



# **Al Batool Virtual International School And Al Forqan Private School (Virtual American Program)**

## **K-12 Private School**

**Administrators Guide to Online learning**





# Al Batool Virtual International School And Al Forqan Private School (Virtual American Program)



## Administrator Guide to Online Learning

Administrators are often recognized as the first line of leadership in any school, online or brick-and-mortar. This free guide is intended to inform building administrators about best practices for online learning and, ultimately, to maximize student learning outcomes in the online environment.

### **In this guide, we explore answers to the following questions**

- What is online learning?
- What are the differences/similarities between online and face-to-face learning?
- Why are students choosing online learning?
- What is the administrator's role in online learning?
- What are some common misconceptions about online learning?
- How does one establish and maintain a successful online learning program?



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## About this Guide

This guide has been adapted by our schools as prepared by *Michigan Virtual™*, through its *Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute®*, with review and support from MASA, MASSP, MEMSPA, and MAISA to acquaint administrators – including superintendents, principals, curriculum directors, and other district and building-level decision-makers – with online learning. The guide includes general information about K-12 online learning, successful attributes of online learners and online programs. At the end of the guide is a list of free practical resources, many of which are cited throughout the guide, for more in-depth study of important aspects of online teaching and learning.

Sources of guide with adaptation and permission are:

1. Michigan Virtual  
<https://michiganvirtual.org/resources/guides/>
2. Apex Learning Virtual School  
<https://www.apexlearningvs.com/>
3. Apex Learning  
<https://www.apexlearning.com/>
4. Accelerate Online Academy  
<https://accelerate.academy/>

**This guide is will be updated and translated into Arabic after the approval and licensing of the National eLearning Center.**



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## Introduction

Research has shown that online learning is academically effective and can provide meaningful alternatives for students who need greater flexibility with their education due to individual learning preferences, health conditions, employment responsibilities, lack of success with traditional school environments, or to pursue advanced coursework.

### Introduction to Online Learning

An online or virtual course can be defined as a course of study that is capable of generating a credit or a grade and that is provided in an interactive learning environment where the majority of the curriculum is delivered using the Internet and in which pupils may be separated from their instructor or teacher of record by time, location, or both.

As outlined in a [blog post](#) by *Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute*<sup>®</sup> (2017), online learning is being used with K-12 students to:

- Expand the range of courses available to students beyond what a single school can offer;
- Allow flexibility to students facing scheduling conflicts;
- Provide credit recovery programs for students that have failed courses and/or dropped out of school, allowing them to get back on track to graduate;
- Help students who are currently performing below grade-level to begin catching-up through blended learning;
- Personalize instruction for the needs of individual students;
- Provide on-demand online tutoring; and
- Increase the teaching of technology skills by embedding technology literacy in academic content.



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## Implementation Issues & Best Practices for Stakeholders

The following sections numerous best practices to assist schools or districts with their planning and implementation.

### Communication

- Communicate clearly and consistently about online learning options to staff, parents/guardians, and students.
- Post your policies and information related to online learning on your website, including any materials about how and when students are expected to make a request for an online course. Also include enrollment deadlines and orientation opportunities for parents and students. Building administrators should be able to explain the school's processes which should align with government legislation and requirements.
- Review your student handbooks annually and update them to reflect current policies and expectations.

### Student Supports

- Offer a variety of training and support to parents/guardians, counselors, and mentors to prepare them to best support online learners.
- Provide space onsite to support online learners, preferably a designated lab with a full-time mentor assigned.
- Identify clearly for staff, students, and parents/guardians what technologies or staffing are available in the online learning spaces to help students be successful in their online courses and provide contact information.

### Grades and Transcripts

- Verify that the grading scales used in online courses align with those used in face-to-face courses.
- Verify that the online course appears on student schedules and transcripts as a face-to-face class would.
- Determine the impact online courses may have on student class rankings.



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## Student Performance

- Compare the pass rate for district students in online courses to the pass rate for those same students in their face-to-face courses.

