in an area with many enrollment options for students, Quakertown was concerned about losing students and funding to virtual charter schools that offered more flexibility but fewer course options. (Pennsylvania funds cyber charters exclusively through tuition from the “sending” districts with local taxes.) As a result, it created its own blended and online learning program, complemented by a one-to-one notebook computer initiative, making it more attractive to current and prospective students by offering a more flexible and personalized learning environment, including an opportunity to enroll in part- or full-time online learning options taught by district teachers.

Today, Quakertown’s blended learning program prevents high-risk students from dropping out of the system, offers more flexible schedules and course offerings to students with outside school commitments, provides expanded options for those students who wish to accelerate and offers courses that wouldn’t be financially feasible to offer in a traditional classroom setting. Courses are asynchronous to allow maximum flexibility for both the teacher and the student, and there is a library and workspace made available for students to work on online courses during the school day. To enroll, the student’s schedule must fit the online offerings within the context of the normal school day. Students are limited to eight online courses per year, but parents can pay for additional courses above the maximum course allotment.

26. This profile was informed by materials created by the Alliance for Excellence in Education and the Christiansen Institute, available at: [http://center.all4ed.org/Page/204](http://center.all4ed.org/Page/204) (profile) and [http://center.all4ed.org/Page/295](http://center.all4ed.org/Page/295) (videos).
Quakertown’s blended learning courses are created and taught by Quakertown teachers, although the district also uses external providers for specialized course offerings, such as Mandarin Chinese, Japanese and Latin. Notably, local union members believe that these online learning programs have helped to preserve positions in the district, and the local union contract views online learning as a traditional assignment with time for the online class as part of the regular school day schedule for teachers (except that no students are physically in the classroom).

Though Quakertown is still waiting on completion and retention data, it is expecting enrollment growth of 17 percent in the 2015-2016 school year. It has already experienced rapid growth in student online course enrollments: 268 percent growth during its first four years.

Lessons from Quakertown

Offering students a broad and diverse set of courses: Quakertown has worked on improving communication around its pedagogy, providing more access to content and other information to students and parents. For the 2014-15 school year, the district began a monthly parent forum open to all parents, regardless of whether their students were enrolled in online and blended programs. These forums allow Quakertown to promote access and understanding and to correct any misinformation about the program.

Ensuring quality in content, instruction and support: For participating educators, professional development has become more of an iterative model in the district versus a “sit and get.” Quakertown has found that there will always be a range of comfort levels with new technology and its use in facilitating student learning, but creating a baseline of understanding and regular conversations about these tools is essential for students’ success in the program long term.

For participating students, Quakertown has built in essential support systems. Physical space in school buildings is provided for students in online programs, which allows students to be monitored and supported to ensure that they stay on track to succeed in online courses.

Stretching limited budgets: Quakertown’s commitment to develop online courses was not viewed as a cost, but rather an investment to ensure students remained enrolled in the district. Though developing its own programs required significant investments of time and resources, Quakertown has been able to recoup the costs that it had lost to neighboring charter schools before it re-oriented itself around online and blended learning (savings amount to $11,000 per regular education student and $22,000 per special education student that would have gone to virtual charter tuition). In other words, Quakertown has been able to improve its long term budget sustainability by creating the kind of flexibility and course options demanded by today’s students.
Tennessee does not currently have a state Course Access program, but it is home to innovative districts, charters and charter management organizations leading the way in online and blended learning opportunities. Nationally recognized for its programs, Putnam County Schools (PCS) transformed a small and struggling online credit recovery program into a suite of online and blended offerings coordinated by the district across schools. The district has seen meaningful gains in its graduation rates. Should Tennessee become a Course Access state, PCS could be a strong provider.

Putnam County Schools (PCS) is a medium-sized, rural district in Tennessee, located between Nashville and Knoxville. PCS serves its population of more than 11,000 students through 20 schools that include three alternative and virtual schools.

