# An Overview of K–12 Online Education

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In this chapter, you will learn about these topics:

- Online learning's place within the larger context of distance education
- K–12 online programs and courses
- K–12 online teaching standards and guidelines
- Qualities of successful online programs

The information provided in this chapter will provide a context for you to think about online learning as a form of distance education, introduce you to the wide variety of K–12 online programs available and examine the existing standards, guidelines, and recommendations defining the characteristics of quality online teaching. You will also examine the criteria most often used to assess the quality of an online program or school. This information will help you evaluate your own readiness and suitability for this new and exciting addition to the field of education.
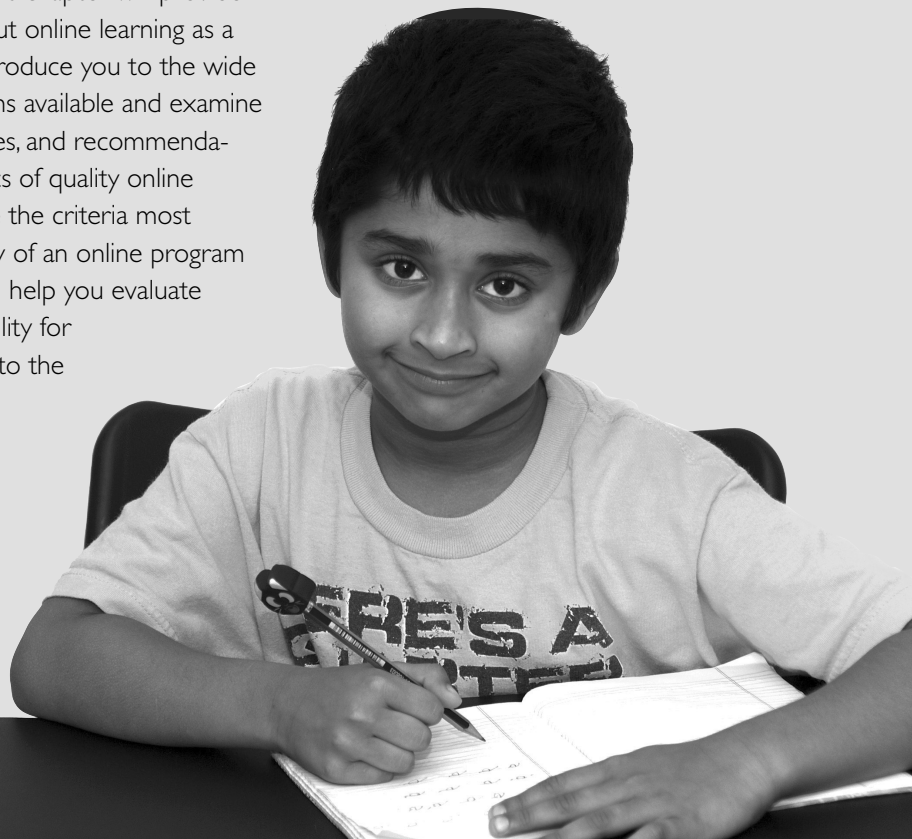
What Is Distance Learning?

Distance education has been around for many years and can be simply defined as education in which the instructor and student are physically separate from each other. Print-based correspondence study is one early form of distance education. A later form is courses delivered through video/telecommunications technologies, in which one instructor and classroom is broadcast to other classrooms.

However, these forms of distance education allow no interaction or, at the very least, only one-way interaction with the instructor and peers. They also tend to mimic traditional expository educational experiences, in which the teacher is center stage. *Online learning, virtual education,* and *e-Learning* are all terms that represent a more recent adaptation of distance education, in which computer technology—primarily in the form of the Internet—is used to deliver instruction *and* to facilitate communication and interaction among participants.

What Is Online Learning?

It is certainly true that good teaching is good teaching, regardless of the mechanism used for instruction. The qualities that make you an effective teacher in the face-to-face classroom will also serve you well in the online classroom. However, significant differences in the ways of communicating with students and delivering content, along with the relatively autonomous nature of the online environment, can present unique challenges for both you and the learners you are trying to serve. When discussing online learning, it is important to understand what makes this Internet-based learning environment unique.