## Policy

- Develop online learning policies based on successful models and strategies.
- Review them annually for adherence to recent changes in state requirements.
- Communicate your policies and annual changes to all stakeholders via your website and using other forms of communication you employ with students and parents/guardians.
- Review and consider national standards as you develop online program policies.

## Evaluation

- Engage an external consultant, organization, or accrediting body to conduct an external review of your online program.



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## The Administrator Role

Administrators are often recognized as the first line of leadership in any school, online or brick and mortar. The administrator holds many roles within the school and navigates each one to create a learning community that focuses on providing a quality education and vision of success for their students. They are responsible for managing funds and cultivating leadership within the school community while effectively managing teachers, mentors, paraprofessionals, parents/guardians, and students and bringing them all together to develop a strong and effective learning environment. They are charged with many objectives that need to work seamlessly together, but often they find themselves thrust into the position with many unanswered questions. In the online learning environment, these questions or unknowns can be even more challenging as this learning environment is not well known to many administrators – especially those new to their role – and spans a smaller but growing demographic.

As each situation is unique, so are the questions and concerns that administrators have when establishing or maintaining a successful online program. Creating a specific checklist is close to impossible, but the general themes that administrators need to focus their attention on can be somewhat summarized in a few points. John Watson, Founder of Evergreen Education Group (personal communication, March 22, 2018), identified five broad encompassing areas that administrators of local online programs should be aware of in their leadership role:

- Online learning is complicated. With so many components to consider – course, program, school, students, teachers, parents, school hours, calendar – the administrator will need to consider how the program or course will work in concert with all the other factors.
- Many people have views regarding online learning that are unsupported, or only partially supported, by evidence.
- Developing a successful program will take longer than expected; therefore, it is very important to set reasonable expectations from the start.
- The online content and platform are not going to make or break the program, as long as the decisions are made thoughtfully, strategically, and with the end user – the student – in mind.
- Successful programs are often created by a strong leader; they are rarely created by committees.





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## Common Misunderstandings about Online Learning

Even with the expansive research and reports surrounding the digital learning landscape, some common misconceptions or misunderstandings about online learning remain. Some of these misconceptions may create gaps that prohibit growth, while others may be the source of confusion among administrative leadership and trickle down to other stakeholders in the school.

*Misunderstanding 1: Classroom teachers can easily be successful in teaching online classes.*

Although public school teachers understand the pedagogy involved in educating students in their instructional area, research has shown that teachers are not prepared to teach online classes and require professional development focusing specifically on online learning pedagogy to meet the unique needs of their learners and understand the dynamics of the virtual delivery of courses (Barbour & Unger Harrison, 2016). Professional development specifically for online teaching is imperative for successful students and teachers (Davis & Rose, 2007).

*Misunderstanding 2: The biggest constraint when implementing online courses is surrounding the technology components.*

John Watson from Evergreen Education Group states that although technology can indeed be a barrier, there are other constraints that create far more challenges than the high-tech aspects. Such challenges are often cultural, behavioral, and organizational. Administrators should be aware that buy-in from stakeholders is critical to a successful online learning program.

*Misunderstanding #3: Online learning is very similar to what students experience in their brick-and-mortar schools except that the instruction is completed online.*

Although the standards and competencies required for students to learn are often the same in both the brick-and-mortar forum and the online forum, the differences expand far beyond delivery. Administrators must recognize and account for the 24/7 accessibility of the online coursework and all the factors that come with a school that is "never closed." Negotiating access in the community; adapting procedures to support grading and open student enrollment; reporting for students, parents, teachers, and mentors; discipline; technological support; and course evaluation must all be looked at through varied lenses (Davis & Rose, 2007).



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*Misunderstanding #4: Online learning is easy for students to adapt to and be successful.*

Although students may be proficient in using technology in their everyday world, using technology for learning requires active instruction and support from the teacher and the mentor. This active instruction requires time to teach the habits and best practices for a successful online learner. Using technology to acquire information, organize thoughts, create and share documents and/or assignments, and learn the educational concepts being taught does not come naturally but requires more direct, step-by-step instruction before students can pick up these habits. This requires implicit instruction from the adults, often 1:1 mentoring, and a great deal of trial and error between the teacher and the student. Expectations need to be spelled out clearly, and often teachers need to reach out to students numerous times to help them navigate the course and learning methods. This takes a considerable amount of time from the teacher, the mentor, and the student, and often is a task that is required in addition to the subject content being taught. Administrators need to recognize the need for this type of intensive coaching on both the mentors' and the teachers' behalf, especially at the beginning of a new course for new online learners. They also need to allow for this mentoring time during the academic instruction, recognizing that the preparation and instruction time may even double for the online instructor.

