

Pioneers in Education:

A Closer Look at How Technology Is
Catalyzing Schools Across America

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school



About Future of School

As the first-ever public charity focused on access to quality education, Future of School is dedicated to mobilizing change in American K-12 education from a one-size-fits-all system to one that ensures all students reach their unbounded potential.

Our Student Scholarship Program rewards students for their courage to forge new learning pathways, giving them greater financial means to continue their education in whatever post-secondary school they choose.

Through the Innovative Educator Prize, we empower pioneering educators with grant funding that enables them to bring programs and tools into the classroom to transform the learning experience.

By amplifying technology's impact on students and educators, we inform, inspire and spearhead much needed change.

Future of School is an organization of the people, by the people and for the people that calls on students, parents, educators, and employers to band together to embrace and inspire the future of our society and prepare the workforce of tomorrow. Join the movement at futureof.school.

Introduction

Future of School (FoS)¹ has provided scholarships to students who have completed online/blended learning courses in a variety of schools since 2016. In doing so, FoS has developed a data set from its scholarship applicants and winners. Although creating this data set was not the goal of FoS, the resulting information is valuable in that it helps educators, policymakers, the media, and others understand why students are choosing online/blended learning options.

As explained more fully in the text box, a companion study titled *Student Perspectives on Blended and Online Learning* explores student choices in detail. This study builds on findings from that report to explore how schools are responding to the rise in demand from students for more access to expanded courses and class offerings.

This study is organized as follows:

- This brief introduction reviews the purpose of the report, and includes some information from the companion report, providing an overview of reasons that students choose online/blended learning options.
- The bulk of this document is a compilation of information describing the reasons why scholarship winners chose online/blended learning. It explores how and why their school made such opportunities available. The information is based on students' essays and videos submitted as part of the scholarship process, research about the schools themselves, and interviews with school leaders.
- A short conclusion summarizes findings and argues that these schools are demonstrating a path forward for the future of education

The schools described in this report include traditional public schools, online schools, charter schools, blended schools, and schools that fall into more than one of these categories. One main outcome of this research was the ability to highlight how a wide range of schools across the country is meeting (and some cases exceeding) the needs of students in their academic pursuits by leveraging technology in creative ways.

¹ At the time Future of School was operating as the Foundation for Blended and Online Learning.

One topic, two studies

This is the second of two associated studies that explore why students selected online or blended learning opportunities, and how schools are meeting students' interests and needs.

The first report provided an in-depth review of why students chose an online or blended school, or individual online courses while enrolled in a traditional school.

This study explores how schools are meeting these student needs. It details the reasons that Future of School scholarship winners selected online/blended courses, and provides insights from the schools regarding why and how they were able to provide these opportunities to their students.

For simplicity, both reports refer to the range of digital learning opportunities, from fully online schools to blended schools to online course, simply as "online/blended learning."

Why students choose online/blended learning

The companion report explains in more depth the reasons that students choose online/blended schools and courses. Figure 1, also available in that report, provides the percentage of scholarship applicants who gave each of the most commonly cited reasons.

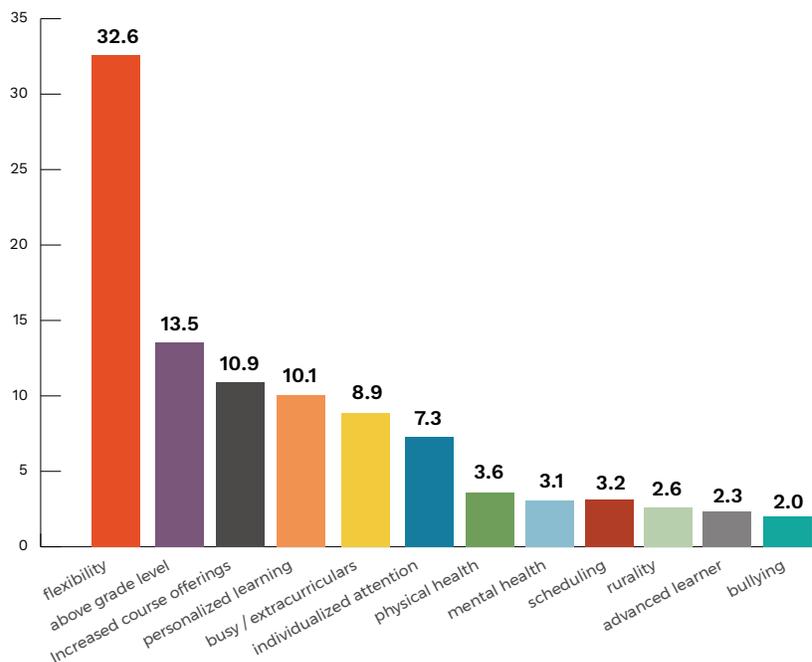


Figure 1: Reasons given by students for choosing online/blended learning. The x-axis represents the percentage of Future of School scholarship applicants who referenced each reason.

This report is based on scholarship winners (not applicants). The reasons cited are similar in both data sets, but not exactly the same. The following section reviews the following reasons:

- Flexibility
- Above Grade Level Courses
- Increased Course Options
- Personalized Learning
- Busy/Extracurriculars
- More Individual Attention
- Physical Health
- Mental Health
- Scheduling Challenges
- Rurality
- Advanced Learner
- Home/ Extra Responsibilities

The following pages review each of these reasons from student and school perspectives.

Flexibility

The number one reason reported by students for choosing online/blended learning was the flexibility to schedule learning to best meet their needs. *Flexibility* also signified students' ability to move at their own pace through their course work. Students appreciated having time to "review the lessons more in depth...whether day or night" and "customize courses to their learning and lifestyle."

Wausau Area Virtual Education

Wausau, WI

Virtual charter school in the Wausau School District serving full and part-time student enrollments in Wisconsin

GRADE LEVELS SERVED:

6-12

NUMBER OF STUDENTS SERVED:

145

Wausau Area Virtual Education (WAVE) is a 6-12th grade virtual public charter offered through the Wausau School District (WSD) serving 145 students total, 66 of whom are full-time (grades 6-12). The others (79) are part-time students. The majority of full-time students are in grades 9-12. The part-time students include homeschool students who opt in for two courses as well as parochial students who have limited course options in their school. Full-time WAVE students can enroll in up to two classes in either of two high schools in WSD and can participate in WSD sports and extracurricular opportunities. WAVE courses are offered online by WSD teachers, who work diligently to form meaningful, supportive relationships and connections with students. While courses are all online, WAVE has a physical location in a local mall where students can come in for teachers' office hours. Students come in as they need help. If students are not close by, they meet with their teachers virtually during office hours. Jenny Seymour, WAVE's Principal, said, "We give kids the freedom to have that flexibility in and ownership of their learning. Our motto at WAVE is really about 24-7 education; wherever they are, they have the opportunity to learn. Our learners, like Skylar [who was awarded the FoS Scholarship] with her horse training and technical education, thrive on taking control of their learning and creating a schedule that is flexible and meets their needs and interests." Beyond WAVE courses, Teri Sether, WAVE's Counselor, helps students enroll in online and face-to-face college courses, "which adds even more flexibility for students in what courses they are able to pursue."