First, online learning leverages Internet technologies to create rich, interactive, and personalized learning experiences using a vast array of technology tools to achieve these goals:

a. Facilitate interaction and communication
b. Assist with skill, knowledge, and project development
c. Promote acquisition of 21st century skills

Second, because of the unique characteristics of the online environment, online learning has the potential to transform the way that we teach and thus the way that students learn. What are the transformative capabilities of online environments? Online learning can promote these outcomes:

a. Learner autonomy and independence—the idea that learners take responsibility for their own learning

   b. Collaboration and community building

   c. Active participation

   d. Authentic types of assessments

Third, online experiences do not just occur in full-time virtual schools and courses. Online learning can also be found in these educational settings:

   a. Brick-and-mortar schools as single course offerings

   b. Traditional face-to-face classrooms to enhance or supplement classroom instruction

   c. Self-contained virtual charter or cyber schools (often, with a parent or guardian acting as a learning coach or guide)

   d. Single course offerings through a state supplemental program
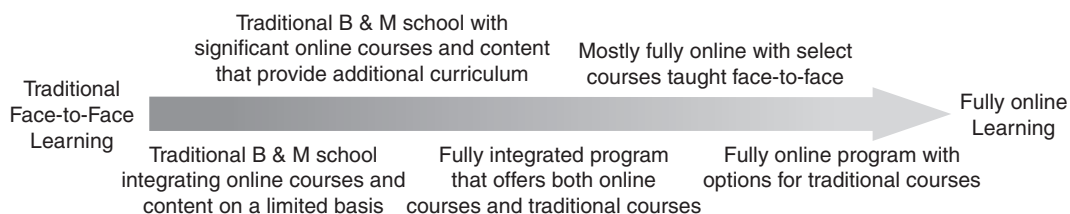
K–12 Online Overview

What Types of Online Programs, Virtual Schools, and Courses Are There?

The types of online learning programs in existence today can best be illustrated along a continuum (see Figure 1.1) and may include full-time online schools (sometimes called *virtual schools* and usually formed as so-called cyber charters), part-time supplemental programs (usually created through state agencies, but not always), brick-and-mortar schools offering online courses, and an infinite number of blends of any of these models.

In addition to program models, individual courses may be viewed along a continuum. They may range from face-to-face courses that incorporate the partial use of Internet technologies (often called *hybrid* or *blended courses*) to courses taught completely online.

How programs function and what particular policies govern them varies widely. For example, some programs incorporate primarily self-paced courses with

Figure 1.1 Continuum of K–12 online programs

Traditional B & M school with
significant online courses and content
that provide additional curriculum

Mostly fully online with select
courses taught face-to-face

Traditional
Face-to-Face
Learning

Fully online
Learning

Traditional B & M school
integrating online courses and
content on a limited basis

Fully integrated program
that offers both online
courses and traditional courses

Fully online program with
options for traditional courses

continuous, rolling, or open enrollments, in which students are allowed to enter and exit courses at any time. Other programs provide fully facilitated courses with set beginning and ending dates. Many programs use predeveloped curricula, others use teacher-created courses, and still others use some combination of the two. Some programs allow the use of interactive discussion forums and encourage student-to-student interaction, while others do not.
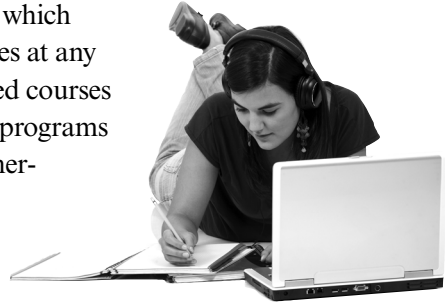
Table 1.1 describes the wide variation in types of online courses you may encounter, with examples of the interactions employed and expected outcomes for each.

The organizational structure that governs online programs can also vary widely. Table 1.2—adapted from the excellent work of Evergreen Consulting in their annual Keeping Pace report (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2010, p. 11)—illustrates the wide variety of programs available nationally and provides a few examples of selected programs. The organization and reach of K–12 online programs can vary widely, and the differences between types of programs are becoming less distinct with the quick expansion of successful programs and crossover of services. However, in general, you will encounter supplemental programs, full-time programs, and in some cases both. In this book, these programs, schools, and courses will be referred to collectively as K–12 online programs.

There are also other important differences in K–12 online programs. One of the initial questions you may ask is, Who is responsible for providing the equipment that allows students to access their learning environment? The answer is, It depends. Supplemental programs, as a rule, do not provide students with computers or Internet access. They rely on students' home schools or districts or require students to access their courses from home computers. Full-time programs, however, often do provide both computers and stipends for Internet access. If the school is a public charter school, this cost is often passed on to the state in which the school is chartered.

The quality of Internet access can also vary, especially since many students taking online courses are from rural areas, where high-speed Internet access may not be available. Some students are still able to obtain only dial-up access. An awareness and recognition of this limitation is an important one, especially when designing online materials.

Finally, a concern that is often expressed within the context of online education is student isolation and lack of socialization opportunities. In fact, some would

Table 1.1 Description of the types of online courses, with examples of the kinds of interactions and expected outcomes.