Additionally, online courses can vary in the level of difficulty, complexity, and expectations just as they would in a traditional face-to-face class (Wicks, 2010). Collaboration between students may exist or the students may have to work independently, also determined by the online class expectations and format.

*Misunderstanding #5: Online learning is less expensive than traditional face-to-face instruction.*

The technological infrastructure required for a quality online program can easily resemble the financial budget required for a brick-and-mortar school (Wicks 2010). Depending on the hardware and software chosen for the program, the teacher-student ratios in the online class, the mentors, and the additional faculty and staff needed to manage the "behind the scenes" innerworkings of the online program, the digital learning school can be equivalent to the cost of the traditional learning model.



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### How Online Learning Is Similar and Different from Face-to-Face

Because online learning is still new to many school staff and students, it is common for there to be misunderstandings about online courses — specifically how they are similar to and different from face-to-face learning. A primary example relevant to the students' direct experience and directly affecting success rates is that people often believe that online courses are easier. Certainly, some online courses are less challenging than what a student experiences face-to-face, but several years of data collected from end-of-course surveys indicate that most often, students report online courses to be at least as challenging — if not more so — than what they experience in their face-to-face courses. This tends to be because the student has to learn the same content knowledge as the face-to-face course but has to do so in an unfamiliar learning environment; students have to develop skills for navigating the online course, self-regulation strategies for staying on pace to complete the course, and new ways of asking for help when they have a question, all without being in the same physical location as their online teacher. However, the learning platform being used may be unique to the online school or program, while the technology and learning applications are often found in today's brick and mortar schools.



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## Why Students Choose Online Learning

Students want to learn online for a variety of reasons. The Foundation for Blended and Online Learning (2017) published a report on why students choose blended and online schools. The report authors used surveys, focus groups, and interviews with students, along with other data to create the report. The report identified three broad reasons students pursue online and blended learning: 1) academics, 2) social-emotional health and safety, and 3) interests and life circumstances. Students may be interested in enrolling in online courses because their schools cannot or do not offer the class face-to-face, for example, Advanced Placement (AP). AP courses are a common request because schools often do not have qualified teachers in the subject areas or enough students to provide the courses face-to-face. Sometimes, students turn to online courses to overcome a scheduling conflict, and some use online courses for elective credit and personal enrichment — including taking courses over the summer.

*Sometimes parents and students alike are surprised at how difficult the work may be and how much time a student will have to spend trying to learn it. – Mentor*

*The level of thoughtful focus necessary for a quality online learning experience is something most K-12 students have never been asked to do. Even in a blended course, they only scratch the surface of how disciplined they must be to be successful. – Mentor*



## **Profile of a Successful Student**

Students who have a successful, satisfying experience learning online tend to share several critical characteristics:

**Good Time Management:** The student creates and maintains a consistent study schedule throughout the semester and is able to do so without significant prodding from a teacher.

**Effective Communication:** The student knows when and how to ask for help and is able to clearly describe any problems she/he is having with the learning materials using email, texting and/or the telephone. This includes seeking help from the online instructor, a mentor, or even other students in the online course.

**Independent Study Habits:** The student studies and completes assignments without direct supervision and maintains the self-discipline to stick to a schedule.

**Self-Motivation:** The student has a strong desire to learn skills, acquire knowledge, and fulfill assignments in online courses because of an educational goal and can maintain focus on that goal.

**Academic Readiness:** The student has the basic reading, writing, math, and computer literacy skills to succeed in the class.