"I chose online learning because working at my own pace allowed me more flexibility to choose when I completed my schoolwork, worked at my job, and trained horses... Shifting to online learning gave me more freedom and confidence to be successful... It's super flexible because you can do it whenever you want."

— Skylar Wise,
2019 Scholarship Winner

Flexibility

Chicago Virtual Charter School

Chicago, IL

Public charter school offering hybrid learning opportunities to students in Chicago

GRADE LEVELS SERVED:

K-12

NUMBER OF STUDENTS SERVED:

482

Chicago Virtual Charter School (CVCS) is a hybrid learning school serving grades K-12. CVCS offers a variety of courses to its students, who are required to come to the CVCS Learning Center one day a week. During their day at the Learning Center, students work with onsite core curriculum teachers to receive direct instruction. During the rest of the week, the students work online alongside their learning coaches, who are often parents, guardians, or community members who are invested in the student's success. CVCS teachers also offer live online sessions, depending on need, to their whole class, groups of students, or one-on-one. CVCS teachers work with students online in addition to the online teachers that are employed by the course provider. Vikki Stokes, Interim CEO of CVCS, explained that "our program goes with the flow of the students specific to their pacing needs. We have students who have graduated at the age of 13 and others who struggle and need additional help with skill-building." CVCS offers tutoring services and interventions as students need the additional help and guidance. Stokes added, "In addition to varying academic needs, we also have students who have other interests they are pursuing like the arts, sports, and acting to name a few. We also have students who have varying religious beliefs and need flexibility for their personal spiritual practices. Some of our high school students are taking college courses. Some of our middle schoolers are taking high school courses. If students are capable, we don't put up a barrier saying that they can't take a certain course because of their grade level. We try to meet each student where they are and with the supports they need to accomplish what they want to do in life."



"What I really loved about virtual school is that there's no set schedule...I have learned how to make my own schedule...and manage my own time...so that I am organized and efficient. I know that in college, students will need these skills in order to succeed, so the fact that I have learned and strengthened these skills from a young age makes me feel that I am very prepared for the next chapter of my life."

— Ericka Woods, 2016 Scholarship Winner

Above Grade Level Courses

For students who are moving faster than other students in their class, access to above grade level courses help to keep students engaged and challenged in their learning. Students reported that they “prefer to be intellectually challenged in a school environment...[and] given the opportunity to attend classes such as AP Calculus and various dual enrollment courses.” Above grade level courses allowed students to also “experience a little bit of what college classes were going to be like.”

Pomperaug High School

Southbury, CT

Traditional public high school located 45 minutes southwest of Hartford

GRADE LEVELS SERVED:

9-12

NUMBER OF STUDENTS SERVED:

1,300

Pomperaug High School (PHS) is a traditional high school located in Southbury, Connecticut. As Dr. Paul N. Jones, Pomperaug High School’s Principal, expressed, “At Pomperaug, we try to offer high-level courses that provide students with experiences for the world they are entering. We offer Advanced Placement courses that provide student experience at the college level, which Henry [who was awarded the FoS Scholarship] participated in. We also use an online course provider, which allows us to provide a larger variety of higher-level courses than what we can offer here at our school because we don’t have as many students who are interested. Through career-based and college-level course work, both online and face-to-face, we try to provide as many opportunities for our students to adjust their schedules to set up a learning path that best meets their needs.” When students want to take online courses or a college course, they work with their school counselor to enroll, as these offerings are part of PHS’s program of studies. PHS pays for the students’ courses and works with students to provide them with space at school to engage in their online course work. While PHS does not have a 1:1 device program, Jones explained that students have access to devices at school if they need them. Students can also work on their online courses at home. About 60% of the 1,300 students take advantage of AP courses offered at PHS, and a smaller percentage, including students like Henry, take online courses and college-level courses, both online and face-to-face. If a student’s face-to-face college courses are scheduled during the day when they’re normally at PHS, as long as the student’s other courses do not conflict with that college course, the students have the flexibility to leave campus to travel to the college.



“I have always sought out knowledge. The most useful things I learned in high school were search, open a new tab, and full screen. In the classroom, I was constantly curious of what else there was to each topic beyond what the teacher said and beyond what normal students would consider relevant...With advanced online options, I pursued my interest in science and gained qualifications for my career...research[ing] real-world applications.”

— Henry Hu,
2017 Scholarship Winner

Above Grade Level Courses

Texas Connections Academy

Houston, TX

Fully online school serving students across Texas

GRADE LEVELS SERVED:

3-12

NUMBER OF STUDENTS SERVED:

6,100 total
(grades 9-12 = 3,400)

Texas Connections Academy (TCA) is a fully online school that partners with the Houston Independent School District (HISD) to serve students across the state. TCA serves about 6,100 students in grades 3-12, with about 3,400 in grades 9-12. Students attend their courses asynchronously unless they're pursuing community college courses, some of which require synchronous meetings. As Brita Lindsey, TCA's High School Principal, emphasized, "Students have many options to take above grade level courses at TCA. We offer over 10 Advanced Placement courses, and through our partnership with HISD, we have agreements with four community colleges, providing our students dual credit opportunities. Over 40% of my staff have graduate degrees in their content areas, including mechanical engineering specializing in orthopedic research and mathematics specializing in systems engineering; four of them have doctoral degrees and an additional two are doctoral candidates. Our teachers love to learn, and I believe it's important to provide them multiple layers of support that will then trickle to student supports. Well-supported teachers provide meaningful support to students. We are constantly working to provide support for our students no matter where they are at, and what we've noticed over time is that our gifted kids need just as much support as our struggling kids. We have a unique opportunity because our online environment affords our educators space to personalize the learning experience and supports for each of our students." TCA also uses College Board and Khan Academy resources and tools to extend their students' learning. TCA is the first virtual school in the world to be approved to offer an AP Capstone Diploma.



"Online courses can not only help bridge learning gaps for struggling students, but they can help students that already excel to excel even more...I learn at a much faster pace...I have been able to take more advanced courses including AP and online dual credit courses. This has resulted in me having 59 credit hours that will count towards my college degree."

— Matthew Whorton, 2019 Scholarship Winner

Increased Course Options

Many scholarship applicants shared how important access to increased course options was to their learning process. Some students added that the courses they wanted to take often were not available at their school. They said that their school recognized a need to “bridge the gap by providing opportunities to students who want specialized classes, [such as ones in the] medical field” and “computer science or programming.”

Melba High School

Melba, ID

Traditional public high school serving students 30 miles southwest of Boise

GRADE LEVELS SERVED:

9-12

NUMBER OF STUDENTS SERVED:

315

Melba High School (MHS) is located in Boise and serves 315 students in grades 9-12. For the last eight years, upon entry into MHS, each student meets with their counselor and principal to design a learning pathway. As Eric Forsgren, Principal of MHS, said, “Whether students want to go into workforce training or college before or upon graduation, we want to set them on that pathway to reach their goal based on their needs and interests. We change our schedule to meet whatever our students need and try to find every opportunity to help and support them with what they want to do.” Dr. Andy Grover, Melba School District’s Superintendent, agreed, “One of the things we try to do for all our students is, if there’s something that we don’t offer, we figure out where we can get it from. For instance, in the case of Payton [who was awarded the FoS Scholarship], for Calculus 2, we set her up with an online class from the state virtual school and a tutor at Boise State University.” Pathway creation starts as early as 7th grade for those students interested in graduating high school with an associate’s degree. About 43% of MHS students take advantage of dual credit options, which is the highest percentage in the state. Grover explained that MHS has six students who attend the College of Western Idaho half the day while two other students attend Kuna High School for two periods a day for Emergency Medical Technician training. Grover continued, “Next year, we’re partnering with Kuna School District so our students can take courses part-time from their new Career and Technical Education school.” MHS also uses the state virtual school for electives and certifications, as well as the University of Idaho for internships and work release programs.



