



IOWA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Online Learning Providers and Resources: Guidance for School Districts, Schools, Parents, Guardians, and Students

➔ Overview

- Iowa Senate File 2284 identifies online learning and online coursework as “educational instruction and content which are delivered primarily over the internet.” This does not include “print-based correspondence education, broadcast television or radio, videocassettes, or stand-alone educational software programs that do not have a significant internet-based instructional component.”
- Online learning is capable of providing students with increased opportunities, flexibility, and convenience. In addition to the potential to meet the unique needs of schools, students and families, the online curriculum should reflect characteristics central to any effective traditional educational program. Effective online opportunities require highly qualified teachers, rigorous and appropriate standards-based curricula, meaningful assessments, engaging resources, adequate support, and effective administration.
- Research increasingly suggests that online learning can be as effective and, in some cases, more effective than traditional classroom learning. This finding coupled with the increasing availability of newer technologies, has led to a dramatic growth in online learning and virtual school programs in recent years.
[USDE Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning](#)
 - Currently, 27 states offer online opportunities to students through virtual schools or state-led initiatives and 31 states, plus the District of Columbia have statewide full-time online schools.
[iNACOL Fast Facts About Online Learning](#)
 - During the 2011-2012 school year, state virtual schools supported approximately 620,000 course enrollments nationwide. [Keeping Pace with K-12 Online and Blended Learning](#)
 - Top reasons why school districts wish to participate in online learning are to provide courses not otherwise available at their schools and to provide opportunities for students to recover course credits from classes missed or failed. [iNACOL Fast Facts About Online Learning](#)
- Expanded interest in online learning has been accompanied by the proliferation of online content and curriculum offerings in the education marketplace. In this relatively unfamiliar and rapidly changing environment, selecting appropriate and credible online providers and resources can be a challenge for school districts/schools, parents/guardians, and students.
- For information to assist you in selecting online providers and resources, Senate File 2284 requires the Iowa Department of Education to provide “criteria for school districts or schools to use when choosing providers for online learning.” Guidance is provided as:
 - Online Learning Providers and Resources Selection Criteria for School Districts and Schools
 - Online Learning Providers and Resources Selection Criteria for Parents and Guardians
 - Online Learning Providers and Resources Selection Criteria for Students

→ Online Learning Providers and Resources Selection Criteria for School Districts and Schools

- Online learning can provide your students with additional course options, scheduling options, and credit recovery options. It can also provide them with the opportunity to experience learning in a virtual environment as well as the flexibility to learn anytime and anywhere. Online learning can be used as a powerful tool and support for students, but to achieve the greatest measure of success in online learning students require continued attention and support from their brick and mortar schools. This support includes access to adequate technology, library and counseling services, and mentoring or coaching. It also requires your advocacy and protection.
- Online learning is not easy and it is not for everyone, but can be a useful tool for life-long learning. To be successful, some students may need to change their study habits or be provided with intensive instructional support. Typically, students who find success in the online learning arena are:
 - motivated, self-directed, and organized;
 - willing to ask questions, communicate, and participate;
 - effective problem-solvers;
 - experienced users of computers and technology; and
 - good readers and writers.
- Your school may offer some Iowa Core aligned, Iowa licensed teacher taught online or blended learning options. (Blended learning is when the student spends some time online and some time in traditional face-to-face classroom instruction.)
- Your students may also enroll in the Iowa Department of Education's virtual learning initiative, Iowa Learning Online (ILO) www.iowalearningonline.org, while continuing their enrollment within your school. Your students may enroll in as many classes as you allow them to, but if your student has never participated in an online course we suggest beginning with no more than two courses in one semester. Grades and credit for your students' ILO course(s) will be sent to you upon course completion, to be recorded by you on their current school transcript. Your students will be able to continue to participate fully in all local school courses and/or extracurricular activities. Your students will graduate and receive the standard diploma from your school district.
- Additionally, the Iowa Legislature has approved two pilot [Open Enrollment](#) options to be available for students through June 30, 2015 – the Iowa Connections Academy at the Cumberland-Anita-Massena (CAM) Community School District and the Iowa Virtual Academy at the Clayton-Ridge Community School District.
- When considering vendor sources of online academic content, be aware that you are ultimately responsible for the quality of the content, the delivery of instruction (including Iowa teacher and/or administrator licensure), the provision of any needed student accommodations, and student outcomes. The content must be included in your ongoing implementation of the [Iowa Core](#) and included in your [Comprehensive School Improvement Plan \(CSIP\)](#). Also, you must continue to comply with all sections of the Iowa Code relating to Iowa schools and K-12 education.
- Consider these questions before deciding to offer online options to your students.
 - What specific student curricular opportunities are consistently difficult or impossible for your school to provide?
 - Does your school have the technical infrastructure to provide and support quality online learning experiences for students? (Check with your local Area Education Agency or the Iowa Department of Education.)
 - Is your school able to provide or arrange a study environment conducive to online learning? If not, would you allow your students to work on their online content/course(s) off-site or at home?
 - Are you willing to provide online students with any required counseling, mentoring, proctoring, and/or support services?
 - What are the comparative costs, quality, and time considerations between designing and/or delivering online opportunities yourself versus selecting other entities to provide these opportunities/services?
 - What does the Iowa Code allow and require? [Annual Progress Report - LEA Chapter 12 Rule Interpretation Matrix](#)