**Technologically Prepared:** The student knows how to open, create, and/or save a document using word processing applications (e.g., Microsoft, Google, or other cloud-based tools); use various technology tools (e.g., dictionary, thesaurus, grammar checker, calculator); and identify, download, and convert various file formats (e.g., doc, xls, pdf, jpg).

**One to Two Online Courses or a History of Success:** Students enrolled in traditional schools tend to perform better in their online courses when they only take one or two online courses at a time. Unless a student has already proven they can be successful taking one or two online courses, it is not advisable to enroll them in more.

Data examined in Michigan's Effectiveness Reports over the last several years have made it clear that success in face-to-face courses is correlated with success in online courses. Further, students who struggle with face-to-face courses also tend to struggle in online courses. Laying the groundwork for student success in online courses requires preparing the students and their parents/guardians for this new experience and maintaining a robust network of wraparound support for students, parents/guardians, mentors, and other staff.



## **Supports Required for Successful Students**

Most K-12 students benefit from a structured learning environment that is well supported — whether in face-to-face classrooms or virtual learning environments. Successful online students tend to be surrounded by a team of adults who are focused on the students' success. For each of these groups — parents/guardians, counselors, mentors, online teachers, and peers — the support role is even more important when students are taking the course to recover credit. It often takes more time and more effort to help these students stay involved and on pace and complete their courses successfully.

*It's really hard to get the parents to understand that this kid has an actual class that in the near future is going on your report card. Grades count. Grades matter. – Mentor*  
*I have a form [the students] have to take home and talk about with their parents. Their parents have to sign the form saying that it's okay that they take a certain class. – Mentor*

### **Parents/Guardians**

Parents/Guardians are integral partners in student support; however, their responsibilities may be a little different when their students are enrolled in online courses. The level of parental engagement that students need is, in part, determined by the level of mentoring support provided at the students' local brick-and-mortar school. Many students who are not provided the time and space to learn at school will have to learn at home. Then the organizing and managing responsibilities shift to the parent (Hasler Waters, Menchaca, & Borup, 2014).

For this reason, school counselors and/or onsite mentors should be working to educate parents/guardians before a student registers for an online course. It is common for parents/guardians to be unaware that their students are enrolled in any online courses (Borup, Chambers, & Stimson, 2017). One means of introducing online learning to parents is the *Parent Guide to Online Learning*. The guide details what online learning is and introduces some of the benefits online learning offers. It also includes information about the characteristics of successful online learners and how to help students prepare for learning online.

In *Helping Online Students Be Successful: Parental Engagement*, Borup, Chambers, and Stimson (2017), reported that teachers and mentors expressed beliefs that students were most likely to succeed in online courses when parents/guardians:



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- Advise students on their course enrollments;
- Participate in an orientation with their students;
- Understand the challenges that students face in online learning and the ways that they can help their students overcome those challenges;
- Receive a contract or agreement outlining responsibilities and expectations for student, parent, online teacher, teacher of record, and mentor (See [Mentor Guide to Online Learning](#) and the student and parent [Online Learning Agreement](#) for samples);
- Receive school policy information, including reasons for denial and how the course figures into the student's academic record;
- Monitor student performance and progress;
- Motivate students to more fully engage in learning activities;
- Organize and manage student learning at home; and
- Assist students as they work on assignments.

They also found that parental engagement in online programs may increase when staff:

- Involve parents/guardians in online course enrollment decisions;
- Educate parents/guardians about learning online and how they can support their students;
- Maintain regular contact with parents/guardians by inviting them to be involved in specific ways;
- Communicate in the mode parents prefer, whether it is phone, email, letter, face-to-face in person or using an app, or via a designated Facebook page.
- Assist parents/guardians in keeping up on their students' academic performance by regularly providing student progress reports and offering an online parent portal so they can easily track student engagement and performance.

Mentors and teachers agree that most students require consistent support from parents/guardians; however, if the online students attend a daily lab with an active mentor, parents' responsibilities are similar to those for students in face-to-face courses.