“I [started taking] college courses in high school [and] took a few online classes a year...In my junior year..., I took history and government classes to put me ahead [and] IT tech language courses. In my senior year, [I took] as many classes as I could for college credit that pertain to the degree in technology I will pursue..., [including] Calculus 2, JavaScript, HTML, Intro to Programming, and other general classes. ”

— Payton Grover,
2016 Scholarship
Winner

Increased Course Options

Marshwood High School

South Berwick, ME

Traditional public high school serving students in southern Maine

GRADE LEVELS SERVED:

9-12

NUMBER OF STUDENTS SERVED:

716

Marshwood High School (MHS) is a comprehensive public high school that serves 716 students in grades 9 through 12. As David Lietz, MHS's Gifted and Talented (GT) Specialist, emphasized, "Marshwood High School has an extensive curriculum that really does a great job in meeting most of our students' needs. About 20% of our students enhance their learning at some point during their time at Marshwood by supplementing with a variety of online, dual enrollment, or independent study accelerated options. The quote from Noble [who was awarded the FoS Scholarship] really does a good job of summarizing many of the options that we offer for all of our students. These opportunities are not just available to those in the GT Program. Every single student has the option to take online coursework and do independent studies." When students are interested, they meet with their guidance counselor to see what courses would work to address their needs. Once they choose their course(s), students often work with a mentor within the building who supports their learning. Students can work on their online classes in the library, cafeteria, in Lietz's classroom, or at home. MHS also participates in the Early College for Maine Program, which allows access to any online college courses offered by the University of Maine system. York County Community College a, local community college, provides dual enrollment instructors at MHS to teach college courses to students. There are literally hundreds of accelerated online learning options in which students can participate. Additionally, because Marshwood has students who attend MHS from Rollinsford, New Hampshire (NH), those students can take college-level and other accelerated courses through NH's Virtual Learning Academy Charter School. Mr. Lietz added, "Marshwood High School allows opportunities for any student who's interested to participate in accelerated and enriched coursework through online programming."



"I have used online courses to explore a wide variety of subjects, from differential equations to macroeconomics, through MIT Open Courseware,... Maine's AP4All program...and Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth...I did a bunch of independent studies in my high school that are all on my transcript...I never get bored and am always encountering new intellectual challenges. In general, online classes...permit students to pursue their own interests [and] expand educational opportunities."

— Noble Mushtak, 2019 Scholarship Winner

Personalized Learning

Personalized learning was another reason why scholarship applicants chose an online/blended learning option. Students understand that “everyone does not learn the same,” and schools acknowledged that “not all children are on the same learning level and [they] are willing to listen to student needs and make a plan specifically for [each] student.”

Iowa BIG

Cedar Rapids, IA

High school program offering learning opportunities to students in four partnering school districts

GRADE LEVELS SERVED:

9-12

NUMBER OF STUDENTS SERVED:

250 students mostly part-time, with 30 “80%ers” and 5 full-time

A high school program offering core and elective learning to students through four partnering school districts, Iowa BIG serves 250 students, most of whom choose to attend Iowa BIG for 50% of their day with the balance at their traditional high school; the majority of their course standards are completed through project-based learning. Approximately 30 of those students are doing the majority (80%) of their learning with Iowa BIG, and five students are working with Iowa BIG full-time. Iowa BIG connects students with businesses, non-profits, and government agencies to work on authentic projects that have meaningful impact. Most students work on two projects with Iowa BIG for half of every school day. Teachers and students co-align project tasks to meet state standards with scheduled progress checks. For instance, a student could meet sociology, economics, and English standards through one project. Students join project teams, bringing their talents while also challenging themselves where they have room to grow. Some Iowa BIG courses have standards that can't be covered by a project, like literature. In those cases, teachers hold seminars to teach the standards. Trace Pickering, Iowa BIG's Executive Director, shared, “We're founded on three ideas: passions, projects, and community. Our students' passions are the vehicle for learning through authentic projects that have real outcomes, clients, and impact; we use our community to build partnerships with businesses, non-profits, and government agencies, allowing us to be highly personalized to what the students care about.” Students have voice and choice about the projects they want to engage with. Pickering added, “One of the realizations that we had is that most assignments kids do in school are fake, serving no purpose other than validating a grade or score for an audience of one. Our biggest joy and our biggest struggle is helping students confront their newfound freedom.”



“I know a student that was disengaged, felt without purpose, and was angry at the traditional education system. That student was me...Angrily, I rebelled...struggling academically and behaviorally...until I found Iowa BIG, a learner-centered program...Our main learning is through blended learning with passion projects... [that include] large-scale collaborations that incorporate businesses, nonprofits, and government agencies to solve real world issues...I immediately excelled when I was given agency, voice, and choice in my learning. ”

— Jemar Lee, 2018 Scholarship Winner

Personalized Learning

Shoshone High School

Shoshone, ID

Traditional public school located 90 minutes southeast of Boise

GRADE LEVELS SERVED:

9-12

NUMBER OF STUDENTS SERVED:

125

With 125 students, Shoshone High School (SHS) is located in a rural area of Idaho between Sun Valley and Twin Falls. Superintendent Rob Waite recalled that “Jasmyn [who was awarded the FoS Scholarship] was part of a group of students who are advanced. By the time they are seniors, if they’re advanced enough and they’ve exhausted all learning options at SHS, then we encourage them to take courses through the College of Western Idaho, which is a nearby community college that we have a really strong relationship with. Students can also take online high school courses as well. Usually two to three students each year partake in the college-level courses.” For Jasmyn specifically, her entire schedule was made up of online courses through College of Western Idaho and Yavapai College in Arizona. As Waite emphasized, “If students need something that we don’t offer in the traditional classroom, then we’ll find something to meet their needs and interests.” Kelly Chapman, Principal of Shoshone Middle and High School, said, “We support students as a team. The student might start by talking to their counselor or teacher or to me directly and even the Superintendent. And then we have a formal conversation with them about what they’re interested in and find something for them.” Waite also mentioned that sometimes the request comes from one of their teachers, counselor, Principal, or Superintendent. He emphasized, “We all know the students so well that we can do that.” SHS also encourages teachers to personalize their classes for each student by offering additional online content resources and materials to keep the students challenged and engaged.



“With online learning, I have had options for face-to-face video chats, phone calls, and emails... Having a one-on-one connection with your teacher and being able to go to them with your problems and your confusion and your questions is something that has always been important to me. Getting one-on-one help has truly been so rewarding.”

