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# Approaching K-12 Online Education in Pennsylvania

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine how K-12 schools are addressing the need to accommodate online learners in Pennsylvania. It is built upon a review of literature focusing on educational legislation, the personalization of online learning and online learning solutions. The study posed 21 questions utilizing a mixed methods approach to district decision-makers from across the state. There were 28 respondents. The data indicate that the driving force for developing online learning alternatives is student interest and while many district decision-makers are outsourcing the development of online education, most feel neutrally about the level of satisfaction with said efforts.

## Introduction

Public education in the United States is managed at the state level. Each state approaches online learning differently. In Pennsylvania, approaches to online learning can vary by school district and the state has roughly 500 school districts, 67 counties and 29 intermediate units (C. Harrington, personal communication, January 12, 2012). According to the 2011 report, *Cost and Funding Models of A State-led Virtual Learning Program*, Pennsylvania's Legislative Budget and Finance Committee estimates, at least 158 of Pennsylvania's 501 school districts have arrangements with outside organizations to provide online learning support. Unlike some other states with a state virtual school or a state-led online initiative, Pennsylvania has neither (States with State," 2011). Currently, if a student elects to take online courses the district is obligated to pay to outsource the education of the student. During the 2010-11 academic year, "the amount varied based on the home district, but averaged around \$12,808" per student (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin & Rapp, 2011, p. 142). While the state would partially reimburse the district, as of 2010-2011, this dollar amount dropped by 25% and was completely eliminated in the 2011-2012 budget (Watson et al., 2011). This change in reimbursement has had financial implications and has left many districts searching for alternatives. However, the lack of data indicating how school districts are accommodating online learners within the state is problematic for decision-makers as they incur the expense of outsourcing online education while simultaneously grappling with developing their own online learning solutions.

## Purpose

The purpose of this study is to determine how K-12 schools are addressing the need to accommodate online learners in Pennsylvania.

## Research Questions

This study utilizes a mixed method approach via a survey posing qualitative and quantitative questions. These questions use Likert scales as well as semantic differential and free text questions. While some open space will be provided for free text, most of the questions will elicit data that can be measured numerically. Driving sub-questions will attempt to assess the following: 1.) What needs do Pennsylvania school districts have with respect to online learning? 2.) What solutions have districts implemented to address these needs? 3.) How satisfied are districts with their online learning solutions? Since trends may exist based on school location (i.e. rural, urban or suburban) and the role of the person taking the survey (i.e. teacher or administrator), this information will be requested. If participation in the survey is overwhelmingly positive, this data can also be used to limit the scope of the report. A copy of the survey is available in Appendix A. (Included in distribution of the survey link were directions and an

explanatory letter of introduction from the researcher.)

## Definition of Terms

- "Blended learning is any time a student learns at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home *and* at least in part through online delivery with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace" (Horn, Staker, Hernandez, Hassel & Ableidinger, 2011, p. 2).
- "Learning management systems by nature are more about the ephemera of learning than the actual learning itself; it is the gathering of course calendars, assignments, and all other relevant content in a single place where both students and teachers can access everything" (*Horizon Report 2011*, p. 30).
- "Personal learning environments (PLEs) are often described as systems for enabling self-directed and group-based learning, designed around each user's goals, with great capacity for flexibility and customization" (*Horizon Report 2011*, p. 30).
- "Multiple phrases are used by foundations, innovators, and state policy to capture the practice of students progressing upon mastery: standards-based, outcomes-based, performance-based, and proficiency-based. The use of "competency-based" has been selected as it has already entered federal policy with its inclusion in Race to the Top (RTTT) and the subsequent state applications" (Sturgis & Patrick, 2010, p. 6).

## Literature Review

While many school districts are struggling to figure out how best to approach online learning, Quakertown Community School District (QCS) successfully created a customized cyber school. The venture was met with such success that QCS and the Bucks County Intermediate Unit #22 partnered to create Bridges Virtual Education Services. According to the website for the organization, "The mission of this partnership is to assist school districts with the implementation or refinement of their own virtual education programs" (*Bridges Virtual Education Services*, 2012). Dr. Christopher Harrington, the former QCS Cyber Program Director, is currently the Director at Bridges Virtual Education Services. Per his recommendation, the resource section of the website for the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) provided current and relevant material focused on this area of research. Close attention was paid to citations, which then led to other relevant materials. For the purpose of this research, three themes, intricately linked to each other and online learning were identified for further exploration: educational legislation, personalization of online learning, and online learning solutions. Similar data was difficult to find which makes comparison challenging, but adds value and importance to the study.