	Online Tutorial	**Self-Paced Course**	**Facilitated Cohort Course**	**Hybrid or Blended Course**
Description	Self-facilitated movement through content.	Learners progress at own pace.	Learners progress through the course at the same time.	Combined online and face-to-face components. May have attributes of all previous types of courses.
Interaction	No instructor interaction. Help or support for technical issues may be included. No peer-to-peer interaction.	Some instructor interaction may occur, particularly at checkpoints and at the end of the course. No interaction or nonmoderated interaction with peers. Not conducive to substantive discussion activity.	Substantial interactions with the instructor and with peers. Includes private and public asynchronous and/or synchronous communications. May include posted weekly lessons with assignment and assessment due dates.	Substantial interactions with instructor and peers in both face-to-face and online communications.
Expected Outcomes	Mastery depends on learner success in interacting with the content. May include formative and summative assessments.	Mastery is determined at checkpoint assignments or assessments. May include instructor assessment of student work.	Content is learned through interactions with the course and the instructor and perhaps with interactions with peers. Includes formative and summative assessments.	Content is learned through interactions with the course and the instructor and perhaps with interactions with peers. Includes formative and summative assessments.
Start and End Dates	Learner choice on when to start, how long to spend on content, and when to complete the course.	Learner choice on start/end dates. However, instructor assessments may dictate these.	Institution or instructor choice on start/end dates. Assignments may have fixed due dates, but when learners work on them is flexible.	Depends on the implementation. Instructor choice on start/end dates.
Institution Involvement	Sponsoring agency provides content.	Sponsoring agency provides content and information to learners. May be an added charge for this service.	Sponsoring agency or facilitator develops content, and facilitator provides information to learners.	Depends on the implementation. May have attributes of the previous types of courses.

Source: Adapted from Lehmann (2004), pp. 24–27.

argue that socialization in traditional public schools is more of a negative influence than a positive or enlightening experience. The advantage of online environments, in this regard, is that students and parents have more control over who is socializing with whom and how and when those interactions are taking place. Effective socialization can be learned in many settings: clubs, after-school activities and sports, family gatherings, religious organizations, and so on. Online programs often incorporate activities, groups, clubs, and field trips into their school year just for this purpose. Learners in online programs are not removed from these opportunities and may, in fact, have more time for them than if they attended a traditional school:

> The online environment is a natural way for Millennial students to inter-act, and that the Internet allows for student-student interactions across geographical boundaries that transcend the possibilities within physical schools. In many ways online programs offer socialization opportunities that go beyond what most traditional schools can provide, whether it is taking part in a discussion with students from another country, or meet-ing students from across their state on a field trip or science competition. In addition, the online environment eliminates, or greatly reduces, issues that may create social friction, such as appearance, gender, age, ethnicity,

Table 1.2 Categories of some online programs, with specific examples and brief descriptions.

Category	Reach	Examples	Description
Supplemental	Statewide	Florida Virtual School, Michigan Virtual School, Idaho Digital Learning Academy, Virtual High School	Typically initiated through state departments of education or legislative action. May also be managed through a consortium. Students take courses as needed, and credit is applied to the home district. Supplemental programs do not usually grant diplomas.
Full-Time	Statewide, multi-district, single district	INSPIRE Connections Academy, California Virtual Academy	Commonly referred to as *virtual charter schools*. Many are managed by for-profit vir-tual school management companies, such as Connections Academy; K12, Inc.; Kaplan; and Insight Schools. The school's reach depends a great deal on the charter school policies adopted by the state in which it operates.
Either or Both	District, national	Los Angeles (CA), Riverside (CA), Broward (FL), Plano (TX), National Con-nections Academy, Florida Virtual School	Blending of program types is creating an infinite number of variations. For example, large district programs may offer their own supplemental online courses to students in the district, or they may offer them to a wid-er audience. Also underway is a movement toward national reach for programs that have traditionally been bound by state boundaries.

physical disabilities, academic progress (e.g., at-risk or drop out students) or socio-economic status. (Watson & Gemin, 2009a, p. 5)

As this statement attests, in many ways, online environments can foster and facilitate community development and connective networks more easily than traditional schools. For example, greater collaboration may occur across grade levels and subject areas because there are no imposed physical barriers separating the grades. Similarly, online interactions remove social and ethnic biases and barriers, because factors such as skin color, language differences, and disabilities are removed from the equation. Finally, students in online environments often have more opportunities to connect with the larger, global world, especially in (but not limited to) programs that serve national and international populations. Having these opportunities further enhances students' connections across borders and cultures.

Who Takes Online Courses?

Colin is an above-average student, a senior in high school. He has taken advanced mathematics classes since middle school, when his school district began a new "fast-track" program designed to provide opportunities for completion of AP Calculus by his senior year. Unfortunately, the AP Calculus class never materialized because of low enrollments in the prerequisite advanced courses.

Luckily, the local university was offering the course Colin needed to complete his intended plan of study before graduation. However, in order to take a class there, Colin needed to be excused from two hours of high school classes, which created a scheduling conflict with his AP English class. An online supplemental program offered by the state where Colin resides offered a perfect solution to the problem. He was able to fit all of his required courses into his schedule by enrolling in an online advanced English course, which freed him up to attend his calculus class at the university.