— Jasmyn Brown, 2019 Scholarship Winner

Busy/Extracurriculars

Many of the scholarship applicants chose online/blended learning to create space to accommodate their involvement in extracurricular activities, such as sports, work, travel, and volunteering. Students emphasized that their learning options allowed them to “work part-time...and continue a strong commitment to my community and church” as well as “excel in Tier I Ice Hockey.”

STAR Prep Academy

Manhattan, CA

Blended school serving high-achieving students

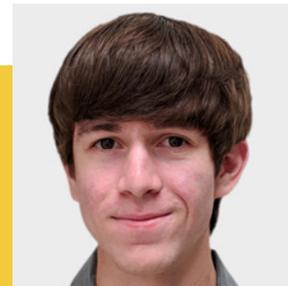
GRADE LEVELS SERVED:

7-12

NUMBER OF STUDENTS SERVED:

60

STAR Prep is a full-time blended learning program serving up to 60 high-achieving students in grades 7-12. Students attend block-scheduled classes Monday through Thursday and use Friday as an open day to explore extracurriculars and internships. Tery Arnold, Director of STAR Prep Academy, explained how “Thomas [who was awarded the FoS Scholarship] came to us from a public school where he felt that his personal endeavors were not supported, and he was not granted the extended time to pursue his many professional interests. So he came to STAR Prep for 10th-12th grades. We’re focused on individualized learning for students who have gifts, and we help to nurture those gifts by giving them a day-to-day schedule that allows them to not only use that gift out in the world but also within our school.” Marisa Cleghorn, STAR Cluster Leader (the statewide nonprofit organization that started and manages STAR Prep), added, “This experience is definitely not unique to Thomas; it’s truly the mission and vision of our school, which is to provide that support structure for students so that they have the opportunities to pursue things that they’re passionate about. We make connections with our curriculum, so it’s about what you’re learning, why you’re learning it, and how you’re using it for a greater purpose.” Thomas Valencia, STAR Prep’s Principal, spoke about the curriculum and how he and the staff work hard to make that direct connection between what students are doing in the classroom and the passions they are pursuing. Valencia shared, “Because we are accommodating so many varying needs, putting together the master calendar is very challenging at times. It often means a very unique, sometimes weird, schedule every semester, but we create a schedule that affords students the time to pursue their passions.”



“Blended and online learning have provided me with the flexibility to work on other projects...and pursue other interests while maintaining my grades and commitment. I often travel between locations to pursue new opportunities for my startups. Blended and online learning has allowed me to run my venture capital funded startup, obtain a technology patent, build my non-profit online programming class, and give speeches worldwide, all in synchrony with my classes.”

— Thomas Suarez, 2018 Scholarship Winner

Busy/Extracurriculars

Spruce Creek High School

Port Orange, FL

Traditional public high school serving students on the east coast of Florida south of Daytona Beach

GRADE LEVELS SERVED:

9-12

NUMBER OF STUDENTS SERVED:

2,500

Spruce Creek High School (SCHS) is an art-focused school that allows students to mix curriculum. Karie Cappiello, SCHS's Guidance and International Baccalaureate Coordinator, said, "Students like Ethan [who was awarded the FoS Scholarship], can develop a mixed curriculum using a combination of SCHS campus courses, dual enrollment classes at the local community college (both online and on campus), IB, AP, master classes, and online courses from district and state virtual schools. The students can create a hybrid schedule to meet their needs." Every student's schedule is different depending on what they are involved in, and they do not have to be on campus all day. They come and go as they need to in order to take classes and participate in learning opportunities within the community. Each year, the counseling team, led by Cappiello, sits down with each student to register them and develop a plan. The SCHS faculty matches students with community experts and additional resources to help them further their interests. Dr. Todd Sparger, SCHS's Principal, stressed, "It is more challenging, as students have more choices and options, to try to make it work in a traditional setting, with buses, lunch, student safety, and accountability. We have to balance all that while meeting the needs of our students. We manage within the framework we have, and it's not always perfect." Cappiello emphasized that creating the master schedule is a critical part of the process to make sure that the courses are offered at a time that meets students' needs. She added, "The schedule doesn't always jive as we'd like it to, and there have to be some exceptions, but we try to make it work as best we can. Communication is the most important thing between students, families, the colleges, online providers, and the staff."



"With a busy lifestyle, like one that is completely immersed in the arts, finding time to do school work is an arduous task... Between piano, acting, voice, and dance lessons, and productions like musicals, plays, and more, it's endless...For students like me who work and spend their entire day focused on their art and future, online classes are the key to success."

— Ethan Rich,
2017 Scholarship Winner

More Individual Attention

Scholarship applicants were happy when their schools provided them more individual attention from teachers, counselors, and tutors. Students commented that “teachers cared if I showed up to class [and] would go out of their way to call when I didn’t show up and even reached out to me first.”

University Scholars Program Pennsylvania Leadership Charter School

West Chester, PA

Onsite blended program situated within the Pennsylvania Leadership Charter School that offers learning opportunities for gifted students across the state

GRADE LEVELS SERVED:

6-12

NUMBER OF STUDENTS SERVED:

260 full-time with some students opting to take a course to supplement as needed

The University Scholars Program (USP) is situated in Pennsylvania Leadership Charter School (PALCS), a public cyber school in Pennsylvania serving over 3,100 K-12 students across the state. Christopher Stiles, University Scholars Principal, detailed how “The USP serves students who are gifted and high-achieving. We follow the multiple criteria model, casting a broader net to those interested in learning alongside the top 5%. Students work with the guidance counselor to develop an individualized track based on needs and abilities.” USP is an “on-site blend,” where local students come onto campus for core courses two or three days a week. All electives are taken online. For virtual students located farther away, they learn in virtual classrooms (live, synchronous), though some are accessing learning jointly with onsite students in an onsite/blended environment. Stiles added, “Maximum class size is 15, so teachers and students really get to know each other. Our students, like Eliana [who was awarded the FoS Scholarship], are awesome and really love to learn, and the teachers are designing instruction just for them.” Most students will loop back to the same teachers over the years for different classes, building trust and consistency. USP’s guidance counselor provides students emotional support as well as career and post-secondary guidance. Students are provided what USP calls “Safety Net” to help support them when they are struggling. If a student has an IEP, PALCS provides special education teachers for support. Students can also take leadership roles to help each other as peer tutors, teaching assistants, and prefects. Extracurriculars are available at USP and are called “extracurriculumums” because “students can learn just as much if not more from these – like Mock Trial, Robotics, Drama Club,” according to Stiles. The relationships created in these extracurriculumums expand the individual attention beyond the coursework.



“[At USP], the emphasis on community rather than competition enhances the learning environment, encouraging us to help each other grow...The blended learning program also meant that we could meet onsite with teachers and classmates from the area...The teachers and staff are personable, and they know every student by name. It’s truly like an extended family...My road to college has been a richly personalized experience.”

