



ON-LINE EDUCATION IN COLORADO

by Cathy Eslinger

Colorado parents are seeking on-line education opportunities for their K-12 students in ever increasing numbers. As educators and policymakers respond to interest in programs that reflect today's technology, statewide discussion continues on the oversight, funding, and availability of such programs. This issue brief discusses the types of on-line education, the relevant statutory provisions for on-line enrollment, and the most recent efforts to address the changing context in which on-line programs operate.

Background

On-line learning or education generally refers to the delivery of educational services via the Internet. Colorado law defines an "**on-line program**" as a program that is:

- ▶ a sequential educational instruction program for a child who resides in Colorado;
- ▶ provided on the Internet;
- ▶ monitored by school district and site coordinators, or solely by a site coordinator if the program is delivered by a charter school; and
- ▶ not a private or nonprofit school.

Colorado's on-line programs are often referred to as *cyberschools*, or virtual schools, in which enrolled students earn credits toward academic advancement as they successfully complete courses offered by the school. For the 2005-06 school year, 5,453 students were enrolled in on-line programs full time, reflecting an increase of over 60 percent from the 3,362 students enrolled in such programs the previous year. Table 1 reflects full-time enrollment for the last five school years and the percentage increase over the prior year.

Full-time On-line Enrollment: 2001-02 — 2005-06

School Year	Full-Time Enrollment	Percentage Increase
2001-02	530	—
2002-03	1,552	193%
2003-04	2,991	93%
2004-05	3,362	12%
2005-06	5,453	62%

Source: Colorado Department of Education

In addition, on-line education can be offered through *supplemental on-line educational services*. Courses are offered to students enrolled in a physical school or a cyberschool, and academic credit is authorized through the school. Colorado Online Learning, the state's primary provider of supplemental on-line services, enrolled over 1,600 public school students in its courses during the 2004-05 school year.

Requirements through Statute and Rule

Program requirements. State law and State Board of Education ("state board") rules set forth certain standards for on-line programs and allow any school district, a group of two or more school districts, a charter school, or a Board of Cooperative Services to establish an on-line program. At a minimum, a program must provide for:

- ▶ regular assessment of a student's academic progress by a site coordinator;
- ▶ evaluation of students through the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP);
- ▶ instruction in reading, writing, mathematics, geography, history, civics, literature, science, and the U.S. Constitution;

- ▶ mentoring services deemed necessary by a site coordinator for a participating student who has been expelled from a public school;
- ▶ a process for a site coordinator to notify a student who is not performing satisfactorily in an on-line program and to identify educational alternatives for the student; and
- ▶ maintenance of student records, including attendance data, test, evaluation, and CSAP results, and immunization records.

A participating student is presumed to comply with the state's compulsory attendance laws. State board rules additionally require that an on-line program have a calendar that reasonably aligns with that of the school district or charter school operating the program.

Student eligibility. Students participating in on-line programs must reside in Colorado and meet eligibility criteria set by the school district or charter school offering the program. Eligible students further must demonstrate that they have the appropriate electronic equipment and resources to participate, although state law authorizes a school district or charter school to provide the necessary equipment or resources to students. Further, any student who is enrolled in an on-line program for the majority of the school day and wishes to enroll in one or more courses in a traditional public school must seek permission from the on-line program.

Funding for On-line Programs

Calculating on-line enrollment. The school finance act recognizes a school district's on-line pupil enrollment as part of its student enrollment and defines it for counting and funding purposes. On-line pupil enrollment is the number of students on October 1, enrolled and participating in an on-line program established by the school district or by a charter school in the district, *as long as*:

- ▶ the student was included in a school district's pupil enrollment or on-line pupil enrollment for the prior school year, and "substantially completed" assigned course work for the courses in which he or she was enrolled for at least one semester of the prior school year and received a semester grade for the classes; *or*
- ▶ the student, in the prior school year, was not enrolled in a private school, was not home-schooled, and did not participate in home instruction by a licensed or certified teacher; *or*

- ▶ the student is enrolling in kindergarten or first grade in an on-line program.

On-line pupil enrollment also includes the on-line pupil enrollment of each operating institute charter school for which the school district is the accounting district. School districts receive the state minimum per pupil funding amount for each student included in their on-line enrollment. For any on-line students who were enrolled in an on-line program for the 2001-02 school year, a district receives its full per pupil funding amount.

Exemptions for counting students. In order to count a student who participates in an on-line program and does not meet the requirements described above, state board rules authorize school districts to seek exemptions from the Colorado Department of Education to count on-line students under circumstances including:

- ▶ the student's parent or legal guardian removed the student from school for extraordinary reasons, such as the student is a parent, was the victim of criminal activity, or has a medical condition that prevents attendance at a regular school;
- ▶ the student is considered habitually disruptive or otherwise at-risk for reasons such as habitual truancy or expulsion; or
- ▶ the student did not reside in and attend school in Colorado during the prior school year.

2006 Legislation

The General Assembly considered on-line education issues in 2006 in the context of a request for a state performance audit of on-line education programs in Colorado, which is expected to be completed by fall of this year. Lawmakers recognized, in the passage of House Bill 06-1008, the challenges small school districts face in providing students with access to a wide range of course offerings. The bill will provide reimbursement to school districts with an enrollment of fewer than 3,000 students and to certain charter schools for supplemental on-line education courses purchased for students in grades 6 through 12. Legislation to repeal restrictions and establish uniform funding for all on-line students did not pass. Likewise, a bill to clarify current statutory provisions for on-line enrollment was debated, but was not passed.