The first theme is that of education legislation. Unlike some states, Pennsylvania does not have a statewide online program; however, it does have charter schools and "cyber charter schools follow the same policies and mandates as brick-and-mortar charter schools" (Watson, 2005, p. 80). Following an incident in 2001 when a school district refused to pay a cyber charter school, a lawsuit came about that "challenged the legitimacy of the cyber charter schools" (p. 80). As a result, Act 88 was passed. According to the Pennsylvania State Department of Education (PDE) website, as a result of the lawsuit, the PDE reviews applications and decides "whether to grant or deny a charter to the applicants" (*Pennsylvania Department of Education*, 2012). Act 88 also details the process by which applicants can reapply if they are denied admission. State law stipulates:

local school districts provide funding for students enrolled in cyber charter schools based on a per-pupil cost determined by PDE [and that the school] must satisfy requirements for compulsory attendance, but it is up to the cyber charter school to provide a description of how the cyber charter school will define and monitor a student's school day. (Watson, 2005, p. 80)

The second theme, that of personalization of online learning, is relevant because the education system in the United States is time-based. That is, students advance through curriculum based on age, not mastery of content. Online education lends itself to a more personalized learning experience – catered to the individual and based upon content mastery. This presents a problem because current legislation is written

for today's time-based education system. Therefore, creating online learning environments that are in compliance with the law is quite difficult. Beyond the challenges presented by legal restrictions, there is a strong argument for the implementation of online learning, because it "enables a greater personalization of the learning process for both students and educators and facilitates opportunities to collaborate with peers and experts, thus empowering a new sense of personal ownership of the learning process" (Learning, 2011, p. 3). Another benefit of personalized online learning is that it "provides continual feedback, assessment, and incremental victory" (Horn, et al., 2011, p. 9). While beneficial to the individual, unfortunately, providing personalized online learning for students can be costly to school districts; however, the cost of outsourcing education is even greater.

The last of the three themes is that of online learning solutions. Online learning began as a way to serve "students in circumstances where there is no alternative for learning - in the advanced courses that many schools struggle to offer in-house; in small, rural, and urban schools that are unable to offer a broad set of courses with highly qualified teachers in certain subject areas; in remedial courses for students who need to recover credits to graduate; and with home-schooled and homebound students" (Horn, et al., 2011, p. 1). In order to be made possible, online learning requires a method of delivery, or learning management system (LMS). This idea of creating/finding an online learning solution is key to the aforementioned problem of creating a personalized online learning experience. Since approaches to online learning can vary by school district in Pennsylvania, many types of online learning solutions can be utilized across the state. As common examples: 1.) districts can purchase courses and instructional services from an outside provider, 2.) districts can purchase courses from an outside provider and have their own teachers teach the courses or 3.) districts can develop their own courses and use their own teachers to teach the courses.

## **Method**

### **Constituents & Rationale**

Survey participants will include district decision-makers across Pennsylvania. For the purpose of this study and at the recommendation of the director of Bridges Virtual Education Services, a minimum of 3 people (superintendents, assistant superintendents and curriculum directors) will be invited from each district to complete the survey. These individuals are interested in learning how districts are approaching this problem because outsourcing student education is costly. As previously mentioned, districts like Quakertown Community School District (QCSD) have created a customized cyber school solution. "The program has seen 178 percent growth in student online course enrollments within a three-year period. [...] More than a dozen schools approached QCSD administrators during the 2010-11 school year to seek guidance" (QCSD, 2012). The success of QCSD's program and the interest of other districts in replicating it prompted the creation of Bridges Virtual Education Services. According to the *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning: An Annual Review of Policy and Practice* (2011) report as well as the Director of Bridges, findings of this study will fill a void in data by providing information at the district level where there currently is very little. Subsequently, there is no information to compare data against and while this could be viewed as a shortcoming, due to the uniqueness of the data; it will be useful to district decision-makers.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Since survey participants are not students, there are no concerns about obtaining permissions to survey minors. While participation will be strongly encouraged by district decision-makers, it cannot be made mandatory, which allows participants to opt out of the survey. General data (i.e., role of the participant and type of district) will be obtained, but anonymity will be preserved in this study, so participants need not fear negative repercussions of completing the survey. The summative data will be shared with interested district decision-makers and will provide an honest and anonymous view of action taken by school districts across the state with regard to how they are approaching online learning.