PCS’s online and blended programs started in 2008 with a small and ultimately unsuccessful online program primarily focused on credit recovery. To address the early program’s deficiencies, PCS centralized the program at the district level, added blended-learning components, built upon early findings on how to improve it and expanded into new courses and offerings. Today, the district’s Virtual Instruction to Accentuate Learning (VITAL) serves many student needs under a single program umbrella, including credit recovery, credit advancement, blended-learning opportunities, distance learning, dual enrollment and district technology professional development. The dual enrollment program is offered through the VITAL Collegiate High School, and PCS offers virtual home school opportunities through the VITAL Homeschool.

27. Data were collected from: http://tn.gov/education/data/report_card/index.shtml
28. This profile was informed by the Christiansen Institute’s “Proof Points” profile of PCS, available at: http://www.christenseninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Putnam-County-Schools-VITAL.pdf
VITAL courses include online content, a highly qualified online instructor and an onsite learning facilitator who actively participates with students in the online course. Online instructors are typically PCS teachers, though instructors are contracted through outside vendors in limited cases (e.g., nontraditional courses with no qualified teacher available in the district). All high schools are staffed with VITAL employees who serve as site administrators in the school building, are managed by the building’s Virtual Learning Coordinator and handle all components of online and distance learning at their school. All other buildings have site facilitators identified by the principal who serve as the liaison between the VITAL program and the school (these personnel are not official VITAL employees). Professional development is provided to every teacher in PCS, regardless of whether they actually teach online courses, so that they have the option to use blended learning in their classrooms.

The VITAL program has seen significant gains and supported improved outcomes district-wide. The need for credit recovery in the district has been cut by 50 percent over a three-year period. Cookeville High School has the most developed programs (with a focus on academic interventions to prevent lost credits) and has witnessed its graduation rate increase from 86 to 94 percent between 2008 and 2014. District-wide, the graduation rate increased from 88 to 92 percent between 2013 and 2014. PCS hopes to reach 97 percent by 2018.

Lessons from Putnam County

Offering students a broad and diverse set of courses: PCS found that starting small through a pilot and growing programs gradually enhanced its ability over time to serve more students with different learning needs and interests. (A district with the state support through a Course Access program may be able to grow more quickly.)
Ensuring quality in content, instruction and support: A key lesson learned for PCS was to identify and rely on strong personnel already in the district. Collaboration is also important, particularly with counselors and learning facilitators working together to identify options for students to take control of their learning path. This collaboration includes both informing options for existing students and identifying and recruiting new possible students to the program. Moreover, providing facilitators that are linked to the program and working at the individual schools has been very important to PCS’ success. Having those “rockstars” for VITAL in the school buildings promotes an atmosphere of communication and collaboration, and this is essential to the success of any program.

Stretching limited budgets: Collaboration can be a key to scaling efficiently. PCS recommends that districts consider a district-district approach to capacity-building, specifically in developing courses, teaching courses and supporting students. This includes partnering with other districts and creating a consortium of districts that take advantage of economies of scale in the network (similar to what districts in Minnesota have created through their partnership with Socrates Online, described above).
Conclusion

Ideas abound on how to address longstanding access and opportunity gaps while also leveraging the opportunities and demands of today to create the best possible conditions for student success. There are no simple answers to meet the range of challenges facing schools. Leaders will need multipart strategies. State Course Access policies offer significant promise as a new approach to address longstanding interests:

- **Offering students a broad and diverse set of courses.**
- **Ensuring quality in content, instruction and support.**
- **Stretching limited budgets.**

Each of these interests has a direct relationship to a district’s ability to serve all of its students effectively.

The profiles in this paper likely represent only a first chapter in the story of moving toward more personalized and expanded learning opportunities for students. No one district here provides a complete solution, but each offers a unique insight into the student interests, curricular needs and contextual challenges that Course Access programs may address. The fact that these programs have found some success in districts large and small and with very different student demographic profiles suggests that there may be insights here for most schools and districts – particularly those in Course Access states. We also hope that leaders in non-Course Access states may be inspired to explore the possibility of creating their own Course Access program to support schools and districts in these efforts.