— Eliana Chow,
2017 Scholarship
Winner

More Individual Attention

Agora Cyber Charter School

King of Prussia, PA

Online charter school serving students across Pennsylvania

GRADE LEVELS SERVED:

K-12

NUMBER OF STUDENTS SERVED:

5,400

Agora Cyber Charter School (ACCS) is a full-time online public school serving 5,400 students across Pennsylvania. Over 2,700 of those students are enrolled in grades 9-12. Students receive synchronous instruction, where they attend daily, live online classes. Some students qualify for independent, asynchronous learning. Both the synchronous and asynchronous students engage in discussion boards, assessments, readings, and other similar learning tasks. About 2,200 high school students are synchronous, with a student-teacher ratio for live sessions of 35:1. As Holly Allen, ACCS’s Assistant Principal for 12th grade, explained, “In the synchronous path, students have a schedule similar to traditional school, where they attend live online classes. We have seven class periods each day. Our asynchronous plan works well for those students who have responsibilities outside of school, such as athletic training or frequent medical needs.” Each student has an academic team that includes a school counselor, teachers, a family coach, and an advisory teacher. Allen emphasized, “ACCS teachers, as mentioned by Jadidah [who was awarded the FoS Scholarship], are readily available to students. An assigned family coach meets with students face-to-face and gets to know the student by monitoring attendance and academic progress and serves as an advocate. The family coach is the first person the family goes to when a need arises. They’re like a primary physician who diagnoses a problem and suggests who to contact and what to do next in order to solve it.” Family coaches usually have about 70 families assigned to them. Advisory teachers, who are content teachers at the high school level, are given a small group of students (12 to 15) to meet with monthly to set goals. Students with IEPs are assigned an IEP teacher and have regular IEP team meetings for individualized support.



“Personally, for me, I have always done well in school no matter what setting, so transitioning to online school wasn’t troubling... In online school, the teachers try to appeal to all of the students’ different learning types... Students can more effectively learn at their own pace and have better access to the teacher if they need help.”

— Jadidah DeJoie,
2018 Scholarship
Winner

Physical Health

Some of the scholarship applicants shared that their physical health was impacted by illness or injury, which caused them to not be successful in traditional education settings and led them to online/blended learning. As one student commented, “I have ADHD, so I needed accommodations that were not adequately supported at my local high school.” Another student shared, “No matter how many accommodations the school offered it wasn’t enough to help me succeed and become mentally and physically healthy.”

Texas Online Preparatory School (TOPS)

San Antonio, TX

Online school serving students across Texas

GRADE LEVELS SERVED:

3-12

NUMBER OF STUDENTS SERVED:

3,215

The Texas Online Preparatory School (TOPS) is a full-time online school serving students across Texas. Students engage in live class sessions each day with teachers for each of their courses. Programmatically, TOPS structures student support around an advisor, who serves as a liaison between the student and their family, the teacher, and the administrative team. The advisor is someone the student can lean on for anything. As Charles Forrest Smith, TOPS’s Head of School, explained, “The advisor knows when a student will be absent and will alert their teachers and will tell the administrators when students need more support. We work together as a team—advisor, teachers, administrators, and the student and their family—to figure out what will be the best support, including anything related to an IEP and/or a 504 plan. We employ special education teachers, as well as two social workers who provide support groups for students, such as new mothers, LGBTQ+ students, and more.” Smith shared, “Our school has a lot of high achievers who have gone through something similar to what Elisabeth [who was awarded the FoS Scholarship] went through and don’t really have another option. When students are inpatients somewhere, we work with the facilities that they’re in. We had a counselor working with four young girls at an eating recovery center who would print off all of the students’ course materials each month and deliver them to the students to check in and see how they were doing. We also set them up with a computer lab where they could do their work while they were healing. Oftentimes we talk about personalized learning around academic challenges, and in this case, we are personalizing learning to find a solution to their health situation, so they continue to heal.”



“I started online courses because I had ongoing surgeries and was severely bullied due to my learning differences...I was born with fetal alcohol syndrome, so I am used to people telling me that I can’t take anything too challenging because I won’t succeed...I took more challenging classes to prove...I can do whatever I want to when I put my mind to it and my disorder can’t define my learning abilities. [In] online school...I was accepted more [and] wasn’t questioned about my abilities.”

— Elisabeth Steen, 2018 Scholarship Winner

Physical Health

Wisconsin Virtual Academy

McFarland, WI

Online school enrolling students across Wisconsin

GRADE LEVELS SERVED:

K-12

NUMBER OF STUDENTS SERVED:

1,200

Wisconsin Virtual Academy (WIVA) is a fully online school enrolling students across Wisconsin. WIVA has a master schedule where live class sessions run from 9am to 4pm Monday through Friday. The school sets up students' schedules for them, and students work in their other responsibilities and interests outside of school around that schedule. Students typically take five classes at a time. Cynthia Worden, WIVA's Academic Administrator 9-12, explained, "Teacher instruction happens synchronously and asynchronously in all academic areas." Students who have physical health issues receive a variety of supports from WIVA. Worden expressed, "While we find that students who attend live sessions are more successful, when health concerns arise for students, we ask that they keep up by watching the class recordings. Our teachers offer one-on-one sessions and give extensions as needed as well. In addition to teachers, the student's learning coach, typically a parent or guardian, keeps the student on track and accountable." Tanya Steger, WIVA's High School Counselor, added, "Our Family and Community Coordinator also supports the Learning Coach and student. If we know a student is experiencing a significant medical issue, with permission from the family, I make their teachers aware of what's happening so that they know there's a reason for the student's absence. It's important to have open and frequent communication with our teachers and work with them to see what is best to give students space to heal. While we like our students to be taking five classes at a time, maybe we reduce them to three or four so that school remains important but isn't something adding to their stress while they're trying to fully heal."



"At the beginning of my freshman year of high school, I got really, really sick, and I could no longer attend my brick-and-mortar school... While I was getting better, I enrolled in Wisconsin Virtual Academy (WIVA)... Individualized plans allowed me to progress at my own pace, instant quiz scores and automatic feedback [provided me] with re-learn opportunities, and certified teachers work[ed] with me one-on-one...When cleared medically, I chose to stay at WIVA."

— Ethan Keller,
2019 Scholarship Winner

Mental Health

Students often chose their learning environment because it was more conducive to their mental well-being. Some scholarship applicants shared that “in traditional classroom, I always felt very anxious and like people were always staring at me” and that their “experience was damaging to [their] mental health” and “caused [their] grades to suffer.” These students chose to shift to learning communities that were more supportive.

Indiana University High School

Bloomington, IN

Private online high school embedded in a public university

GRADE LEVELS SERVED:

9–12

NUMBER OF STUDENTS SERVED:

3,500

Indiana University High School (IUHS) is a fully online asynchronous high school. Since 1925, IUHS has offered high school students an opportunity to earn high school credits at a distance. In 1999, IUHS was accredited as a diploma-granting school. Today, the school operates using two models, one of which is more independent, where students interact with their teacher to study and discuss course content. The second model is collaborative, where students exchange feedback asynchronously. In both models, teachers are always available for personalized feedback through email, phone, and web conferencing. Students can make their own schedule and interact in ways that are conducive to them individually. As Dr. Rebecca Itow, Principal of IUHS, explained, “IU High School allows students to access rigorous high school curricula in ways that fit their individual situations, unconstrained by place or timing. Students can take one to five courses at a time and have between six weeks and six months to complete each course. When students are struggling, we work with them to develop a plan to keep them learning while they’re healing. The student can even pause their coursework completely and pick it back up when the time and situation are right for them to do so. In this digital environment, it is sometimes difficult to know when students are struggling, making it all the more important to cultivate meaningful relationships with them. Doing so helps build the trust students need to approach us when they’re struggling, and for faculty and staff to identify issues as they arise. We see our role as caring about students’ academic, mental, emotional, and physical well-being. We’re continually researching and developing practices for supporting online students’ mental health so we can have more support structures for them and they know they can turn to us when they need help.”