- Consider these criteria when purchasing online content or online services.
 - The content or courses are rigorous and well-designed with assessments that guard against cheating. [Southern Regional Education Board Standards for Quality Online Courses](#) [iNACOL National Standards for Quality Online Courses](#)
 - In addition to verbal assurances, “actual evidence” has been provided to assure that the content/course aligns with the [Iowa Core](#).
 - You have viewed a demonstration of the content or course(s) and understand the advantages and limitations of any associated Learning Management System.
 - You have access to and have personally verified information regarding the education, experience, and Iowa licensure of any teachers used by the provider.
 - The student-teacher class ratios and the total number of students assigned to each teacher are manageable and appropriate.
 - The teachers provide students with regular and meaningful communication and instruction.
 - The teachers are readily available to students, parents, and student coaches or local school personnel.
 - The teacher’s expected response time for assigned work/assessments and student/parent questions is 24 hours or less unless students, parents, and student coaches or local school personnel have been given prior notice that the teacher will be unavailable for a day or more, due to illness or emergency.
 - The school or provider has been established in business for a reasonable length of time and has maintained positive relationships with their education clients.
 - The content choice matches the academic skill level of the student population, provides specially designed instruction to children with disabilities, and meets the needs of diverse learners.
 - Additional help/support is readily available for struggling students, as well as for students with disabilities and other diverse learning needs.
 - There are flexible options for course pacing.
 - You are aware of and comfortable with the distance learning format being employed. (Is the work primarily independent or is it teacher-led? Is it rigorous and engaging? Are there ample teacher-student interactions, and opportunities for student collaboration?)
 - You are aware of your actual costs and what (if any) additional, charges, or ongoing expenses may be expected.
 - You have had any potential agreement/contract reviewed by your school’s legal counsel and are fully aware of your rights, obligations, and limitations regarding the vendor’s products and any associated personnel.

- Selecting online content and/or courses that will assist you in preparing your students for the rigors of their post-secondary education or career(s) is of the utmost importance. Please make sure your choices for online learning are credible ones. Your regional Area Education Agency, your local community college, and the Iowa Department of Education will be happy to assist you with questions and concerns.

➔ Online Learning Providers and Resources Selection Criteria for Parents and Guardians