### **Counselors**

School processes differ in how the student gains access to online courses. Some schools have registrars, others use mentors to enroll students, and in many places, counselors fill that role. Whether discussion about online options takes place when the counselor and student are engaged in academic planning or as a student is being enrolled in courses for the next semester, reviewing vital school information such as attendance, grades, and test records is



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another important step in determining whether online learning is a good fit for each individual student — regardless of the reason for taking a course online. Those advising students should also consider a readiness check, such as the easily administered [Online Learner Readiness Rubric](#) or the [Strategies for Online Success](#).

Counselors, mentors, and students and their parents/guardians – whoever is involved in assisting the student with course selection – should review the full syllabus of a course, not just the title and course description, in order to understand recommended prerequisite coursework; device or technical requirements and limitations; required textbooks, lab kits, software downloads; and other additional costs or materials not provided online.

*Mentors provide the human relationship that is sometimes missing in online learning.* –  
Mentor

### **Mentors**

Many people have the misconception that online learners don't have the benefit of the traditional human relationships established in the face-to-face classroom. On the contrary, the school-based mentor provides that important personal, usually face-to-face connection for students learning virtually: effective mentors work with the students every day, support them, and build trusting relationships.

In some districts, mentors are part of the school's multi-tiered system of support and do more than support online learning. They engage with other school staff at all levels, contributing to a vision of the whole student and his/her personalized learning. Many mentors are part-time paraprofessionals, although mentors often fill other roles in the school, such as a teacher, counselor, media center specialist, and even an administrator.

If administrators and staff already recognize low parental engagement at their school, one effective intervention they can implement is to provide their online students with a set time and place to learn in the presence of an active mentor. In fact, research has found that students who learned in a facilitated lab were almost twice as likely to pass their online courses as students who were not required to attend a lab (Roblyer, Davis, Mills, Marshall, & Pape, 2008). The most successful online programs tend to have someone who is devoted to mentoring online students full time. Regardless of what other roles they fulfill, mentors are indispensable adults who know the student and provide perspective, support, and encouragement.





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## Online Teacher

While some models of online learning tend not to provide an online teacher, including many credit recovery models, an online teacher can be instrumental in student success – just as they are in face-to-face settings. The online teacher provides direct coaching toward achieving course goals through personalized feedback on assignments and progress. Many teachers and students report that online learning offers the opportunity to develop closer relationships than a face-to-face environment. While that may seem counter-intuitive, consider that online students are asked to respond to all teacher questions — not just the few times they get called upon in a face-to-face class – and that in many cases, the student response is only seen by the teacher, unlike a public classroom setting where their peers are listening and perhaps judging their responses. It is not surprising that outside the demands and challenges of a face-to-face classroom, both teachers and students alike can develop close relationships.

On the other hand, some students in programs with high success rates expressed contrary opinions. For instance, research by Borup, Chambers, and Stimson (2018a) found that some online students resisted developing relationships with their online teachers. One of the students in their focus group found the thought of building a relationship with an online teacher to be weird. Others didn't see a need for such a relationship, instead advocating that it was more important to develop a strong relationship with their mentor teacher. It may be that whether the relationship is with the mentor or the online teacher is less important and what is most important is that a strong relationship with one of them exists.

## Peers

While other students are not a primary source of support to online learners, as mentors, parents/guardians, and other adults are, peers are still valuable assets in the learning process. Borup, Chambers, and Stimson (2018a & 2018b) documented how other online learners provided support:

- Source of information when making a decision about a particular online course or about learning online in general,
- Sources of encouragement when the peer has taken online courses before,
- Study resource when the peer has taken the same online course before or is taking it concurrently,
- Reassurance about learning in a new format, including guidance in how to navigate the online course and work with the mentor and online teacher, and
- General support and collegiality when online learners work on their courses in a lab setting or otherwise designated space.



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## How to Establish and Maintain a Successful Online Program

Watson and Gemin (2009) discussed key ideas to consider when establishing an online program in the Promising Practices series published by the Aurora Institute (formerly iNACOL). The first step is to determine the type of online program that would meet stakeholder needs and the goals associated with this program. Asking basic questions to identify a problem, determining the need, and outlining the purpose is essential to starting an online program.