Distance and online education have been seen predominantly in higher education. However, recent trends indicate the increasing potential of the Internet for delivering instruction in K–12 environments. Students in K–12 enroll in online courses for a variety of reasons. For many learners, online courses provide opportunities that might not otherwise be available. The preceding vignette illustrates just such an example. Having an expanded choice of courses (especially in rural districts), flexible scheduling, and credit recovery are often the most appealing reasons for taking online courses.

Convenience is another, especially for those students who, for whatever reason, are not able to attend traditional schools. Some enroll in online courses because they have not been successful in traditional educational systems. Others are looking for opportunities to advance at a quicker rate than can be accomplished in traditional schools. Many homeschooling parents find that the expertise of a guiding teacher helps meet the needs of older children—those taking high-level mathematics or science courses, for example.

In 2009, the growth in enrollment for postsecondary students taking online classes ranged from 10 percent to 100 percent (Nagel, 2010). Moreover, the flexibility, convenience, and just-in-time availability of online courses have all helped fuel the exponential growth in K–12 online programs and schools. Although an exact number is difficult to obtain, a survey of school district administrators found that more than 1 million K–12 students took online courses in the 2007–2008 school year (Picciano & Seaman, 2009). Other reports predict that 1.4 million children will be taking online courses in cyber charter schools by 2014 (Nagel, 2010). However, a 2010 report from the International Association for K–12 Online Learning (iNACOL) indicated that this number has already been surpassed, with an estimated 1.5 million students enrolled in online programs (Wicks, 2010).

Evergreen Consulting Group publishes a yearly update on the progress of K–12 online programs, and in the 2010 *Keeping Pace* report, 39 states were identified as having state-led virtual schools or state-led online learning initiatives (Watson et al., 2010). This finding accounts for approximately 500,000 enrollments and an increase of almost 40 percent over the previous year. The number of full-time virtual schools continues to grow, as well. These schools can be found in 27 states and have an estimated total enrollment of 200,000 students. And although online and blended programs are difficult to track, the Evergreen Consulting Group estimates that 50 percent of school districts across the United States have some form of these programs in place. (Watson et al., 2010). Christensen, Johnson, and Horn (2008), in their book *Disrupting Class,* estimate that by the year 2019, 50 percent of all high school courses will be online.

Based on what little we know about how many K–12 students are taking online courses, combined with the predicted growth in enrollment and increased pressure from students themselves (Project Tomorrow, 2009), you may very well find yourself faced with the expectation to teach in an online environment at some point in your career—whether you choose this medium or not. Although the variety in types of programs can be confusing at times, your primary goal should be to acquire the knowledge and understanding that will allow you to make appropriate professional decisions about how

best to promote learning for the students served in these nontraditional educational environments.

Who Teaches Online?

Voices from the Field

Teresa Grey Dove, EdD
*Online Teacher of Mathematics and Graduate Education*
2010 iNACOL and SREB National Online Teacher of the Year

Since I won the 2010 National Online Teacher of the Year award, I have been asked many times why I chose to teach online. Although there are many explanations as to why I continue teaching in the online environment, two major reasons really stand out at this point in my distance education journey.

First, my life demands flexibility. I have two toddler sons at home, ages 3 and 1. As you may imagine, both demand a lot of attention and care, and I wanted to be able to stay with them and enjoy them while they were young. This past year, I was able to pick up my computer and headset and work from numerous hospitals and ICUs throughout my state, so that I could be there for my mom as she fought for her life against lung cancer. This time I have been able to spend with her was priceless and something I would not trade for anything else in this world. She has been there so much for me, and I was glad I was in a position where I could finally be there for her.

Secondly, I teach online because I have a firm belief that our students deserve better. If you have ever taught in the traditional classroom, you understand when I say that we would consider it a "success" if we were able to take roll, check homework, deal with discipline issues, wake up a few students, teach the lesson, and still have 10 minutes at the end of the class period to circle around the room and help our students one-on-one with their homework. However, when you reflect on this, in a classroom of 30 students, 10 minutes allows you 20 seconds of one-on-one time per student. Twenty seconds . . . It's not enough, and our students deserve better. Online, the lesson planning and most of the direct instruction responsibilities are taken away. Instead, you get to spend that time working individually with your students and developing relationships with them. I average over 30 minutes of one-on-one phone time with each of my students every month. This is the equivalent of one semester's worth of one-on-one time they would receive in a traditional setting! When you combine the calls with all of the IMs, online synchronous sessions, and e-mails, the time you get to spend individually with each student far exceeds anything you would ever get to do in the traditional classroom.

