



Strategic Directions and Non-Directions That Independent Schools are Taking in Online Learning

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The Online School for Girls has more than doubled in enrollment each year since its opening. This rate outpaces current growth rates of online learning nationwide but is indicative of what happens when online learning enters a community (be it a town, state, school, or district) – it takes off. We continue to believe that schools which plan to incorporate online learning into their programs to enhance student experiences and opportunities and to prepare students for college and post-college online learning will hold a large strategic advantage over other independent schools over the next number of years. Independent schools that do not develop plans for incorporating online learning or who ignore the possibilities on principle may be left playing catch-up to the others and will have an increasingly difficult time matching the mission of their school to online learning opportunities.

Last month, the National Association of Independent School's 21st Century Curriculum/Technology Task Force published their "Online Learning Guide." We strongly recommend that schools read through this guide, as it provides pathways for schools to address online learning at "entry," "emerging," or "innovative" stages of development. The "Online Learning Guide" helps schools identify ways to move through the matrix associated with the critical questions posed by the Task Force.

This OSG Whitepaper is different from the NAIS "Online Learning Guide" as it seeks to identify the places that independent schools are today in online learning. Over the last two years, we have visited to over fifty independent schools, presented to many independent school boards, given over twenty-five conference workshops and presentations, and interacted with countless independent school educators and administrators, including over 250 participants in our own professional development offerings. We suggest four ways that schools have (or have not) been approaching online learning: as Skeptics and the Tried and True; Dabblers and Lone Wolves; Pilots with a Plan; and Strategic Thinkers and Actors. Here, we attempt to identify each type of school and identify the common threads that we see for each group.

Skeptics and the Tried and True - more than 35%

Many independent schools remain deeply skeptical of online education. Common threads between many (though certainly not all) of these schools is that they tend to be the defined "market leaders" within their local communities, they have large endowments that have allowed for great on-campus programs and financial security, and/or they have school cultures that do not embrace change.

In our view, these "skeptics" forget that they are not simply competing within a local market anymore. With increased options, especially for high achieving students, emerging from universities and others, being the local market leader is not as sufficient as it once was. For example, a high achieving student can choose to attend an online program offered by a university for high school students – an option not available a few years back. In addition, other schools can challenge the market leader quickly by leveraging the powers of online education well by partnering with existing online course providers to greatly expand opportunities for students beyond what the local market leader could do face-to-face. Skeptics forget that no matter how large their endowments, they can never match the sheer breadth of experiences that are available through online learning opportunities, which capitalize on the open education movement and economies of scale.

Skeptics, whether market leaders or laggards, whether rich or poor, are most often tied together by a common bond that they have a school culture that not only does not want to see change, but often actively works to undermine it. In these schools, dissenting opinions from established norms are not welcome or even heard. Over and over, we have seen that no matter how hard a strong voice or two may press a community (even if that voice is the Head's), without a

cultural shift, these schools will miss opportunities in online learning.

Dabblers and Lone Wolves - 45%

Many independent schools have a singular person or a small group of people who are looking to actively explore online education. Often, this group centers around a school's technology office or its youngest faculty members, many of whom have had positive personal experiences with online learning.

At times, Dabblers and Lone Wolves can have an impact on individuals within a school—faculty, students, parents, etc.—but they often lack administrative buy-in and encouragement to make the online learning a meaningful part of their school's program or to pilot a program in a way that can move a school past the pilot stage. Administrative buy-in and support is critical at the point in order for schools to move to the next stage of online learning development.

Administrators will need to understand the possibilities of online learning to the degree that they are comfortable answering inevitable questions from faculty, and to a lesser degree from parents, Trustees, and students. It has been our experience in schools that a school's faculty will be most reticent to online learning--not the parents, Trustees, or students-- and thus it is imperative that those who oversee faculty development and evaluation buy into online learning to help bring faculty along.

The Dabblers and Lone Wolves seem to be making headway within their schools, at least to the point of encouraging administrators to open themselves to the possibilities of online education. Perhaps one of the greatest signs of a shift is that the audiences that we are working with at conferences are no longer primarily technology directors or technology integrators at schools, but are now largely academic program directors and other senior administrators.

Pilots With a Plan - 15%

A good number of independent schools have begun to move past the point of having a singular or a few faculty members or students engaged with online education to a point where they are actively piloting one or more online education programs within their schools and then measuring students' performance. We have seen this group grow dramatically in the last year, led by consortium approaches to online learning, like the Online School for Girls. OSG has more than doubled in size in the past year, from twenty-four in the OSG consortium at the start of 2010-2011 to fifty-two schools at start of 2011-2012. In addition, many schools have begun to develop their own courses that they are offering (at this point internally) to their students. The NAIS 2011 Hybrid/Blended Learning in Independent Schools reports, "there has been some growth over the past year in the number of schools that currently offer fully and blended online courses or programs (20 percent) and that are actively planning to offer online courses (13 percent). Four-in-10 schools are considering and researching online courses and one-quarter do not offer, or plan to offer, any online courses."ⁱ

Schools that are piloting programs often ensure that students taking an online course receive additional support. This seems to be particularly important when students have not experienced "blended" or intensively "web-facilitated" courses at their schools before. This year, we have worked with a few schools intensively to build support networks for students. One such school, a small, urban day school, has twelve students taking courses through OSG this year. That school supports the cohort of students taking online courses as an "advisory group." These students see their online course "advisory" on a weekly basis; the "advisor" and online teacher regularly communicate about students; and the students feel like they have an advocate at their school in case a difficult situation arises. In some schools that are actively looking to engage more strategically in online education, the "advisor" role has been taken on by a senior administrator, such as a division director, college counselor, or academic dean.