### **Action Research & Plans for Validity/Reliability**

Many action research processes/models share similar concepts, presented in different ways visually. Stringer's Action Research Helix, boasts visual simplicity and the implication of the repetitious nature of

research; yet the model conveys forward progress as momentum from the previous loop (or period of research), carries it through to the next (Mills, 2011). Key concepts identified by Stringer include repetition of looking, thinking and acting as "phases of research repeated over time" (p. 16). Reoccurring research strands in this study: educational legislation, personalization of online learning, and online learning solutions, allow for parallels between this study and Stringer's Helix to be drawn.

As outlined in *Action Research: A Guide for the Teacher Researcher*, the qualitative design identified as Anderson, Herr & Nihlen aligns most closely to this study (Mills, 2011). Exploring the types of validity characterized by this design affirms that each has an application to the study. Democratic validity requires consideration of multiple perspectives as they hold a variety of positions in a variety of districts across the state. Outcome validity deals with the relevance of the data while process validity mentions that the data be gathered in a "dependable" and "competent" manner," which this aims to do (p. 109). Catalytic validity requires participants be moved to take action as a result of the research. Hopefully, this study will spur conversation and improvement to K-12 online education in Pennsylvania. Further, by offering to share the data, the increased participation and circulation of the survey is anticipated. Lastly, dialogic validity requires that critical conversation follow the study. This relates to the earlier mentioned concept of outcome validity and relevance of the data in that little research has previously been done in this area.