Some key questions that administrators of online programs should keep at the forefront of their daily activities may be:

- What educational problem are we trying to solve? What goal are we trying to reach?
- What is our geographic reach?
- How long will it take to reach this goal, and what are the steps along the way?
- How does every stakeholder feel about this effort?

Then, as the administrator begins to establish the online program, he/she might want to reflect on and review the following questions:

- Have we reached our goals?
- Where are we on the trajectory towards our goals?
- How does every stakeholder feel about this effort?
- How are we managing efforts towards continuous improvement?

These high-level questions help to build a solid foundation for an online program; however, these questions and the sub-questions that will emerge, should be reviewed often and honestly to maintain a successful online program for a long period of time (See District Strategy Framework in the resources for more information). In addition, remember the following elements in an online learning program that lead to greater success for students:

- Methods for how best to manage the everyday operations of the online program – including the teachers, mentors, paraprofessionals, parents, and students – are essential components to identify and contemplate.
- Ways to develop a strong and effective learning environment, manage funds, and cultivate leadership within the school community are also frequent considerations for discussion and reflection.



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- Additional attributes to consider include the curriculum that will be used, the demographics of students, and the teachers and mentors selected for this program and their understanding of the online learning methodology and purpose.

The National Standards for Quality Online Programs, initially created by the Aurora Institute (formerly iNACOL), have been updated by Quality Matters and the Virtual Learning Leadership Alliance. These standards provide a framework for schools, districts, state agencies, statewide online programs and other interested educational organizations to improve online and blended learning programs. The standards are intended to provide guidance while providing maximum flexibility for the users.



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## Factors & Features Tied to Success

Successful online learning programs require planning and support in the areas outlined below, most of which also pertain to the face-to-face environment. The nature of online learning is ever-changing; it demands special attention, adjustment to some existing elements and processes, and continued creative problem-solving as well as knowledge of practical research-based best practices. The resources at the end of the guide provide an extensive introduction to and foundation for many of these practices.

### Program Development

- Invest in time for staff to engage in strategic planning for online learning.
- Invest in time to visit/investigate other programs, and include teachers and other staff in the visits/investigation.
- Participate in and/or create professional learning networks (PLNs) and professional learning communities (PLCs).
- Verify the quality of the individual courses using national standards such as those listed in the resources (ISTE, and Quality Matters); attend to how the online course is created, supported, and maintained; and check how often it is revised.

### Mentors

- Provide the opportunity for mentor professional development, beginning with initial orientation to the position and the online program and lasting throughout the individual's online career, as for teachers and other student support personnel.
- Provide professional, technical, and learning resources for mentors to support online students.
- Maintain a manageable work-load for mentors.
- Establish a mentor position dedicated specifically for supporting online learners, not as an addition to other duties.

*If the students don't have the opportunity to work in the school, then I think more expectations are put on the parents to play more of a role in monitoring the progress of the student: making sure they're understanding the material, contacting me if the student is struggling and needs after-hours help with some of the work, setting up time [for additional support]. – Online teacher*



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## Technology

- Provide access to and support for technology required for online courses as stipulated by your course provider.
- Provide space, preferably a dedicated lab, where online students can receive support from their mentor(s) and support each other.
- Maintain devices provided to students enrolled in your school or district.
- Provide tech support for students and mentors who are aware of common issues with the online courses your students are taking.
- Be prepared to accommodate student need for 24/7 access and the lack of internet access for some students outside of the brick-and-mortar school.

## Students

- Offer time and opportunity to assess students' preparedness for online learning.
- Provide devices and technological support.
- Provide and maintain student support resources – academic, technological, and human (mentors, counselors, special services).
- Provide orientation for parents and students to set expectations, introduce the LMS and technology needed to be successful, discuss the policies for grading and student conduct, and review the related portions of your student handbook.
- Develop a system for documenting how students' Individual education Plans (IEPs) are met in the online environment.