The primary benefit of piloting online learning programs within schools seems to be that it allows for a comfortable way

Suggested Reading

2011-2012 NAIS Trendbook,
National Association of
Independent Schools, 2011.

"Online Learning Guide,"
National Association of
Independent Schools 21st
Century/Technology Task
Force, September 2011:
<http://sss.nais.org/files/OnlineLearningGuide10-5-11.pdf>

Clayton M. Christensen,
Michael B. Horn, Louis
Caldera, Louis Soare,
"Disrupting College: How
Disruptive Education can
Deliver Quality and
Affordability in Postsecondary
Education." Center for
American Progress and Innosight
Institute, February 2011
<http://www.americanprogress.org/events/2011/02/disrupting.html>

to open dialogue about online education within the community, while allaying community fears that “face-to-face” learning is going away – a primary fear among faculty, lesser so for parents. Schools that use the online learning pilot programs to help move the community dialog along can become strategic about their engagement with online learning within only a year or two.

Strategic Thinkers and Actors - less than 5%

A small number of independent schools are engaging in online education on a strategic level. These schools have been actively researching and piloting online learning programs for at least a full year and have begun to incorporate online learning into their school's operations planning, strategic planning, and curriculum planning. These schools often teach at least one of their courses online, and work either with a consortium of schools to build an online program or work with a for-profit course provider. Of note, many of these schools that we work with closely are also contemplating or actively planning toward an online course requirement for graduation from the school.

Recently, we were presenting at such a school. The school, a large, day-boarding school, has worked to engage its entire community toward an understanding of online learning and the strategic benefits for the school. Tellingly, while there, we met with their Board of Trustees, students, administrators, and faculty, and we met many parents. What is indicative about this experience is that instead of making decisions in closed meeting rooms, the entire community was engaged in discussions. And, those discussions were focused on the opportunities associated with online learning (rather than possible problems). We do believe that there was this type of openness because the school had actively piloted a program for more than a year and had kept conversations with the community open and honest throughout, building in many feedback loops for each constituency group.

Meeting the Mission - The Problem with Not Engaging Now

The new NAIS “Online Learning Guide” summarizes well: “Schools thinking strategically are well aware of the *Disrupting Class* prognostication (confirmed by other recent studies) that the adoption curve for high school students taking coursework online is steeply rising and will inevitably change the way schools offer courses, as it already has in the higher education sector.”ⁱⁱ The underlying challenge here is: how will schools be able to meet their missions and what they hold as inviolate educational principles with online courses? We believe that the short (and pretty scary) answer is: they will not be able to meet mission and principles if they do not engage now.

Online learning at the secondary level is becoming dominated by two extraordinarily well-funded sources: universities offering their courses to high school students and for-profit providers. Many colleges and universities have well established online programs, and have begun to offer these courses to high school students, with highly effective marketing efforts. Most of these courses are taught in a college, lecture-style format and are quite large in size. For-profit course providers have been working with public school districts for a number of years and have programs that are very large in size. Many courses from for-profit providers are analytics-driven and based in Computer Based Instruction (CBI). And, often, these course providers sell their courses and programs to other providers who then market these courses as their own, creating even greater confusion about the online learning landscape and confusing parent and student “consumers” in the process.

If prognostications are correct, and half of all courses at the high school level are taught online by 2019, independent schools will have to address online learning at some point in the near future.ⁱⁱⁱ However, if the current market forces (university and for-profit) for online high school courses grow – and there is no reason right now to believe that they will not – it will be increasingly hard for independent schools to create online course opportunities to meet the demands of students and their parents while also meeting the mission and principles of their school, as it is hard to imagine a lecture-styled college course or a CBI-based course resonating with most independent schools’ missions.

The schools that engage today and actively move toward strategically thinking about online education will have some time both to be true to *and* to strategically use online learning in providing a superior 21st century educational experience for students.

ⁱ “Hybrid/Blended Learning in Independent Schools,” National Association of Independent Schools, May 2011.

ⁱⁱ “Online Learning Guide,” National Association of Independent Schools 21st Century/Technology Task Force, September 2011:
<http://sss.nais.org/files/OnlineLearningGuide10-5-11.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Clayton M. Christensen and Michael B. Horn, “The Rise of Online Education.” *Washington Post*, September 14, 2011.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-innovations/the-rise-of-online-education/2011/09/14/gIQA8e2AdL_story.html