

**Listening to the Public:
Washington State Community Forums on Online Education**

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Report on Community Forums on Online Education Outline

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1. Purpose of the Task Force

In January, 2002, Governor Gary Locke appointed a task force of education, business, and government leaders to advise him on the development of statewide virtual education opportunities for students, initially focusing on opportunities for middle and high school students. The goal of the virtual education initiative is to provide all citizens in Washington State with expanded online learning opportunities, resources, and tools – tools that give students access to rich multi-media content, the ability to collaborate with other students around the world, enrichment and AP courses, technology tools for teachers, and the capacity to tailor online resources to meet the needs of individual students and teachers.

2. Purpose of the Community Forums

Task Force members were committed to connecting with Washington communities and seeking to understand what Internet-enabled learning opportunities and distance education choices Washington state residents would like to see developed. In April 2002, representatives of the Task Force conducted a series of one-hour community forums around the state. These community meetings were an opportunity for members of the public to provide their best ideas on the development of these online learning opportunities for middle and high school students. To provide a context for the discussion, each session began with a brief CD-ROM presentation highlighting several online teaching and learning technologies currently available. Members of the public were then invited to provide brief comments, and/or to submit written comments.

3. Schedule of Community Forums:

Date	Location	Participants
4/12/02	Forks – Forks High School	25 parents, teachers, students, and school administrators
4/15/02	Seattle – Nova High School and the Islamic School	41 students, parents, and teachers Governor Locke attended
4/16/02	Pasco – Pasco High School	8 teachers, parents, and school administrators
4/17/02	Toppenish – Toppenish Middle School	20 community college students, high school students parents, school administrators
4/18/02	Omak – Omak High School	7 parents and school administrators
4/23/02	Bellevue – Bellevue High School	25 parents, teachers, and school administrators

4. Perspectives Offered by Participating Communities

Forks: Unlike many of the other rural communities the Task Force visited, the majority of the group attending the Forks community forum had already experienced online learning as students, parents of students, teachers, or school administrators. The conversation focused on the many benefits of online learning for rural communities, particularly on how it helps broaden the course offerings and lessen the isolation felt by many rural schools. The community strongly felt any online education initiative should be funded at the state or federal level.

Seattle (Nova High School): The audience for this forum was composed entirely of students, parents, and staff from Nova, an alternative high school in Seattle, and the nearby Islamic School, a private religious school. A thoughtful discussion developed around several themes including concerns about ensuring equality of access to courses; the effectiveness of teaching/learning in an online learning environment lacking person-to-person interaction; support for students; and concerns about diverting already limited state funds to develop a statewide online learning initiative.

Toppenish and Pasco: Both of these communities shared similar concerns about providing equal access and course opportunities for Hispanic students. Many citizens also felt online courses could help ESL students master English. Both communities expressed a concern about the lack of access to computers with Internet at home and suggested community technology centers be constructed. Thought was given to how computer resources in local schools could be utilized after-hours and on weekends to help provide access. Citizens in Pasco enthusiastically offered to participate in the initial pilot of this effort.

Omak: A small group of school administrators and community leaders attended this forum to discuss how a statewide online learning initiative could help their students to think “beyond the orchards” about future careers. They were also very excited about being able to offer Omak children access to the same courses as Bellevue students; but pointed out that online courses should also resonate with the local interests and needs. There was concern that special needs students be considered when designing a statewide online learning program.

Bellevue: Much of the forum discussion centered on a few parents who shared their experiences shepherding their children through fee-based online courses and the struggle to obtain course credit at the district level. These parents thought it was very important the Task Force develop a streamlined user-friendly approach to course enrollment and credit granting. Bandwidth was also seen as a key issue – if it is in place, then quality content could follow. There was concern that if funding followed the student, various forms of competition might be created. Finally, the group agreed teacher preparation programs must produce teachers who know how to effectively use technology in education.