## Courses

- Compute the cost of the staff and technology required to develop your own courses.
- Consider the difference in expense between developing your own courses or purchasing them from a third-party provider.
- Plan for the review and include the cost of ensuring quality reviews (internal or external) of the courses your school or district develop using an established and, preferably, a nationally recognized process. (See the resources for suggestions.)
- Verify that third party content under consideration has been reviewed or include time and resources for doing the review process in-house.
- Identify the student supports included by providers when considering third party options.
- Include teachers for oversight and support for the mentors and students if you choose any courses that do not come with one.



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## Teachers

- Offer professional development topics specifically related to online teaching and learning if teachers are expected to teach or oversee online courses, for example:
  - Student motivation,
  - Interaction and involvement between students in the course and the teacher,
  - How to differentiate and personalize instruction in the online learning environment,
  - Meeting the learning support needs of special education students in the online learning environment,
  - Effective communication (email, discussion posts, tone of writing, etc.)
  - Comprehensive formative assessment techniques for the online learning environment, and
  - Academic integrity
- Establish a calendar and specific processes for evaluating and coaching online teachers.
- Understand and encourage collaborative work with your students' mentors.

## Parental Involvement

- Include parents/guardians in some phase of strategic planning for your online learning program and in its review and improvements as well.
- Introduce parents early to your online learning options, policies, and contact people.
- Determine how parents will monitor or access their students' course content in the LMS, if they will be provided a parent role with login credentials to monitor their students' progress and assist in their work, and if there will be planned or automated progress reporting to parents from the student data within the LMS.
- Provide an orientation that includes both parents/guardians and students, so they hear the same message together. Record these interactions so they can be shared with those who could not attend and archived as support materials.
- Communicate regularly about your online program and any policy changes.
- Use parents' preferred mode of communication and offer choices: letters, email, text, phone, Facebook, Google Hangout, Skype, Zoom.
- Offer face-to-face opportunities for parents/guardians and online learners to talk with mentors and program administrators.
- Provide resources – print, online, and in person – for parents' ongoing engagement in their students' online experience.



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- Make sure parents have access to the LMS and understand how to access their students' progress in the course.

### Instructional Leadership

A successful online program requires strong leadership. Most school administrators may not have much experience establishing and maintaining online learning programs, but many have a good start on the endeavor and can and do provide ideas, encouragement, and support to their colleagues who are at earlier stages of development. In addition, practical research about online learning environments and student success has been and is being done, so we know a lot more about best practices than we did even three years ago. See the resources and references at the end of the guide for relevant research-based publications.

While opportunities to show understanding about and vision for developing successful online programs and services occur at the professional level, the impact of instructional leadership occurs at home, at the district and school building level, where the superintendent and principals set the tone and expectations for students, staff, parents, vendors, and community. Administrators at all levels are important advocates for online learning policies and options that expand opportunities for students and prepare them to be successful digital citizens in post-secondary studies and their work lives.

#### Best Practices for Using Online Learning

##### ***Build on the Strengths and Experience of Those Who Are a Little Further Along***

If you're just getting started, establish and promote a PLC focused on issues specific for administrators in the same position. If you have been building a program, establish and promote a PLC focused on the issues you're tackling and invite colleagues in a similar spot, as well as those further along. While you're at it, encourage the establishing of PLCs at the building or district level for other staff who will be intimately involved, such as teachers, counselors, and mentors.

The same can be said for PLNs. Both are very accessible means of learning more about what you already know and what you need to learn and provide the opportunity to collaborate and build relationships with colleagues.

##### ***Participate in Ongoing Professional Development***

Because technology, pedagogy, and best practices are changing very rapidly, ongoing professional development is critical. It is important for administrators at all levels to participate in professional development in order to meet the challenges of embracing online



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learning options effectively and to provide the optimum learning environment for the students, teachers, staff, parents/guardians, and the community that you serve. Other staff involved in online learning will also require professional development to stay on target with best practices.

### ***Offer Best Practices and Guidance***

When leadership exhibits knowledge of and support for best practice in online learning – including blended learning, supplemental instruction, and full-time online cyber schools – others feel more comfortable exploring new strategies and techniques. It is incumbent upon administrators and other district and school level decision-makers to set the tone for school staff's exploration of educational technology and commitment to new teaching and learning strategies specific to online environments. Everyone operates more successfully when they are prepared and understand the challenges and strategies that characterize the approaches.

