



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Catharine Young

Online Learning Advisory Council Issues Final Report

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Senator Young sponsored legislation creating the council

Online and blended learning courses have the potential to dramatically improve educational opportunities for students throughout New York State, and a report issued by the Online Learning Advisory Council provides recommendations to improve the availability of these learning systems. The report can be downloaded above.

Senator Catharine Young (R,C,I - Olean), Chair of the Legislative Commission on Rural Resources, sponsored a bill which was signed into law last year and established the council. The council was tasked with developing recommendations regarding the statewide delivery of online and blended learning services in school districts.

“Online and blended learning systems provide school districts, teachers, and students with innovative and cutting-edge approaches to education. There are tremendous opportunities for schools to utilize these teaching methods and dramatically enhance the educational experience for students. For example, imagine students interacting directly with subject-matter experts from thousands of miles away, or having access to college preparatory and career-specific courses that were not previously available,” said Senator Young.

Online courses, as well as blended learning initiatives that combine both a physical location with online resources, provide schools with cost-effective opportunities for students to access coursework and educational resources otherwise not available. These learning initiatives are critical to providing education for children. It is important in rural areas where geographic distances and limited resources can reduce the options available to students and schools, but the recommendations also apply to schools in non-rural areas.

The Council’s recommendations are timely as more schools are exploring the purchase of technology for the classroom that will enable the implementation of online and blended learning systems. This is especially important now that schools may obtain funding for online learning and technology through the Smart Schools Bond Act that was approved by voters in 2014.

The report does not follow a one-size-fits-all methodology, and it recognizes that each school has unique resources and equally unique needs.

The report makes recommendations that will foster collaborative innovation in the classroom and among teachers when implementing online learning and other technologies. These include:

- Implementing professional development programs to expand instructional skills;
- Providing certain waivers of regulations that will reduce the risk for teachers and schools as they implement new online learning programs;
- Establishing a team of leaders at the New York State Education Department specifically dedicated to online education and educational technology; and
- Incorporating online and blended learning training within pre-service teacher curricula.

The council was comprised of 11 members whose backgrounds include a wide variety of expertise in online and blended learning. Dr. David O'Rourke, District Superintendent for Erie 2-Chautauqua-Cattaraugus BOCES, and Mr. Scott Bischooping, District Superintendent for Wayne-Finger Lakes BOCES, served as co-chairs for the council. Throughout the process of developing the report, the council sought and incorporated input from stakeholders throughout the state.

“Our teacher leaders are showing us the way. We learned through Virtual Advanced Placement programs in New York State that a teacher who learns to teach online frequently adapts online learning tools for their face-to-face classroom, and this deepens student learning experiences in face-to-face classrooms as well. We know that online learning can be a transformation of teaching and learning,” said Dr. O'Rourke.

“Providing equity of access to online course work to help enhance educational programs is important. Equally important are the digital transformations of face-to-face learning, using

online learning tools in K-12 classrooms. The Report also recommends online learning becomes a part of teacher education programs in colleges and universities. Teachers' first experiences using online learning tools shouldn't be when they are arriving in schools. They need exposure while learning in our higher education institutions," said Mr. Bischooping.

"We are grateful to the Governor, Senator Young, and Assemblywoman Nolan for their sponsorship of this legislation, which has advanced the conversation about online learning opportunities for K-12 students in New York State," said Dr. O'Rourke.

"I am thankful for the many hours of work that the Online Learning Advisory Council has put into evaluating online and blended learning systems in New York State. Clearly, they are dedicated to creating more opportunities for our students to excel, and I am eager to see the positive results of implementing their recommendations," said Senator Young.