- Online learning can provide your student with additional course options, scheduling options, and credit recovery options. It can also provide them with the opportunity to learn in a virtual environment and the flexibility to learn anytime and anywhere.
- Online learning is not easy and it is not for everyone, but can be a useful tool for life-long learning. To be successful, some students may need to change their study habits or be provided with intensive support. Typically, students who find success in the online learning environment are:
 - motivated, self-directed, and organized;
 - willing to ask questions, communicate, and participate;
 - effective problem-solvers;
 - experienced users of computers and technology; and
 - good readers and writers.
- Your student's school may offer its own online or blended learning options. Your student's school may also allow your student to enroll in the Iowa Department of Education's virtual learning initiative, Iowa Learning Online (ILO) www.iowalearningonline.org, while continuing enrollment within his/her current school. Your student may enroll in as many classes as his/her school allows, but if your student has never participated in an online course, we suggest that he/she begin with no more than two courses in one semester. You may access information regarding your student's progress at any time and you will receive a grade and credit received report at the completion of the course(s). Grades and credit for your student's ILO course(s) will also be sent to their local school upon course completion to be added to their current school transcript. They will continue to be able to participate fully in all local school courses and/or extracurricular activities. Your student will graduate and receive the standard diploma from your school district.
- Additionally, the Iowa Legislature has approved two pilot [Open Enrollment](#) options to be available for students through June 30, 2015 – the Iowa Connections Academy at the Cumberland-Anita-Massena (CAM) Community School District and the Iowa Virtual Academy at Clayton-Ridge Community School District.
- Ask questions and consider the following criteria to make sure you and your student are able to request/select the online options that best meets his/her needs.
 - The curriculum or course will challenge your student and prepare them for their career or post-secondary education.
 - The teachers are well-educated, experienced, and have an Iowa license to teach the subject(s) and at the grade level they are teaching.
 - The school or provider has been in business for a reasonable length of time and has maintained positive relationships with their education clients.
 - The student-teacher class ratios and the total number of students assigned to each teacher is close to what you would expect in a brick and mortar school.
 - The teachers provide students with regular and meaningful communication and instruction.
 - The teachers are readily available to students, parents, and student coaches or local school personnel.
 - The teacher's expected response time for grading and student/parent questions is 24 hours or less, unless students, parents, and student coaches or local school personnel have been given prior notice that the teacher will be unavailable for a day or more, due to illness or emergency.
 - Additional help/support is readily available for struggling students, as well as for students with disabilities and other diverse learning needs.
 - There are frequent teacher-student interactions and opportunities for students to interact with each other online.
 - You are aware of what (if any) additional expenses may be expected (textbooks, software, etc.).
- Beware of enrolling your student or sending money to any online school without **first** checking with your student's school counselor, your local community college, or the Iowa Department of Education (gwen.nagel@iowa.gov). Many online schools are completely legitimate, but unfortunately some are not.

- Additionally, if your student is currently enrolled in or may re-enroll in their district of residence, check with the district's school counselor and/or administrator to see if their school will recognize credit earned from any online courses not offered through their district.
- When browsing the web for online schools, even though the online school's website and school accreditation page may seem quite impressive, watch for these signs for concern.
 - The amount of time required to complete a degree or diploma is suspiciously short (days or weeks).
 - Credit is awarded based totally or in great part on "life experiences."
 - The student is able to receive a diploma after taking only a short test, often with as many attempts as needed and help with the questions answered incorrectly the first time.
 - There is a lump sum diploma cost listed, rather than a per-course cost. There might also be offers of a "special deal."
 - There is no "physical" address or location information listed on the website for the school. If you ask about the location, you may receive vague or conflicting answers.
 - Sample diplomas or transcripts are displayed on the website.
 - The school's accreditation is not provided by a recognized regional accreditation agency. (Check with your local community college or the Iowa Department of Education.)
 - After you search for "who is (the school name)" to find the IP (Internet Protocol) address and owner of the website, you are able to find additional websites with the same IP address or you find that the school's accreditation institution has the same IP address as the school.
 - There is an offer for taking the High School Equivalency Diploma (GED) Test (or a test that is said to be equivalent) online at home.
- If your student is seeking a High School Equivalency Diploma (GED) you should contact their local [Iowa Community College](#). Currently, Iowa students **may not take the High School Equivalency Diploma (GED) test at home**. They may arrange with their local community college to prepare for their High School Equivalency Diploma (GED) test online at home, but they **must take the test in person** at a location determined by the community college.
- Securing a High School Equivalency Diploma (GED), high school, technical, or college diploma that will not be accepted by an employer or a postsecondary institution will not further your student's education or their career. Please make sure your family's choice for online learning is a credible one. Your student's school counselor, your local community college, or the Iowa Department of Education will be happy to assist you with questions.