### ***Blended Learning***

For many districts and schools, blended learning can be the gateway to understanding how online teaching strategies can enhance and improve student learning. Some districts or schools are making the transition to online options by beginning with blended learning. Many teachers have begun employing blended learning strategies and techniques in their face-to-face classrooms. Some schools and districts have embraced blended learning and have been encouraging and often providing professional development for their teachers to expand and embrace this practice. For more about the blended teaching experience, see the resources at the end of this guide.

### ***Supplemental Instruction***

Most schools choose to support the interest in online learning by purchasing courses from third party providers that supplement the face-to-face courses students take. Once staff have some experience with courses, they often begin developing their own local solutions. Good course development requires knowledge of design principles and associated learning technologies as well as a review and evaluation process to see that the courses meet quality standards.

### ***Full Online Cyber***

Some leadership choose the option of creating a program that serves students within a district and offers curriculum that is completely online. Traditionally, full online cyber schools





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have been charter cybers, but more growth is occurring in local schools creating their own full-time cyber programs.

### ***Collaborate with Other Schools/Districts***

The level of understanding of and enthusiasm for online learning varies. Collaborating with another school or district that is a little further along in their program development may make the transition a little more comfortable. PLCs, PLNs, organizational special interest groups (SIGs), can all provide a venue for discussing vision, strategies, and implementation and for troubleshooting as well.

### ***Plan Ahead***

Planning is an area where a PLC, PLN, or SIG could play a significant role by providing a venue for administrators to share their experience and describe what they have learned and what they would do differently. Those who have not yet developed a clear vision for their online program might benefit from reviewing the strategic plan for an established, successful program as a model. Include internal and external stakeholders in the strategic planning for your online options or program. While students and parents, as well as school staff, are often unaware of the nature, benefits, and challenges of online learning, ongoing transparency and regular communication are required for healthy, trusting relationships. Strategic planning for such a large endeavor also cannot be undervalued. Review the sample District Strategy Framework in the resources at the end of this report for questions to help you focus on important elements.

### ***Prepare for Assessment & Reporting***

Course assessment differs as broadly in the online environment as it does in the face-to-face classroom. However, course assessments may require that students are proctored. This is less of a problem when you have a dedicated lab and mentor available. In order to be prepared, it is important that all concerned know what to expect from the provider.

### ***Establish Multiple Parent/Guardian Communication Strategies***

Parents/guardians are integral to student support and success in online learning as in the face-to-face classroom, perhaps more so because the student is expected to work independently – both inside and outside of regular school hours. Because of the many competing responsibilities parents juggle and the problems associated with homelessness, lack of internet service, and sometimes literacy skills, maintaining communication can be a



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challenge. Mentors report using the regular channels of email, letters sent home with students, letters sent through the mail, phone calls, and school functions to share information. Some mentors have had more success getting responses by using a Facebook page designated for administrative communication with online learners and their parents or guardians.

### ***Establish Faculty Alignment & Communication***

As always, clear and consistent communication has a significant impact on the acceptance of changes in the teaching and learning workplace. Staff at all levels should have a shared understanding of your district or school's online learning options to aid in broad acceptance, encourage support at all levels for students, and represent the opportunities for online learning with other stakeholders in a positive and productive light. Faculty are especially important because they have the potential to develop or enhance their capacity for online teaching, and they often play an advisory role when students are looking for courses. See the Supports for Successful Students section of this guide for additional best practices.

### **Professional Development and Support for Mentors**

Professional development for teachers and mentors in the online learning environment must be a high priority for the success of online learners. Educators and mentors in online environments have unique learning needs that require additional pedagogy awareness and practice to meet the needs of their students and establish their own understanding of the online format and instructional delivery. Research indicates that professional development for teachers and mentors must be ongoing, specific, and relevant to the K-12 online learning and mentoring format, personalized for the individual, and modeled in its instruction. School and district administrators lay the groundwork for a successful virtual learning environment for staff and students by incorporating professional development opportunities in their annual planning and by being aware of and sharing a variety of free resources.