



## Online School *for* Girls

This is the first in what we expect to be a series of white papers on the trends we see developing that impact member and affiliated schools in the Online School for Girls network. At least initially, we see these papers as being internal to the OSG membership and affiliation group, as an added benefit of your participation in the School. We hope that you and your school's community find this to be helpful. And, we do encourage you to share this white paper within your school's community.

This first white paper is a summary of recent findings. It was written by Molly Rumsey, the Interim Director of the Online School for Girls, Brad Rathgeber, the Director of Technology at Holton-Arms School, and Albert Throckmorton, the Assistant Head of School at St. Mary's Episcopal School.

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# Online School for Girls

## Current Trends in Online and Blended Learning

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Online Learning is a rapidly growing and fast changing field. Schools and their leaders need to be abreast of the current trends in the field, and nimble and quick in their approaches to online learning. The model that many schools (and most independent schools) follow of long, in-depth study and contemplation (often through faculty committees) may be too slow to keep up with this fast-moving world. For online learning, the cycle of innovation seems to be similar to that of technology in general: eighteen to twenty-four months. Therefore, the school that studies for a year or two the “right” platform for online learning, the “right” partners for content delivery, the “right” organizations to partner with, etc., may find itself behind the curve of the field, and not choosing the “right” thing after all.

The schools that will best take advantage of the current opportunities and find opportunities for their own growth and success will pilot many approaches and constantly monitor the changing field. Importantly, when schools (and their teachers) venture into the fields of online and blended learning, they will need to be prepared for both success (rapid or incremental) and failure (dismal or insignificant). It seems to us that schools will need to promote for their faculty what Carol Dweck constantly tells us we need to promote in our students, a “growth mindset.”

### **Finding Number 1: Online Learning is Still Growing Rapidly**

*Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning: An Annual Review of Policies and Practice* (the recently released annual report on K-12 online learning) reports consistent and impressive growth: 450,000 course enrollments in state-run online schools (a 40% increase); 200,000 full-time online school enrolled students; very large independent school district and supplemental programs, and 1.5 million students overall enrolled in K-12 online learning.<sup>1</sup>

This growth has implications both for individual public schools and for independent schools. Individual public schools may see pressure on state legislatures to shift funding away from schools and districts to state-wide online schools, as has happened in North Carolina. Independent schools will see increased competition from public schools, as they have an opportunity to offer additional courses and more flexible scheduling. This may be particularly the case in states where there are large state-run or multi-district online schools, such as Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina, and (especially) Florida.

### **Finding Number 2: Kids Flock to Online Courses When Schools Let Them**

A large part of the growth of online education is due to the changes in educational policy at the state and federal levels, often spurred by iNACOL and their membership. There have been a number of big changes to state policies over the last few years to allow for more funding from state and federal governments to online learning providers, and in changing

#### *Online and Blended Learning Essential Questions for School Leaders*

- How can my school position itself to take advantage of opportunities in online and blended learning?
- Do we have the most effective administrative structures in place to take full advantage of opportunities?
- How do I help my school community understand online and blended learning and their impact on education?



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definitions at the state levels relating to “seat-time” required for students. As more policy changes become implemented, it is reasonable to assume that growth in online and blended instruction will continue. States such as North Carolina that have changed their policies the most dramatically in recent years have seen some of the largest increases in enrollments. In the 2009-2010 school year, North Carolina’s enrollment in its statewide online learning school grew to 73,658, a more than 300% increase in enrollment from 2008-2009.<sup>ii</sup>

The tie between policy and growth in online education also helps schools understand how they can best promote online education opportunities within their schools. In many cases, it is not simply “enough” for schools to offer online course options. If schools are interested in their students having online course experiences, their policies must allow students easy access to online courses. Thus, registration for courses, payment for courses, and credit for courses all should be considered by administrators.

### *Suggested Readings*

John Watson, Amy Murin, Lauren Vashaw, Butch Gemin, and Chris Rapp, *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning: An Annual Review of Policy and Practice*. 2010.

National Association of Independent Schools, *K-12 Online Learning: A Literature Review*, Washington DC. 2010.

### **Finding Number 3: Blended Learning is becoming an increasingly large field, too...**

Even the experts seem to have some difficulty describing what Blended Learning actually is. Most people within higher education (especially those that work with the Sloan Consortium) define Blended Learning as learning that substitutes traditional “seat-time” for face-to-face teaching and learning.<sup>iii</sup> iNACOL includes a broader continuum in its definition of Blended Learning that includes programs where almost all instruction is done online in a classroom with a teacher present to facilitate the learning process.<sup>iv</sup> OSG’s definition of Blended Learning is closer to that of the Sloan Consortium, as we describe below. But, regardless of the definition, the field is growing.