5. Common Themes

Benefits of online learning

Enables schools to offer more courses and to individualize learning

- While online learning may not be an appropriate solution for every student, it will help small communities and small schools that can't afford to offer a wide variety of core/elective/AP courses. In addition, online learning allows schools to individualize learning and support students in learning at their own pace

Provides choices for non-traditional students

- Not all students learn well in a traditional classroom environment. This initiative offers students with diverse learning styles another way to learn, appealing, for example, to hands-on, visual learners and students who enjoy learning at their own pace and on their own schedule.
- Online learning enables home-schooled and home-bound students to access a broader range of learning opportunities

Increases interaction with other cultures and communities

- The interaction students can have with people in other countries and communities broadens their classroom experience and can augment limited field trip opportunities. Connecting communities through videoconferencing opens minds and motivates students to learn more about each other, breaking down racial and cultural barriers and fostering mutual understanding and respect.

Empowers parents and students

- Parents sometimes feel disconnected from their child's teachers and school. The ability to contact teachers from home via email and check the status of their child's work online would be valuable. A "Washington State Portal" would be an excellent way to give students easy access to their educational records and enable them to build a portfolio of their work.
- When working online, students are often unaware of the age, sex, and race of their classmates – they are generally only concerned with what brings them together as opposed to being distracted or distanced by their differences.
- Students commented that when working in a virtual classroom they function as much like a teacher as like a student. This experience of teaching and learning from their peers significantly increased their learning and engagement in the material.

Challenges

Find a name that communicates

- Be sure to think carefully about the name for this project. "Virtual Education" is hard to understand and the word "virtual" makes it appear to be of a lower quality than "real" education.

Keep this initiative commercial free

- Citizens expressed concern about the commercialization or inappropriate use of marketing in a Washington online education environment and stated strongly that school environments should be commercial-free.

Do not re-invent the wheel

- Many forum attendees were knowledgeable about other virtual education initiatives. They recommended that the task force learn from existing online learning programs around the United States and the world, while taking into account the specific needs of Washington State.

Find a means to build student/teacher relationships and a sense of community

- While online education offers many opportunities, there is the potential for losing the social value of interacting with other students and teachers. Interactions must be more than just words passed on a screen between students and teachers if we want to develop strong learning relationships in the online environment.
- Attendees felt that not all learning should be done in front of a computer. It is important that online class assignments require students to get out into the real world.
- In a traditional classroom good teachers rely on the face-to-face contact and other body language to gauge student comprehension of lessons. Other techniques must be developed for teachers to assess student understanding in the online learning environment.

Be aware of access challenges which may limit cross-cultural exchange efforts

- If an international exchange is a goal, then how can students communicate with poor countries that don't have the same access these information technologies? Interactions will be limited to developed countries with Internet computers in their classrooms.

Program Design

Establish clear policies for student enrollment

- Enrolling in an online course should be a collaborative decision between parents, children, and teachers. It needs to be made by people who know the potential benefits and drawbacks of a particular student enrolling in an online course.
- There should be a list of pre-requisite skills attached to each online course. If a child meets the qualifications and wants to take the course they should be able to enroll.
- Participation should be decided at the school level, not at the district level.
- Students will need academic counseling to help them make the right choices.
- There should be a limit on the number of online courses students can take.

Provide student support

- It is vital that students have a support person or group at their school to help with any online course problems. There should be a maximum of 35 students assigned to each support person.
- Not all students will be able to decide if online courses are right for them.

Provide technical support

- Several students who had experienced learning online had trouble accessing their course website. Sufficient technical support is needed to make sure the courses are always up and running, regardless of where they access the online courses. Appropriate funds need to be budgeted for this purpose.
- Public access machines are generally not maintained well. If public access terminals are used, resources should be in place to support them.

Involve citizen advisors

- Many attendees expressed appreciation that the Governor is addressing this from the bottom-up, rather than the top-down, and encouraged the task force to maintain that stance throughout.

Set and maintain standards for conducting on-line courses

- Student participants reported problems accessing their Apex instructors in current on-line learning environments. They often had to wait a long time before their teachers answered questions and reported there were not enough “office hours.” Also, sometimes teachers did not clearly define assignment due dates and other expectations and didn’t confirm assignments had been received. Students emphasized the importance of online teachers setting clear course guidelines so students know what is expected of them. The first twenty days in many traditional classrooms is spent developing the classroom learning community. Considerable thought should be given to build that same sense of community in an online space.

Accommodate special needs populations

- Be sure accommodations are made for students who have special needs, including students who have trouble reading, speak English as a second language, have physical disabilities, etc.