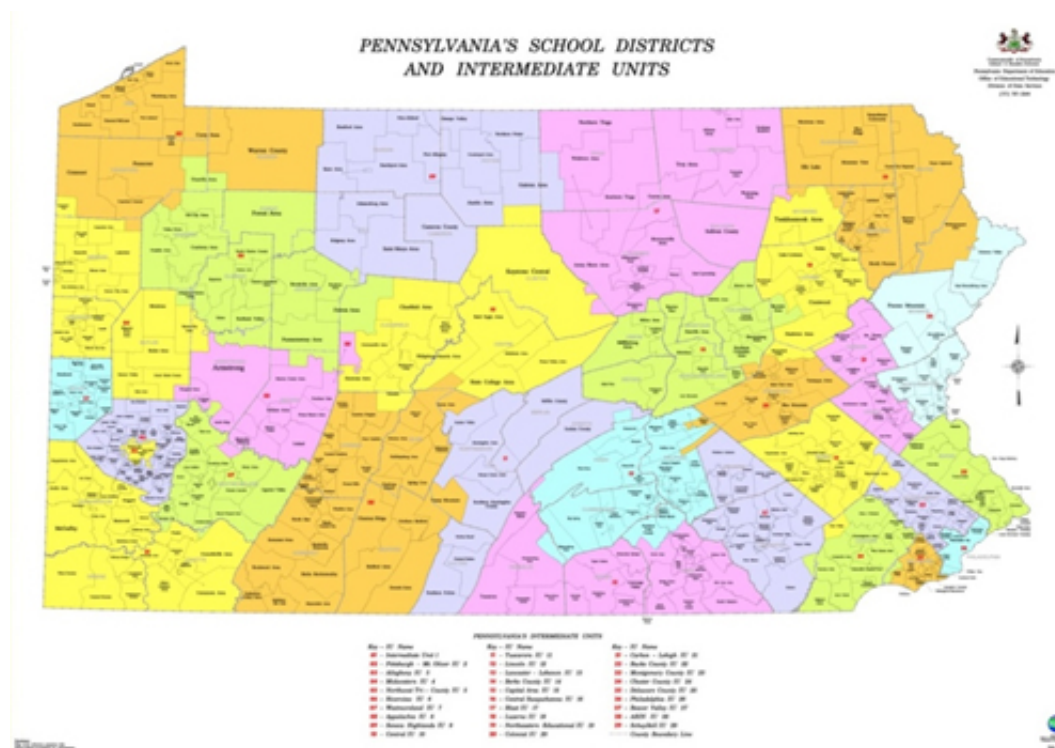
## **Results**

### **Data**

Responses to this survey were largely qualitative, providing focused data about online learning in the district. Specifically, the questions were designed to gather information about the academic level, purpose, subjects and motivation for use of online learning in the district as well as whether or not the district has an online learning solution and the level of satisfaction with that solution. The survey was structured in four sections: 1.) Demographics, 2.) Identifying Needs, 3.) Current Efforts, and 4.) Evaluation. Survey questions assessed the way in which school districts in the state of Pennsylvania are addressing the need for students to be able to attend school virtually through online class environments. Participants had the option of self-identifying if they were interested in receiving the survey results and were also instructed to select multiple answers when applicable and/or appropriate.

To summarize the first section of the survey, focused on the demographic information of the 28 respondents, 24 were school district employees and 2 were intermediate units (IU) employees with 1 individual not identifying. Respondents received primary support from 12 different IUs across the state. There are a total of 29 IUs supporting 500 districts in the state of Pennsylvania as illustrated in Figure 1. Of the 28 respondents, 21 self-identified by name. When asked to estimate a total student enrollment and given the options of less than 2,000, a range of 2,000 to 5,000 or more than 5,000, 25% of respondents indicated that they work in a district with less than 2,000 students, 14.3% indicated that they work in a district with a range of 2,000 to 5,000 students and 60.7% indicated that they work in a district with 5,000 students or more.

*Figure 1. Illustration of school districts and intermediate units in Pennsylvania.*



Retrieved from:

[http://www.dot.state.pa.us/Internet/Bureaus/pdPlanRes.nsf/infoBPR\\_Education\\_PA\\_Intermediate\\_unit](http://www.dot.state.pa.us/Internet/Bureaus/pdPlanRes.nsf/infoBPR_Education_PA_Intermediate_unit)

In the second section of the survey where participants were asked to identify online learning needs, 3.6% indicated that they did not have online learning needs while 57.1%, 39.3% and 7.1% indicated that their district recognized a need to deliver content online at the high, middle and elementary school levels respectively. (Again, because participants could select all applicable answers, a total of over 100% was possible.) Forty-six point four percent of respondents indicated that the need to deliver online content existed at all levels. Given the choice to identify the purpose for which their school district recognized a need to deliver online content, 92.9% of respondents chose credit recovery. Among the other choices were remediation (75%), acceleration (78.6%), original credit acquisition (78.6%), homebound instruction (75%), summer school (78.6%) and alternative education (75%). Respondents were able to choose as many options as were applicable and a summary of this data is provided in Table 1 where the number of respondents corresponding to the percentage is visible in the column farthest to the right. The last question in this section asked respondents to identify what was motivating their need for online content. Of the 28 respondents, 89.3% identified accommodating student interest, 67.9% indicated expanding course offerings, 78.6% identified addressing financial concerns and 39.3% indicated the demand from the community was the motivating factor in considering the need for delivering content online.

Table 1 *Purpose for Delivery of Content Online*

<b>Credit recovery</b>	<div></div>	<b>92.9%</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Remediation</b>	<div></div>	<b>75.0%</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Acceleration</b>	<div></div>	<b>78.6%</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Original credit acquisition</b>	<div></div>	<b>78.6%</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Home bound instruction</b>	<div></div>	<b>75.0%</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Summer school</b>	<div></div>	<b>78.6%</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Alternative education</b>	<div></div>	<b>75.0%</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Other (please specify)</b>	<div></div>	<b>25.0%</b>	<b>7</b>
Show replies			

The third section of the survey sought to assess current district efforts in the area of online learning. When asked whether they currently had an online learning solution for students, 75% indicated they did while 25% indicated that they did not. Given the variety of ways in which an online learning program can be offered, respondents were given three options with which to identify: 1.) My school district purchases courses and instructional services from an outside provider, 2.) My school district purchases courses from an outside provider and uses our own teachers to teach the courses, or 3.) My school district develops its own courses and uses our own teachers to teach the courses. Of the 21 respondents (the 75% who indicated that they did have an online learning solution in place), 71.4% identified the first option, 38.1% identified the second option and 28.6% identified the third option as applicable to their school district. (One respondent indicated that they used a combination of these options in their district.)