Success stories abound in large public school districts that have piloted “blended learning” programs where much of the instruction is computer-based and individualized. New York City’s School of One and Chicago’s Voise Academy may be the best known in this area. Both schools have been top performing schools within their systems, and are seen as potential models to bring to large scale.

As with online learning, large companies are taking note of the blended learning growth. Connections Academy in Baltimore is moving particularly quickly in the market. And, recently News Corp. purchased the company responsible for the School of One’s software (and hired Joel Klein, the New York City School Superintendent to lead News Corp.’s education division).<sup>v</sup>

### **Finding Number 4: Textbook Manufacturers both Provide *and* Teach Content These Days**

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most of the material used in classrooms came from a handful of content providers (namely textbook manufacturers). This was less the case in independent schools, where teachers were more apt to develop some of their own course materials, and pick and choose from a variety of sources. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one trend that seems to be emerging is pacts between some of the textbook manufacturers and online learning companies or organizations. One of most prominent of these examples is the recent pact between Florida Virtual School and Pearson Education.<sup>vi</sup> This is a trend that independent school leaders and public school leaders should monitor, as there are potentially large



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implications from not just the content coming from a handful of sources, but also the content delivery (teaching or Computer Based Instruction).

We believe that this shift will eventually cause independent schools to redefine the nature of their teachers and curriculum, in much the same way that they did in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the worries in education in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was that content was produced by a small number of textbook manufacturers, and thus that large states (namely Texas and California) would have large influence over the content in textbooks. This was a prime reason that independent schools hired faculty with strong academic credentials, with many (if not most) independent schools favoring academic credentials (master's and PhD degrees) over education degrees. If both the content and the teaching will increasingly come from large textbook manufacturers (or other conglomerate entities) in the future, it means that independent schools will likely need to hire faculty (and train existing faculty) to both be able to select appropriate and challenging content and material for students, and teach that content in effective and varied means (not just the means provided by the textbook manufacturer or educational company).

### **Finding Number 5: The OSG Approach Continues to be Different, Very Different**

This is true both in terms of online learning and blended learning. The key distinction is that the OSG approach to online and blended learning puts the relationships between the teacher and the student, and the students and their classmates, at the center of the course experience. In doing so, we think that the Online School for Girls model is the most compatible experience with the classroom experience in independent schools. And, as far as we have seen, no one else seems to be putting the same emphasis. Therefore, these days we think that not only is the Online School for Girls the first single-gender online school, but also it is the first truly independent school online.

The Online School for Girls establishes its value the ways that other independent schools do: compensating excellent teachers to develop and teach the courses at high level. This will likely prove to be more costly than many of the other models for online learning, especially those with heavy emphasis on Computer Based Instruction which undervalue the teacher and relationship building. However, when trying to create the best educational experience in a digital environment for girls, we will continue to plan for the expense. In order for OSG to make sure that it hits its mark in terms of Collaboration, Connection, Creativity, and Application, it will need to.

#### *About the authors:*

Molly Rumsey is the Interim Director of the Online School for Girls, an online school that offers supplemental online courses for girls and co-educational professional development classes for faculty members. Prior serving as the OSG Interim Director, Molly worked at the Harpeth Hall School in Nashville, Tennessee for fifteen years as Technology Integration Specialist, Dean of Students, and math teacher.

Brad Rathgeber is the Director of Technology at the Holton-Arms School in Bethesda, Maryland. He has worked at Holton-Arms for seven years, serving as history and art history teacher, interim Division Director, and Academic Technology Director. Brad is also the President of the Board for the Online School for Girls.

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<sup>i</sup> John Watson, Amy Murin, Lauren Vashaw, Butch Gemin, and Chris Rapp, *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning: An Annual Review of Policy and Practice*. 2010. 6.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.* 24.

<sup>iii</sup> Anthony G. Picciano and Chuck Dziuba ed., *Blended Learning: Research Perspectives*, Sloan Consortium, 2010.



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<sup>iv</sup> John Watson, Blended Learning: The Convergence of Online and Face-to-Face Education, iNACOL, 2010.

[http://www.inacol.org/research/promisingpractices/NACOL\\_PP-BlendedLearning-lr.pdf](http://www.inacol.org/research/promisingpractices/NACOL_PP-BlendedLearning-lr.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> Fernanda Santos, *News Corp.*, *After Hiring Klein, Buys Technology Partner in City Schools Project*, NY Times, November 23, 2010.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/24/nyregion/24newscorp.html>

<sup>vi</sup> Press release: "Pearson and Florida Virtual Announce Agreement," November 17, 2010.

<http://www.pearsoned.com/press/2010/11/17/pearson-and-florida-virtual-school-announce-agreement.htm>