The statistics are astonishing, and it is empowering as a teacher to know you can make so much more of a difference in a student's life. I never thought at this point in my career that I could say I have found my "niche" and what I want to do for the rest of my life. However, after teaching online and working with my students individually, I could not imagine ever doing anything else.
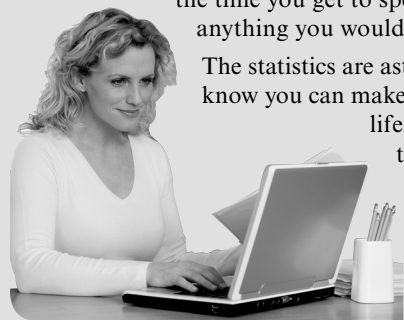
Online teachers are as varied as the students they serve and the online programs available to them. The story just shared by Teresa Grey Dove represents just one example of how teaching online can be both career changing and life changing. Research tells us that online teachers are just as qualified to teach as those in traditional brick-and-mortar schools—and perhaps more so—with nearly 100 percent meeting their state teacher certification requirements and over half having advanced degrees (Rice & Dawley, 2009). However, in addition to having the traditional certifications and endorsements required of all public school teachers, online teachers must also have a unique set of skills.

In the online classroom, teacher–student interaction may be the most important element for student success. Frequent interaction with parents is also essential particularly with younger learners. For these reasons, online teachers must be adept and skilled in communication skills, both verbal and written. As anyone living in the modern world can attest, change is constant. The dynamic nature of the Internet, the frequent introduction of new technologies, and the 24/7 access to online materials mean that flexibility, adaptability, and "out of the box" thinking are also critical qualities of online teachers. Finally, because online instructional strategies often require teachers to transcend the traditional models of teaching and learning, comfort and confidence in pedagogical knowledge and theories of learning also ensure a greater chance of success in online environments.

A word should probably be shared here about what online teaching is *not*. If you imagine that teaching online will be easier than teaching in person, then online teaching is not for you. In most instances, it is much more difficult, especially at first. Of course, this can be said for all teaching. You would expect your first teaching assignment to take much more time and effort than an assignment after having ten or more years of experience. Also consider that online teaching is not for everybody. Just because you are a good or even a great teacher in a traditional classroom, you will not necessarily be effective online. This does not mean you cannot become a great online teacher, but you may find it challenging to rethink old practices and to keep up with emerging and evolving technologies. So, if you like the ideas of flexibility, of challenging yourself, and of leveraging technology for student learning, then online teaching may just be a perfect fit.

At this point, you may be wondering how teachers are evaluated in online environments. As we get better and better at using this new medium for instruction, the process of evaluating teachers is also getting better. In general, effectiveness can be gauged by teachers who are highly skilled and diligent, who provide high and clear expectations, who care about their students and are fair to them, and who provide consistent and meaningful feedback. The

benefit of online environments in terms of evaluation is that digital archives, server logs, and communication logs allow us to empirically evaluate the effectiveness of instruction in ways that were never possible before. The online environment provides a transparency that is much different from the traditional "closed door" atmosphere of the past. When you teach online, administrators can view your written lessons and instructions and easily monitor the quality and quantity of your interactions with students and parents.

The online environment also facilitates your evaluation of students' learning. It allows you and your program to track student progress in ways that allow you to adjust your teaching or implement interventions before it is too late for students to recover, making you a better teacher in the process. Teacher evaluation is also often tied to student completion and performance, and some programs have even introduced incentives and bonuses for the best-performing teachers.

It Takes a Village

When you teach in a traditional school, you can rely on a variety of support personnel to assist you in meeting the needs of your learners. The same is true of online programs. Supplemental programs often have site coordinators, or individuals who are responsible for overseeing online courses at the school or district level. These school-to-program liaisons can assist students with course enrollment, answer questions, and connect learners with their online teachers. Sometimes, school counselors assume this role, and sometimes, personnel are hired specifically for this purpose.

The growing number of students enrolled in online courses has also resulted in the creation and development of special labs or academies within brick-and-mortar schools, whose sole purpose is to support students taking online courses. An hour or two may be set aside each day for students to gather in one place to work on online coursework with the assistance of a local teacher or adult monitor. Or a lab may be completely dedicated to online courses, and students can visit any time of day during their homeroom, lunchtime, or other breaks in the school day.

Because full-time programs are fully responsible for granting credit, they may also employ administrative staff and specialized curriculum and instructional personnel to support teachers across a large region or even the nation. Special education directors are an example of this. They work with state agencies to assist the school and the teacher in meeting state and federal mandates for services of special needs students. Superintendents, principals, and assistant principals can all be employees of K–12 online programs, depending on state policies regulating charters and supplemental programs. Individuals with titles

such as *Director* and *Head of School* perform similar duties as traditional high-level school administrators.

The Quality of Online Education

How Effective Are Online Courses?