The fourth and final section of the survey asked respondents to specify the level of challenges that exist within their school district's online learning program for each category listed. When the same 19 respondents were asked about their level of satisfaction with the online learning solution in place in their school district on a similar Likert scale, 15.8% indicated that they were very satisfied while 36.8% indicated that they were satisfied, 42.1% indicated that they were neutral and 5.3% indicated that they were dissatisfied. In a related question, 52.6% of respondents indicated that their current online learning solution was effectively meeting the needs of their students while 15.8% indicated it was not and 31.6% were unsure. When asked to elaborate about why they responded as unsure, most respondents supported their response by saying that they were working with only a small group of students/teachers and/or that that they were too early in the process to make a different assessment. When asked whether they were considering changing any aspect of their online learning solution, 78.9% indicated yes while only 21.1% indicated no. The concluding three free-text questions asked the 19 respondents who indicated that they did have an online learning solution in place to identify their likes and dislikes and share any additional comments.

## **Limitations**

Since this study was deeply rooted in quantitative design, its success was heavily dependent upon participation. The researcher contacted participants through the IUs and did not have direct communication with them. Even though the statement of purpose and request for participation were made to district decision makers through the IUs, the researcher has no proof of these requests being made. The researcher requested that IUs circulate the survey to 3 people in each district (superintendents, assistant superintendents and curriculum directors). Because there are 500 districts, there could have theoretically been 1,500 participants. Since respondents came from 12 different IUs (slightly less than half of all IUs), it is feasible that IUs did circulate the survey to roughly 150-200 districts, which would garner anywhere from 150-450 respondents because instructions indicated that the survey should go to 3 respondents per district. With this perspective, a response from 28 individuals is less shocking as 15-45 respondents would be 10% of this smaller population. While it may be tempting to apply the findings in Pennsylvania to other nearby states, given state education regulations, it would be a mistake to generalize said findings due to the state-focused nature of education in the United States.

## **Discussion/Conclusion**

### **Findings**

A total of 21 questions were posed to 28 participants. Themes in responses emerged - generally, participants liked the flexibility and cost saving aspects of online learning. Conversely, most expressed concern about proper teacher training and the actual teaching of online courses. When asked about their motivation for online learning, cost came in second to the desire to accommodate student interest.

As a separate point of interest one question asked participants to specify the level of challenge that exist within their district online learning program in a variety of categories. The level of significance, average rating and response count for each category are listed in Table 2. Percentages higher than 60% were evident in ESL support while percentages higher than 50% were present in course quality assurance, special education support, teacher supervision and local funding of online learning. This suggests high levels of consensus among respondents identifying these as areas of significant challenge as they relate to online learning. Many respondents also identified student motivation and special education support as

areas of significant challenge - this is evident by the rating average below 2.00 in both of these areas.

The fact that student motivation is a concern in online learning enforces the idea that online learning is not the best method for all students. Similarly, the fact that special education is ranked as having such significant challenges associated with it in online learning suggests that there is likely a better way to serve this population. Conversely, the areas where the average rating is highest (greater than 2.50) are in the categories of school board/administrator/community support and technology policies/procedures. This suggests that most districts are finding that their communities are supportive of online learning solutions and the necessary technology to support it.

Table 2 *Identified Challenge by Category*

	Significant	Somewhat significant	Insignificant	No challenge present	Rating Average	Response Count
Course quality assurance	21.1% (4)	52.6% (10)	15.8% (3)	10.5% (2)	2.16	19
Quality of instruction	35.0% (7)	40.0% (8)	15.0% (3)	10.0% (2)	2.00	20
Student motivation	47.4% (9)	42.1% (8)	10.5% (2)	0.0% (0)	1.63	19
Course completion rates	31.6% (6)	42.1% (8)	15.8% (3)	10.5% (2)	2.05	19
Special education support	36.8% (7)	52.6% (10)	10.5% (2)	0.0% (0)	1.74	19
ESL support	15.8% (3)	63.2% (12)	10.5% (2)	10.5% (2)	2.16	19
Teacher supervision	5.3% (1)	52.6% (10)	36.8% (7)	5.3% (1)	2.42	19
Professional development	36.8% (7)	36.8% (7)	10.5% (2)	15.8% (3)	2.05	19
Teacher unions	15.8% (3)	36.8% (7)	31.6% (6)	15.8% (3)	2.47	19
School board/administrator/community support	21.1% (4)	26.3% (5)	21.1% (4)	31.6% (6)	2.63	19
Local funding of online learning	21.1% (4)	57.9% (11)	10.5% (2)	10.5% (2)	2.11	19
Attendance policies/procedures	15.8% (3)	47.4% (9)	26.3% (5)	10.5% (2)	2.32	19
Technology policies/procedures	10.5% (2)	31.6% (6)	36.8% (7)	21.1% (4)	2.68	19
Other	0.0% (0)	66.7% (2)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (1)	2.67	3