Provide teacher training

- This initiative needs to provide adequate resources to train existing teachers and work with teacher preparation programs to produce new teachers with the skills necessary to teach effectively in the online environment.
- Online courses should be developed to teach existing teachers how to use technology in education more effectively.

Content

Use multiple course formats within content areas

- There should not be a set formula for online curriculum. A range of course structures should be developed (ex: Six different Biology II courses each appealing to different learning styles).

ESL and foreign language courses are a key area of need and opportunity

- There is a need for a range of foreign languages and various Native American languages. This initiative is uniquely capable of making contributions to teaching English as a second-language.

Courses should be developed based on local community needs

- Community group should have input into what courses are developed based on the educational needs of the community. This would provide an opportunity to develop courses that resonate with the local interests and needs (e.g. courses about apples, fish and marine biology, electrical power systems, handling food, driving a tractor safely, dams, etc.).
- Consider creating online courses that prepare students to take standardized tests like the WASL.
- Develop courses that get students thinking about careers. Work with private industry to provide students the opportunity to take virtual tours of Microsoft, Boeing, etc. Leverage these partnerships with private industry to create internships.
- Involve existing online teachers in the course and system design process. They know what really works better than anyone.

Create the best interface design possible

- The Graphical User Interface should be of high quality and easy to use.
- There should be a single portal everyone uses to access courses and resources. WebPages should not be more than 3 clicks deep. Use an “Earthviewer” approach – zoom in on information – streamline the entrance into the information.
- Washington’s online education initiative could be a place where tutorials, information, and discussions are organized and centralized. It would not necessarily need to be a “classroom.”
- The program should use language that is accessible to all audiences (ESL, parents, students, teachers, etc.).

Access

Maintain the K-20 Network

- Washington State's K-20 network makes it possible to consider expanding on-line learning opportunities. Don't abandon it.

Primary access should be provided at school

- In rural areas of Washington, access to computers with Internet at home is limited. Schools should be the major point of access for students. High school and local college computer labs should be opened after hours and on weekends for students to work on their online courses.

Promote access at public libraries and community centers

- Washington should identify and publicize community technology centers where they exist and create more community technology centers. These facilities provide a place where students can work on their online courses and also help the public become comfortable with technology. Make sure these facilities are open at the right times and that they have adequate technical support infrastructures in place.

Support access at home

- Student access from home is vital. If course access is not made convenient, then student's work will suffer.
- Access gaps need to be addressed – not everyone can afford to have an online computer at home with all the software applications needed for courses. Perhaps Washington should consider creating a scholarship program for students who can't afford access at home.

Funding

Secure adequate funding before launching the project

- A sustainable funding model for this program should be established before it is launched. We don't want to start offering something and find out later the state can't continue to afford it.

Ensure K-12 virtual education is free to all

- Payment should never be the responsibility of the parent or the school because online education in Washington should be an equalizer – otherwise, the existing digital divide will increase. Free and public K-12 education is a must – state or federal taxes should pay for it. If a student wants to take a class for college credit then that student should pay for it.

Money to support this initiative should follow the students.

- If a student decides to take a course, a portion of that student's FTE money should be directed to the Washington online education program. But it must be done in a

way that does not take too much money away from local schools or create competition for resources.

Seek private sector contributions

- Contributions should be sought from various private sector companies and non-profit organizations to meet the cost of building a solid online education infrastructure because they would benefit from a more prepared and technologically savvy emerging workforce.

Pursue alternative funding options

- There is not enough money in the schools already. An alternative would be to trade curricula for student space in online classes.
- Explore whether the Twenty-First Century Learning Communities grant program might be a model for this initiative.

Timing

The time is now

- Many attendees stressed that now is the time to invest in online education. There are good models, a clear need, and proven benefits.

Supplement classroom courses and provide online courses

- There should be on-line courses as well as tools for use in existing courses. As a starting point, online teaching/learning tools could be developed to supplement existing lessons and resources. Once people are more comfortable using online resources for teaching/learning then the program can expand to start offering courses.

Create a pilot

- Piloting programs in a few areas in the state would be good before launching statewide. Communities that the Task Force visited would be ideal for pilot programs. Be sure the pilot is carried out in communities on both sides of the mountains.