



K-12 ONLINE EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN COLORADO

by Katey McGettrick

In Colorado, there are two types of online education programs: those that serve students from a single district and those that serve students across multiple districts. Currently, 22 multi-district programs and 12 single-district programs operate in Colorado. For the current school year, 14,229 students are enrolled in multi-district programs, and about 450 students are enrolled in single-district programs. This issue brief discusses the operation, oversight, funding, and accountability structure for on-line programs.

Program authorization and criteria. Under state law, school districts, boards of cooperative educational services (BOCES), and the state Charter School Institute (CSI) are authorized to create and oversee single- and multi-district online programs. An online program may be operated as a charter school or as a district school and is subject to the same accountability laws that govern all public schools in Colorado. Additionally, online programs must meet the quality standards established by the State Board of Education (SBE), which address a variety of issues ranging from governance and administration to tracking student performance and ensuring Internet safety.

A student who participates in an online program must be a resident of Colorado and must demonstrate that he or she possesses the appropriate electronic equipment and resources to participate in the program, which may be provided to the student by the online

program. Additionally, students are subject to the state's compulsory school attendance law and to the laws pertaining to the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP).

Multi-district program certification. If a school district, BOCES, or the CSI wants to authorize a multi-district program, it must apply for certification to the Division of Online Learning (division) within the Colorado Department of Education. The SBE may waive the requirement for certification if the program being authorized will serve ten students or fewer from outside the district. In reviewing certification applications, the division must consider the following:

- whether the authorizer possesses adequate resources and capacity to oversee the multi-district program;
- whether the plan for operating and monitoring the program addresses areas such as governance, student support, staff development, financial practices, and other administrative issues; and
- the degree to which the program will satisfy the SBE quality standards for online programs.

Oversight. The division is responsible for reviewing multi-district programs two years after initial certification, and every three years thereafter. If the division determines that the program no longer meets one or more of the criteria established by the

SBE, it must notify the program and the authorizer, and provide a reasonable amount of time for corrective action. If the authorizer fails to take corrective action, the division must notify the SBE and recommend actions to address the situation.

In addition to the certification process, online programs are required to submit an annual report to the division, which must include:

- how the online program has satisfied the SBE quality standards;
- the ratio of adults to students in the online program, which state law stipulates is not required to be the equivalent of licensed teachers to students;
- the number of online teachers who satisfy the professional requirements specified under the federal No Child Left Behind Act; and
- the annual budget of the program.

Program delivery. Online programs are delivered in a virtual or remote setting, such as a home or at a learning center. Under state law, a learning center is defined as a facility in which a consistent group of students meets more than once per week under the supervision of a teacher or mentor for a significant portion of the day. State law prohibits a private home or a group of parents and students meeting occasionally, repeatedly, and informally, even if facilitated by a school, to be considered a learning center.

Typically, the curriculum for online programs is purchased from a third party vendor. Some online programs opt to supplement the purchased curriculum with materials developed in-house. Four online programs use a third party vendor to wholly operate the school, and the remainder of the programs use district teaching staff or charter school staff to operate the program. As with any charter or district school, online programs may seek waivers for certain state laws and SBE rules. An online charter school may be granted certain waivers through the normal process of establishing a charter school, and a school district must apply for waivers and receive approval from SBE.

Funding of on-line learning. Online programs are funded through the Public School Finance Act of 1994. In the current fiscal year, an estimated 14,229 students are enrolled in multi-district online programs and are funded at \$6,228 per pupil, accounting for about \$88.6 million of school finance funding, or about 1.6 percent of total funding this year. Students enrolled in full-time, single-district programs are funded at the district's regular per-pupil funding.

Accountability data. Online schools are required to meet state and federal accountability requirements. The state accountability program assigns every school in Colorado a plan type that indicates its attainment on the four performance indicators: academic achievement; academic growth; academic growth gaps; and postsecondary and workforce readiness (high school only). Based on these performance indicators, a school is issued one of the following plans: performance, improvement, priority improvement, or turnaround. Struggling schools are issued priority improvement and turnaround plans and are subject to additional scrutiny by CDE. For schools that span the elementary, middle, and high school levels, a district may opt to combine the school levels into one plan or issue a plan for each school level. Of the 22 multi-district online programs, three schools have aggregated plans — of these, two are on performance plans, and one is on an improvement plan. For the remainder of the schools, plans have been issued by school level, which is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1
Multi-District Online Programs
Plan Types by School Level

Plan Type	E	M	H	Total
Performance	0	1	3	4
Improvement	2	4	5	11
Priority Improvement	3	3	4	10
Turnaround	2	3	6	11

E= Elementary; M = Middle; H = High.

Source: Colorado Department of Education