“Social anxiety was at its peak in seventh grade. Struggling both academically and socially, I began to refuse to go to school. I couldn’t ask for help at school, which led to poor grades and feeling stupid. When I started online school, I was able to work at my own pace, which boosted my confidence and lessened my social anxiety. I grew excited to learn again.”

— Emmy Foty,
2019 Scholarship
Winner

Mental Health

Iowa Connections Academy

Anita, IA

Online public school serving students across Iowa

GRADE LEVELS SERVED:

K-12

NUMBER OF STUDENTS SERVED:

550

Iowa Connections Academy (ICA) opened in 2012. Students engage with course content asynchronously and are not required to attend courses in real-time with their teachers, though they can receive supplemental assistance via LiveLessons in virtual classrooms. As Dr. James Brauer, ICA’s Principal described, “Four years ago, we were thinking about shifting to a synchronous model to provide multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), but some students were begging us not to, saying ‘I’m just not comfortable,’ ‘I can’t thrive.’ There was merit in keeping the asynchronous structure because we’d be working against our at-risk students’ well-being.” A significant percentage of ICA students are at-risk due to a variety of reasons, such as economic hardship, bullying and harassment, gender transformation, special education needs, and debilitating anxiety from past trauma. In a state-wide study, nearly a third of the county’s students have thought of suicide while 15% have attempted it or self-harmed. To help students, ICA designs MTSS approaches based on the students’ needs and creates an informed, customized plan. ICA has two counselors who provide guidance on courses and SEL support. Every student is assigned a faculty advisor who serves as the student’s advocate. Brauer shared, “Our staff has put great emphasis on culture. We’ve engaged in staff development on how we interact with students so that we’re minimizing trauma and not creating more anxiety and stress through the actions we take, words we say, and policies we create. At the heart of everything we do is culture and creating a safe space for our students to learn. We’re trying to bring in levels of decency, hope, and compassion. We want students to feel like they’re part of a family and that someone genuinely cares about their well-being. This is more than our work; it’s at the heart of who we are as people.”



“I left traditional school during the 10th grade because I had trouble staying organized, focused, and I would easily get overwhelmed with all of the assignments... partly because I...[was having] migraines...By the end of junior high and high school, I started having more work... extracurricular activities...stress, and anxiety... and [had] more migraines and started to miss school...School became miserable... Online education presented the best option for me.”

— Brady Patterson, 2018 Scholarship Winner

Scheduling Challenges

Many students reported that scheduling challenges led them to seek online/blended learning options. Scholarship applicants shared that they couldn't fit certain courses in or that they had to make room for other activities in their lives, including sports and club participation. As one applicant mentioned, "I participate in competitive snowboarding on a team that practices nearly an hour from my home and travels a great deal during the school year."

Gabrielino High School

San Gabriel, CA

Traditional public high school located 10 miles northeast of Los Angeles

GRADE LEVELS SERVED:

9-12

NUMBER OF STUDENTS SERVED:

1,693

Gabrielino High School (GHS) is a comprehensive public high school. The school is currently in a two-year roll-out of a 1:1 device initiative that allows students to use computers on campus as well as have a dedicated device at home. If students do not have connectivity at home, they are assigned a hotspot that they can use to connect to the Internet, which allows them to learn from almost anywhere. Until recently, GHS used a traditional six-period schedule. As Sharron Heinrich, GHS's Principal, described, "We had to start experimenting in 2018 because the afterschool program's supports and interventions were not well attended, especially by students who needed them. We started to look at how to embed that support in the school day. We looked at school schedules that provide what we were calling, 'The Gift of Time.' We also were seeing more anxiety and depression in our students, and felt this gift of time would offer more support. The extra time would allow students to get help from teachers on their homework, have quiet time to recharge their energy, or meet with counselors for social and emotional support." After a number of pilots, GHS implemented a schedule in 2019-2020 that includes six-period days on Mondays and Fridays, shortened six-period days on Tuesdays and Thursdays to make room for embedded time, and an early release on Wednesdays. Heinrich shared, "The latest schedule allows students to come in early or late based on what works for them. For students who want to take a college course or do an internship, they have that flexibility. We're seeing increased performance for those students who were struggling, and students are managing their time better. Parents are seeing more of their kids, and teachers have more time to collaborate with their colleagues."



"All too often, I've encountered fellow peers from low-income backgrounds in which holding full-time status as a student while working full-time schedules, in conjunction with supporting families, was simply not feasible...The flexibility and comprehensive programming allowed me to continue learning outside of the classroom [and] still pursue both work, [internships], and school...[and] to build upon what I've already learned... [From this, I'm] creating a mentorship or a resource group on campus for students from nontraditional backgrounds."

— Weldon Chang,
2018 Scholarship
Winner

Scheduling Challenges

North Carolina Cyber Academy

Winston Salem, NC

Online charter school serving students across North Carolina

GRADE LEVELS SERVED:

K-12

NUMBER OF STUDENTS SERVED:

2,420

North Carolina Cyber Academy (NCCA) is a public online charter school serving students across the state. Students have the option to choose between synchronous and asynchronous classes. Nathan Currie, Superintendent of NCCA, calls this approach the “hybrid online approach.” The synchronous classes are live online learning sessions where NCCA state-certified teachers and students gather for whole group instruction and engage with each other. The live sessions are recorded in order to meet the needs of those students who need the content asynchronously. Currie emphasized, “One of our driving attractions for students to come to us is that flexibility in their demanding schedule. At our school we accommodate those scheduling challenges that students have, like sports practice, medical situations, etc., while helping them maintain their academic life. Maybe a student learns better in the morning or at night or on the weekend. We offer that flexibility so that they can work around other commitments and work at a pace that is conducive to them. Additionally, if students have already mastered a concept, they don’t have to re-learn it. They can just move onto the next one.” Support strategies for students include learning coaches, who are often the parent, guardian, a trusted neighbor, or retired educator. Currie shared from his experience how he’s seen a variety of different learning coaches beyond the typical ones, including church community members as well as athletic coaches who work with students who are traveling for professional sports, like Kylie [who was awarded the FoS Scholarship]. As Currie expressed, “As long as students are keeping up with their learning progress, the flexibility of NCCA can work for them to minimize or eliminate scheduling challenges altogether.”



“Online courses bridge learning gaps by allowing students to learn at their own pace, so as not to rush one student to keep up with another and to not let a student be held behind when they are capable of moving forward at an accelerated rate... I can also structure the class around my schedule rather than having to rush to fit everything in.”

— Kylie Gardner, 2019 Scholarship Winner

Rurality

Students who reported being from a rural school mentioned that they didn't have as much variety of courses to choose from as those in urban areas. Some rural schools recognize this and create opportunities for their students. Some scholarship applicants wrote, for example, that because of their access to additional courses they would be graduating with "a high school diploma and an associate's degree."