Student success is as vital in online classrooms as it is in traditional classrooms. A growing body of evidence suggests that online environments are just as effective or even more effective than face-to-face environments. However, the evidence also suggests that good teaching—regardless of the media used to deliver the instruction—appears to be the central factor that makes a course effective (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Yet some criticisms have been leveled against the effectiveness of online learning, including problems related to technical difficulties, low learner motivation, isolation, poor learner readiness, lack of contact with the teacher, and low retention rates.

The key to success in online environments may have more to do with the characteristics primarily responsible for success in any teaching and learning environment—the quality of the learning materials and instruction—than with the medium used to deliver that instruction. What we know about online learning is that simply posting course content to the Web is not an effective use of the medium. Doing so would be akin to assigning a textbook to students in a face-to-face classroom, leaving the classroom, and expecting them to learn something.

What is becoming apparent is the need to move away from teacher-centered instructional strategies to strategies that incorporate learner-centered practices. The physical distance created in online learning means that the strategies we have long believed to be effective—for example, immediate feedback, visual cues, and time-structured activities—simply do not work. Instead, the emphasis must be placed on learner actions. We, as teachers, must take on the role of orchestrating the interactions learners have with the content, with their peers, with the computer, and with us. Luckily, plenty of information is available to help guide us in our search for effective online teaching strategies.

Are There Standards or Guidelines for K–12 Online Education?

To address quality concerns in online education, the development of standards for best practices in online teaching, as well as online course design, continues

to be a priority for organizations associated with K–12 online education. There are four organizations from which many programs obtain online learning and professional development guidance, and each has published its own standards and recommendations:

1. International Association for K–12 Online Learning (iNACOL)
   - *National Standards for Quality Online Courses (2007)*
   - *National Standards for Quality Online Teaching (2008)*

2. National Education Association (NEA)
   - *Guide to Online High School Courses (2006a)*
   - *Guide to Teaching Online Courses (2006b)*

3. Southern Regional Education Board (SREB)
   - *Standards for Quality Online Courses (2006a)*
   - *Standards for Quality Online Teaching (2006b)*
   - *Checklist for Evaluating Online Courses (2006c)*
   - *Online Teaching Evaluation Tool (2006d)*

4. International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE)
   - *National Educational Technology Standards (NETS) for Students (2007)*
   - *National Educational Technology Standards (NETS) for Teachers (2008)*
   - *National Educational Technology Standards (NETS) for Administrators (2009)*

A synthesis of the standards addressing quality online teaching reveals four main categories of key elements of which you should be aware (Crozier, Rice, & Homuth, 2008):

1. Online teacher qualifications
2. Teacher practice
3. Evaluation
4. Special needs and diverse learners

Each will be discussed in detail in the following section.

Online Teacher Qualifications

The standards and guidelines suggest that teachers responsible for delivering online instruction must possess a unique set of prerequisite skills to be effective. Skills in facilitating online communications, promoting and sustaining appropriate interactions (i.e., timely feedback, facilitated discussions and collaboration), and designing Web-based curricula and proficiency in using the available

technology to support instruction are essential for creating meaningful and productive electronic learning experiences.

- *Skill set:* While there are minor differences among organizations, all of them recommend that teachers possess prerequisite technology skills, including skills in the use of technology applications (i.e., word-processing, spreadsheet, presentation software), Internet applications, learning management systems (LMSs), and communication tools. Typically, course design recommendations have been handled as a separate set of standards, but because course design is so tightly intertwined with the instructional process in online environments, these have occasionally been included in the teaching standards.

- *Academic preparation and credentials:* Academic preparation of online teachers is addressed by all organizations with the assumption that these teachers meet the professional teaching standards for the state or program in which they will teach.

- *Online experience:* In general, all organizations recognize the importance of online experiences for teachers, which serve as models of the experiences their students will face. Organizations recommend that online teachers experience online learning environments themselves.

- *Professional development:* All organizations recommend that teachers participate in continuing education opportunities related to online teaching. Online teachers should demonstrate proficiency in content and online pedagogy and be provided with appropriate technical, administrative, and educational support (i.e., release time, mentoring, clear evaluation criteria, continuous professional development). In addition, online teachers should be able to demonstrate a specific skill set. Those skills revolve around effective design capabilities as well as instructional strategies that promote student interaction and engagement with each other, with the instructor, and with the content. The ISTE standards emphasize that teachers should not only focus on local online learning communities but also expand their discussions to include global learning communities.

Teacher Practice

The need for teachers to understand best practices in online environments is recognized as essential. This includes how and when to apply appropriate instructional strategies, leadership and participation in professional learning communities, and knowledge of legal and ethical issues in online environments.

- *Instructional strategies:* All organizations recognize that online learning environments should be student centered, flexible, and inquiry oriented. In addition, they recognize that the teacher should possess the ability to

incorporate effective instructional strategies through planning and design to encourage active learning, interaction, participation, and collaboration.