→ Online Learning Providers and Resources Selection Criteria for Students

- As a student, online learning can offer you additional course options, scheduling options, and credit recovery options. It can also provide you with the opportunity to learn in a virtual environment and the flexibility to learn anytime and anywhere.
- Online learning is not easy and it is not for everyone, but can be a useful tool for life-long learning. To be successful, you may need to change your study habits or be provided with intensive instructional support. Typically, to be successful in online learning you need to be:
 - motivated, self-directed, and organized;
 - willing to ask questions, communicate, and participate;
 - an effective problem-solver;
 - an experienced user of computers and technology; and
 - a good reader and writer.
- Your school may offer its own online or blended learning options. (Blended learning is when a student spends some instructional time online and some instructional time in the traditional face-to-face classroom.)
- Your school may also allow you to enroll in the Iowa Department of Education's virtual school initiative, Iowa Learning Online (ILO) www.iowalearningonline.org, while continuing enrollment within your current school. You will work with your school counselor to enroll. You may enroll in as many courses as your school allows, but if you have never participated in an online course, we suggest that you begin with no more than two courses in one semester. Grades and credit for your ILO course(s) will be added to your current school transcript and you will continue to be able to participate fully in all of your local school's courses and/or extracurricular activities. You will graduate from your current school.
- Additionally, the Iowa Legislature has approved two pilot [Open Enrollment](#) options to be available for students through June 30, 2015 – the Iowa Connections Academy at the Cumberland-Anita-Massena (CAM) Community School District and the Iowa Virtual Academy at Clayton-Ridge Community School District.
- Talk your parent/guardian or school counselor, ask questions and consider the following criteria to make sure you are able to request/select the online options that best meet your needs.
 - The curriculum or course will challenge you and prepare you for your career or post-secondary education.
 - Clear course expectations are provided, along with information on how your work will be graded.
 - The classes are small enough that you will have plenty of opportunities to participate and ask questions.
 - The teacher will provide feedback on your work and respond to your questions within 24 hours or less, unless you have been given prior notice that he/she will be unavailable for a day or more, due to illness or emergency.
 - Additional help is readily available for you if you need it, as well as help with accommodations if you are a student with disabilities or other diverse learning needs.
 - You have frequent opportunities to talk to your teacher one-on-one and opportunities to work with other online students.
- Beware of enrolling or sending money to any online school without **first** checking with your parents and then your school counselor, your local community college, or the Iowa Department of Education (gwen.nagel@iowa.gov). Many online schools are completely legitimate, but unfortunately some are not.
- Additionally, if you are currently enrolled in or may re-enroll in your district of residence, have your parents check with the district's school counselor and/or administrator to see if your school will recognize credit earned from online courses not offered through their district.

- When browsing the web for online schools, even though the online school's website and school's accreditation page may seem quite impressive, watch for these signs for concern.
 - The amount of time required to complete your degree or diploma is suspiciously short (days or weeks).
 - Credit is awarded based totally or in great part on "life experiences."
 - You are able to receive a diploma after taking only a short test, often with as many attempts as you need and help with the questions you answer incorrectly the first time.
 - There is a lump sum diploma cost listed, rather than a per-course cost. There might also be offers of a "special deal."
 - There is no "physical" address or location information given for the school on the website. If you ask about the location, you may receive vague or conflicting answers.
 - Sample diplomas or transcripts are displayed on the website.
 - The school's accreditation is not provided by a recognized regional accreditation agency. (Check with your local community college or the Iowa Department of Education.)
 - After you search for "who is (the school name)" to find the IP (Internet Protocol) address and owner of the website, you are able to find additional websites with the same IP address or you find that the school's accreditation institution has the same IP address as the school.
 - There is an offer for taking the High School Equivalency Diploma (GED) Test (or a test that is said to be equivalent) online at home.

- If you are interested in receiving a High School Equivalency Diploma (GED), begin by contacting your local [Iowa Community College](#). Currently, Iowa students **may not take the High School Equivalency Diploma (GED) test at home**. You may arrange with your local community college to prepare for your High School Equivalency Diploma (GED) test online at home, but you **must take the test in person** at a location determined by the community college.

- Securing a High School Equivalency Diploma (GED), high school, technical, or college diploma that will not be accepted by an employer or a postsecondary institution will not help you further your education or your career. Please make sure your choice for online learning is a credible one. Your school counselor, your local community college, or the Iowa Department of Education will be happy to assist you and your parent/guardian with questions.