Julesburg High School

Julesburg, CO

Small traditional public high school offering over 150 high school and college courses

GRADE LEVELS SERVED:

9-12

NUMBER OF STUDENTS SERVED:

80

Shawn Ehnes, Julesburg School District's Superintendent/Principal, was concerned that Julesburg High School (JHS) students were not getting a variety of course electives. As Ehnes recalled, "While our academic performance was high, I didn't feel good about making kids take classes that weren't a good fit for what they wanted to do after high school." In 2008, they became the authorizer of Destinations Career Academy (DCA), Colorado's only online school that provides state-approved CTE Pathways and courses to students across Colorado. JHS has an online learning lab for students to take online high school and college level courses throughout the day with the support of an onsite learning coach, and each course is taught by a Colorado-licensed teacher or college instructor. In 2019-20, 62 out of 80 JHS students are taking online courses, with 20 taking two courses, 12 taking three, and three taking four. Because of the nationwide teacher shortage, JHS hired social studies teachers who provide blended instruction for the core courses at the 7th-12th grade levels. The teachers provide synchronous instruction three to five days per week and occasionally make face-to-face visits on site at JHS. In addition, JHS students have a blended online Agriculture/Future Farmers of America program available along with access to online college level courses from numerous regional community colleges and universities. Kim Ehnes, the Dean of Students, Guidance Counselor, and District Liaison to the online school, emphasized, "Ruth [who was awarded the FoS Scholarship] was really the driving force of students coming to us and saying, 'These are the courses I want, they're not offered here, now what do I do?' I never tell a kid 'no.' I just call around and find a college willing to provide the college level courses our students want and need."



"I come from a really small school. I graduated with 12 kids. In a smaller school, you get awesome teachers... [but] don't really have a big class selection...Because of online learning..., I was able to take all of the other classes that kids from bigger communities and high schools are allowed to take...I credit my success to the forward thinking of our school district and the technological advances in education."

— Ruth Garnas,
2018 Scholarship
Winner

Rurality

Drew Central High School

Monticello, AR

Traditional public high school located 100 miles southeast of Little Rock

GRADE LEVELS SERVED:

9-12

NUMBER OF STUDENTS SERVED:

303

Drew Central High School (DCHS) is a traditional public school in southeast Arkansas. Misty Lyle, DCHS’s Counselor, shared, “Our students don’t have as many options, so we use the state virtual school for a variety of courses, including Fundamentals of Flight, Psychology, and Criminal Law. In addition to working with the state virtual school, we partner with Arkansas Tech University and Southern Arkansas University so students can take U.S. History, College Algebra, Composition One and Two. We have one student this year who will have at least a semester of college done before they finish high school graduation.” The school informs students about the different options during the morning announcements as well as during common classes. DCHS also sends packets of information home with students so that their parents/legal guardians are informed as well. When students are interested in taking online courses, they meet with Lyle and talk about their current and potential future interests. Because the college courses are run more independently, the parent/guardian has to sign an agreement with the college that they’re aware of their child taking a course and that they are going to support the student as they learn. During the day, students who are taking online courses can use the DCHS’s virtual lab, which is staffed by a paraprofessional who serves as a facilitator. The virtual lab has a set of computers that stay in the lab. The facilitator works as a lab coordinator and learning coach, helping students stay organized, and remain on task, and providing simple tech support. This allows a group of students to take different classes at the same time with mentor guidance from an on-site generalist. The state virtual school teachers are in touch with the facilitator, the Principal, and Lyle when a student is falling behind so they can work with the student to get them back on track.



“As a student who lives in a rural area and goes to a small school, we don’t have many classes to choose from. Online learning gave me the opportunity to take classes that I could never take because my school either didn’t offer them or it wouldn’t fit in my schedule. I got the opportunity to take classes that I thought I might want a career in, [such as] journalism and psychology.”

— April Vincent,
2017 Scholarship Winner

Advanced Learner

Scholarship applicants sometimes self-identified as gifted students or being able to learn more quickly than their peers. One student mentioned, “I was belittled and shamed for being smart...[and] I have always felt out of place...[so] I have grown to dislike the usual classroom setting.” After shifting to a new learning space where they could learn at their own pace, this student thrived.

Springs Studio for Academic Excellence

Colorado Springs, CO

District school providing online and blended learning opportunities

GRADE LEVELS SERVED:

3-12

NUMBER OF STUDENTS SERVED:

450

Springs Studio for Academic Excellence is a blended-learning school in School District 49. While it qualifies as an online school so is allowed to serve students across the state, the administrators limit to students within a 50-mile radius. High school students are onsite Tuesdays and Thursdays for teacher-driven instruction and project-based learning, and the rest of the week, grades 3-8 are on campus. When not onsite, students engage with online curriculum. Students can come to the building on their off days to get one-on-one help from teachers but aren't required to do so. David Knoche, Springs Studio's Executive Principal, emphasized, “We really don't want our students on campus [laughing]. We want them taking college courses, doing internships, and pursuing activities aligned to their passions.” Amanda Pethtel, Springs Studio's Dean of Academics, added, “Being a small school enables us to individualize for kids. Counselors meet each student and their family twice a year for advising. If the student is performing close to college level, then we put them in college-level classes. We also have ‘Articulated Classes’ where students take the course with us and then submit to college to earn three credits. We have eight MOUs with colleges who offer students access to courses we don't offer.” Knoche explained, “Students can also engage in concurrent enrollment where they take courses on college campuses, like Sierra [who was awarded the FoS Scholarship] did. Ultimately the goal is to find a way to get to ‘yes’ with kids, and too often schools are designed around the idea of ‘Well, we can't do that.’ We sit with each student and plan this out. It is crucial for us to find avenues for them to continue pursuing their passions.”



“Doing online school has allowed me to not only take the classes that I needed to graduate, but I was able to take classes that suited my interest in learning, such as College Drawing... Music Appreciation, Digital Illustration, and Art Appreciation... Taking different arts classes along with STEM classes helped [me] think more critically, be more creative, and become more engaged with [my] work.”

— Sierra Jarmon, 2016 Scholarship Winner

Advanced Learner

Southwest Secondary Learning Center

Albuquerque, NM

Blended charter school serving students in Albuquerque

GRADE LEVELS SERVED:

9-12

NUMBER OF STUDENTS SERVED:

200

Established in 2001, Southwest Secondary Learning Center (SSLC) is a blended learning program featuring a high-tech STEAM lab and using online curriculum with onsite core content teachers. Teachers focus on both one-on-one and group instruction with students onsite via project-based learning and monitor students weekly progress in their online curriculum. Students must be onsite for at least four days a week for one block a day, which is the equivalent of 3.5 hours. There are three blocks for students to choose from each day, between 8am and 7:30pm, allowing students to work around dual enrollment, internships, and other interests. On campus, students work in a lab setting. Each student has a sponsor teacher who supports them, tracking progress toward graduation and registering them for dual enrollment. As Christine Lutz, Head Administrator, explained, “Rachel [who was awarded the FoS Scholarship] took high school classes as a 7th grader when SSLC served 7-12, but since that time we’ve switched to 9-12th graders. Rachel was a 9th grader when she started taking college courses. By providing her with the opportunity to take high school classes early, she was able to take college classes when she was ready to be on a college campus.” SSLC also has what school leaders call a “Smart Lab.” Denise Dixson, the Academic Dean and Smart Lab Administrator, explained that the Smart Lab is STEAM-focused and houses engineering programs, 3D printers, a wind tunnel, movie and sound editing equipment, and graphic design software. In the labs, students can create their own credit-based projects to work on. Dixson also emphasized, “Our main focus when we opened was removing seat-time, which most traditional schools are still hung up on, and barriers, so that these students could work at their own pace, whether advanced or not, toward content mastery.”