## Recommendations

In summary, of those surveyed, 60% of respondents were from districts with 5,000 or more students and 46.4% of respondents indicated that they had online learning needs at all levels. Admittedly, the 28 respondents were from 12 intermediate units, so there were multiple responses from some districts and intermediate units. When asked to identify a purpose for delivering content online, 92.9% cited credit recovery as most important. Notably, all other categories listed (remediation, acceleration, original credit acquisition, home bound instruction, summer school and alternative education) were ranked as a purpose for delivering online content by at least 75% of respondents. Three quarters of those surveyed (21 respondents) indicated that they currently had an online learning solution in place but 42.1% of this population reported their level of satisfaction with the online learning solution as neutral and 5.3% were



dissatisfied for a total of 47.4% of 21 respondents feeling neutrally or negatively about their current online learning solution. Also of these 21 respondents with online learning solutions, 71.4% indicated that they rely on an outside provider and 78.9% indicated they were considering changing an aspect of their online learning solution.

As a result of these findings it would seem that at least a recommendation (if not an investment) at the intermediate unit or state level, as opposed to the district level, would benefit all schools – particularly those currently without online learning solutions. Theoretically, this would mean that decisions such as choosing a learning management system and licensing would not need to be made by district decision makers. Ideally, this system could provide personal learning environments for students and be competency based. While a decision of this magnitude is may be unlikely in the immediate future, in the meantime, it is recommended that school districts pool together to find a common solution. Since one of the major concerns brought forth by the study is staff development, it is recommended that the districts train and devote in-house personnel to focus on teaching as opposed to relying on an outside company and/or teachers who already have a full time face-to-face course load. Further, given perceived challenges in blending online learning solutions for special education and ESL students, it is recommended that these populations not be part of the initial target population in an online learning environment.

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## Appendix A

### Identifying Needs: CHECK ALL THAT APPLY

- At what level is does your district recognize a demonstrated need to deliver content online?
  - Level – none, high, middle or elementary school or all
- For what purpose does you district recognize a demonstrated need to deliver content online?
  - Credit recovery, remediation, acceleration, original credit acquisition, home bound instruction, summer school, alternative education, OTHER
- In what subjects do you view there to be a need to deliver content online?
  - Foreign language, History, English, Sciences, Math, OTHER
- What is motivating your need for online content?
  - Accommodate student interest, expanding course offerings, financial, demand from community
- Additional Comments/Elaboration on this Section

### Current Efforts: CHECK ALL THAT APPLY

- Do you currently have an online learning solution for students?
  - If yes, how long have you had the program?
  - If no, do you plan on implementing in the next year?
- Please select the option below that best describes your online learning program:
  - My school district purchases courses and instructional services from an outside provider.
  - My school/district purchases courses from an outside provider and uses our own teachers to teach the courses.
  - My school/district develops its own courses and its own teachers teach the courses.
  - OTHER
- Additional Comments/Elaboration on this Section

### Evaluation: CHECK ALL THAT APPLY

- What is your level of satisfaction?
  - Very Satisfied, Satisfied, Neutral, Dissatisfied, Very Unsatisfied
- Is it effectively meeting the needs of your online students?
  - Yes, No, Unsure
- If it's not meeting your needs, why?
  - FREE TEXT
- Please specify the level of challenges that exist within your school/district online learning program for each category listed below:
  - (Scale: significant, somewhat significant, somewhat insignificant, insignificant, no challenge present)
  - Course quality assurance, quality of instruction, student motivation, student support, course completion rates, special education support, ESL support, teacher supervision, professional development, teacher unions, school board/administrator/community support, local funding of online learning, attendance policies/procedures, technology policies/procedures, OTHER
- Would you consider changing what you're doing now?
  - Yes/No/Depends
- What would you like to see done differently and/or why do you believe what you're currently

doing is successful? (FREE TEXT)

- Additional Comments/Elaboration on this Section