- *Leadership:* Leadership comprises those items that require the teacher's interaction or involvement in ways other than content area instruction. This may include but is not limited to parent contact, establishment of feedback and communication protocols, clear expectations, and teacher collaboration. Only the NEA specifically states that teachers should log into the course every day for the purpose of reviewing student participation and providing feedback. Noteworthy, as well, is the focus of the iNACOL standards on the development of 21st century skills and the importance of teacher-to-teacher collaboration and networking.

- *Learning community:* The ISTE standards focus on developing and utilizing the online learning community not only to learn course content but also to foster collaborative learning, research skills, creativity, and innovation. The ISTE standards emphasize the use of an online learning community to foster student collaboration, peer-to-peer teaching, and shared decision making.

- *Legal, ethical, and safe environments:* The iNACOL, SREB, and ISTE standards all contain a section devoted to legal and ethical considerations of online education and the ability of the teacher to model appropriate behaviors and establish guidelines for a safe and healthy environment for student learning.

Evaluation

Evaluation and assessment are key components of online educational environments. They apply to both student assessment and approaches to teacher and program evaluation.

- *Teaching/Program evaluation:* This topic is not addressed universally in the standards and guidelines. However, within the specific skill set recommended in the NEA's professional development framework, this organization addresses the need for and challenge of developing the critical knowledge and skills administrators should have to effectively evaluate online teaching. The NEA underscores the benefit of meaningful evaluation and guidance by administrators who possess the necessary skills to evaluate online teaching. Suggested criteria for evaluating teachers include developing communities of learners, fostering online discussions, collaborating, using course delivery tools, having an online voice and presence, providing feedback, updating course content, modifying content, and selecting and using appropriate tools to support instruction.

- *Student assessment:* Student assessment is addressed extensively by both SREB and iNACOL and in several ways. Topics include developing and delivering valid and reliable assessments that are authentic and standards based, using data from assessments to modify instruction, and enabling the development of independent and autonomous learning through self-review and peer review.

Special Needs and Diverse Learners

Meeting the needs of diverse learners is addressed in a variety of ways by all of the organizations. The NEA makes specific reference to the Section 508 requirements for accessibility. While the SREB and iNACOL do not specifically reference Section 508, they do recommend that teachers accommodate learners with special needs and be equipped with skills that allow them to employ instructional modifications, multiple paths for learning, strategies for nonnative English speakers, interactive and student-centered instructional strategies, variety in assessments, and enrichment opportunities. Using digital tools and resources to accommodate diverse needs, as well as adapting these tools to provide customized, student-centered learning environments, is recommended in the ISTE standards.

Quality Online Programs

Standards at the program level are much less developed than those at the course and teaching level. Some states, along with regional and private accreditation agencies, provide program guidelines with oversight based on student and parent satisfaction, achievement scores, and fiduciary responsibilities using anecdotal evidence and program evaluations and audits. Criteria that define the successful management and organization of online programs often include the following (Watson & Gemin, 2009b):

- *Curriculum development and course quality* are the building blocks for program success. Programs will vary in the number of courses they offer, how decisions are made about growth and content, what evaluation processes are used, and whether courses are developed by teachers or curriculum designers or purchased.

- *Teacher management* will vary widely depending on the program model and will affect teachers most directly. Teachers who work part time for a supplemental program can be handled much differently than those who teach full time in a virtual charter school. This area encompasses recruiting processes, the amount and quality of professional development, accountability and evaluation processes, support systems, and minimum requirements for communicating with students and parents.

- *Student support* will vary widely, as well, depending on the program model. Students in supplemental programs have very different needs than those in full-time online programs. In general, teachers will want to know how students access their courses, what orientation processes are in place, how student activity is tracked and monitored, and what specific supports are available for counseling, technical assistance, and learners with special needs.
- *Technology* is the medium used to deliver instruction to students, and the better the technology, the better teachers will be able to do their jobs. Teachers should look at how well learning management system (LMS) data are used to monitor student activity, conduct an annual evaluation of technology needs, and examine the scalability of current technologies for program growth.
- *Program evaluation* should be an integral part of every program's mission and should be ongoing. A program's success is judged on how well it meets state expectations and satisfies students, parents, and other stakeholders.

Understanding these basics can help you gather the information you need to make an informed decision about which school or program will be the best fit for you.

Choosing the Right Program for You

It may seem too early to think about how to choose the best school or program for you, but it is an important consideration that should be approached thoughtfully. When you contract with a school to teach, whether face to face or online, you commit yourself as a member of a team and a representative of that organization. When searching for employment, we do not often think about how well we fit a position or an organization, but doing so is critical if we want to be happy, successful, and effective in serving our learners to the best of our abilities.