“In elementary school, I always found myself asking the teacher for extra work because I was always finished before...other students...In 7th grade...I chose a charter school that embraced online learning, which allowed me to work at my own pace, getting ahead in most...classes... By sophomore year, I was two years ahead... Because I was so far ahead..., I [took] math and science dual-enrollment at the University of New Mexico. This prepared me for college...with 58 credits.”

— Rachel Penner, 2018 Scholarship Winner

Home/Extra Responsibilities

For some students, being home or having extra responsibilities outside of their academic work was an important consideration when they chose their school. Some students were parents, while others had parents who were suffering from serious illnesses. As one scholarship applicant noted, “After both of my grandfathers died within a short time of each other, I did not want to struggle to keep up with the distraction, pressures, and schedule I’d face in a traditional school. I was able to shift my time [in my new school] and complete my classes as I worked through my grief.”

Mat-Su Central

Wasilla, AK

Hybrid school located 45 minutes northeast of Anchorage

GRADE LEVELS SERVED:

PreK-12

NUMBER OF STUDENTS SERVED:

1,955

The cornerstone of Mat-Su Central is the Individualized Learning Plan (ILP). As Stacey McIntosh, Mat-Su Central’s Assistant Principal, explained, “We work with students and families to create an ILP to outline what the best path will be for the students’ learning. Each student receives \$2,200 in state funding to use toward their education. Students and their families collaborate with their advisory teacher to individualize the student’s ILP and determine educational outcomes.” Students can take classes within Mat-Su Central’s building, through another district or school, or through over 300 community partners. These community partners are vetted, go through background checks by the district, and outline a learning plan to use with students, providing interest-based curriculum, such as karate, sewing, welding, and tutoring to name a few, covering subject areas that Mat-Su Central doesn’t offer. Students can choose when they want to come to the school; some students, like Shaylee [who was awarded the FoS Scholarship] do not step foot in the school except for their ILP meeting.” McIntosh added, “Our school is like a public library; kids are constantly coming and going.” Mat-Su Central’s advisors continuously look at the students’ learning to make sure the students are meeting learning goals. To offer more choices, Mat-Su Central allows families to submit curriculum for consideration. Their Curriculum Council reviews curriculum for rigor and state-standards alignment. John Brown, Mat-Su Central’s Principal, expressed, “Our personalized learning program is an a la carte system, a menu of options that students and families can choose from to best meet their needs. The model is also nimble, which allows for changes at any time.”



“Online learning was my ticket to independence and improv[ing] my life; I was raised in foster care and had all the excuses... to...do nothing with my future...Having a flexible [school] schedule allowed me to work full time, which gave me the financial independence to start the process of becoming a legally emancipated minor... [and] live on my own. I am a 16-year-old student who is graduating this year; 2 years earlier than scheduled.”

— Shaylee Felicetty-Kacena, 2018 Scholarship Winner

Home/Extra Responsibilities

Princess Anne High School

Virginia Beach, VA

Traditional public high school located east of Norfolk

GRADE LEVELS SERVED:

9-12

NUMBER OF STUDENTS SERVED:

1,870

Princess Anne High School (PAHS) is a traditional high school located in Virginia Beach, serving a little over 1,800 enrollments. Sometimes their learners, like Joseph [who was awarded the FoS Scholarship] experience a family hardship, and “we see our job as whatever it takes to help students keep plugging along and being successful,” said Helen Cox, PAHS’s International Baccalaureate (IB) Coordinator. Cox continued, “We work as a team using the expertise of our staff – school psychologists, counselors, nurses, teachers, administrators, and more – to figure out how to help students continue their learning. Sometimes the student needs extensions to accommodate their need to be home with their loved ones, like Joseph. We can enroll students in up to three different online programs so that they can stay home and work online. We also have robots provided by the school division that can be in the classroom, transmitting their learning to them wherever they are. Students have video-conferenced into classes before.” They can develop an independent study, where they work with a teacher to define a course of study for which they will earn credit once completed, providing even more flexibility. Learners also have the option to enroll in college courses online or face-to-face. PAHS has a 1:1 device program, so students are able to use their devices for their learning wherever they are. Students are supported while they’re physically away from school, using technology solutions to receive and send assignments. In addition to accommodating students who have family members facing physical or mental health challenges, PAHS also serves international students who often need to return to their homeland for various reasons. These students also, with their frequency of travel, benefit from the flexible accommodations that help them keep up with their learning no matter where they are in the world.



“My mother had just been diagnosed with terminal cancer, [and] holding myself together was already too great a task to handle... Online courses gave me the flexibility... to continue learning at my own pace [while also being] there in the moments with my family and my Mom where I wouldn’t have normally been able to. Despite the out-of-state trips and the late-night hospital stays..., [online learning kept] me on track.”

— Joseph Wornom, 2019 Scholarship Winner

Conclusion

Most people—school leaders, teachers, educator reformers, media reporters, parents, and policymakers—recognize that students have a wide range of needs and interests. Students learn best in varied ways, and at different times and rates. They greatly benefit from educator’s efforts to individualize their learning to meet their personal needs.

Less understood is the extent to which a wide range of schools is responding to students’ needs and interests by offering new school and course options, and in particular, the ways in which traditional public schools are part of the solution. Extremely creative solutions to diversifying instruction using technology in classrooms exist throughout America. This report showcases a handful of examples. However, there is an imperative for bigger, broader, more inclusive representation of strategies being employed to integrate blended and online courses, programs, and options for K-12 students.

This report relies on the words of students, school leaders, and teachers to demonstrate these truths. Many students, unfortunately, still have learning requirements that aren’t being met well by their current school. An increasing number of students, however, are enrolling in online and blended schools and courses to meet their needs. These new instructional models continue to emerge in response to the demand from students. However, they are not as widely recognized as they should be and our country has not yet reached the tipping point of acceptance of the fundamental shift in our education system, made possible by technology.

The science fiction author William Gibson wrote in 2003, “The future is already here — it’s just not evenly distributed.” At that time, nearly two decades ago, these new educational models were emerging but not yet proven.

Now, in 2020, it’s fair to say that the future of education is here. The future of education lies in pioneering online and blended schools and courses, and the use of online tools and resources in the full range of schools, including charter schools, magnet schools, private schools, and traditional public schools.

But, to paraphrase Gibson, the future of education is not evenly distributed. Many students, parents, and school leaders have not yet discovered the extent to which proven innovations are improving education right now, and can be extended to even more schools and students.

We at Future of School hope that this report helps shine a spotlight on the successful schools, and demonstrates, to the next wave of schools, a path forward to helping all students.