Not all programs are created equal. For example, some are more restrictive than others in terms of the amount of flexibility you have in adapting the curriculum. Some allow student-to-student interactions, and some do not. Refer to the criteria outlined earlier, as well as other qualities of online programs discussed in this chapter, and as you work through the other chapters in this book, think about your style of teaching, whether you want to work from home or prefer having a place to go to work, if you intend to teach part time or full time, if you can adapt to the challenges of continuous enrollments, if a low teacher-to-student ratio is important to you, and so on.

Use the "Know Your School or Program" guide in Figure 1.2 to help you make the best decision for you. Add additional questions as they occur to you.

Figure 1.2 Important questions to ask of your school or program before you sign a contract

Know Your School or Program

School Model

- Work from home or central facility?
- Full-time or part-time employment?
- Fully facilitated, self-paced, or rolling enrollments?
- How does the pay compare to brick-and-mortar teacher pay? (You may have to give up some pay for the convenience of working from home.)
- Is a special credential or certificate needed to teach?
- Student-to-teacher ratio?
- Grade-level designations? (Some programs use mastery- or competency-based identifiers to place students, rather than grade-level designations.)
- Family grouping? (If a program is flexible enough, it will sometimes group siblings from the same family with one teacher. This often depends on how close in age the children are.)
- Established criteria for teacher evaluation? What are evaluation processes?
- Incentives and bonuses?
- How much travel is required?

Quality Indicators

- What is the curriculum? Is it well designed?
- What level of flexibility do I have to enhance and supplement the curriculum?
- Are there teacher supports and standards-based professional development opportunities?
- Are there student supports for enrollment, orientation, academics, technical, counseling, and mentoring?
- Is there support for learners with special needs?
- Does the program incorporate learner-centered models of instruction?

- Are there opportunities for student socialization?
- Is the program accredited? If so, by whom?
- Are there continuous improvement processes in place? If so, what are they?
- Are mechanisms for tracking student progress available or alert systems in place to assist in identifying at-risk or struggling learners so appropriate interventions can be implemented?

Policies and Guidelines

- Policies for student and teacher computer use (AUP)?
- Policies for student-to-student communication?
- Mechanisms for reporting inappropriate student behavior?

Final Thoughts

K–12 online programs represent a growing opportunity for learners who want to engage in alternative educational experiences and educators who are willing to embrace change in traditional models of teaching and learning. The organization and makeup of these programs can be quite varied, depending on the growing needs of a state, district, or school. As you read this book, be sure to remember that it is not the *medium* that facilitates learning but the instructional *strategies* employed that result in satisfactory online experiences and student outcomes. This emphasis is clearly articulated in the national and regional standards for K–12 online teaching and learning.
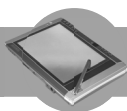
Apply What You Have Learned

1. **Create an e-Portfolio.**

   Learning Activity: Many of the learning activities in this guide contain an e-Portfolio option, providing the opportunity for you to document your work and provide evidence of your understanding. Begin your e-Portfolio now using any number of available tools. (Links to tools can be found on the associated website.) If you need help locating information on e-Portfolios, Dr. Helen Barrett offers a comprehensive description along with multiple examples of e-Portfolios using a variety of Web-based tools (both open

source and commercial) on her website: http://electronicportfolios.org. Once you have created your e-Porfolio, complete the following activities:

- Create an "About Me" page with a professional description of your interests and goals.
- Create an area for posting your resume or curriculum vitae.

2. **Explore the standards and guidelines for K–12 online teachers.**

Learning Activity: If the state in which you teach offers a set of standards for online teachers, take time now to review them. If not, choose a set of standards from one of the organizations reviewed in this chapter.

- e-Portfolio option Include the pertinent information about your chosen standards in your e-Portfolio. Think about how you might organize your portfolio so that you can demonstrate evidence in meeting the standards with artifacts and self-reflection.

3. **Explore organizations associated with K–12 online learning.**

Learning Activity: Explore the resources listed below (or on the associated website for this text). Become a member of an organization or professional learning community, and actively participate in a K–12 online learning discussion.

- International Association for K–12 Online Learning (iNACOL): www.inacol.org
- International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE): www.iste.org
- TeacherStream: http://teacherstream.org
- United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA): www.usdla.org

Chapter Resources

- K–12 Online Schools
  http://k12onlineschools.org
- International Association for K–12 Online Learning (iNACOL)
  www.inacol.org
- International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE)
  www.iste.org
- Southern Regional Education Board (SREB)
  www.sreb.org
- National Education Association (NEA)
  www.nea.org

- United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA)
  www.usdla.org
- TeacherStream
  http://teacherstream.org
- Evergreen Education Group
  http://evergreenedgroup.com
- Free World U
  www.freeworldu.org
- Dr. Helen Barrett: Electronic Portfolios
  http://electronicportfolios.org

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