

HOUSE BILL REPORT

SSB 5410

As Reported by House Committee On:
Education

Title: An act relating to online learning.

Brief Description: Regarding online learning.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on Early Learning & K-12 Education (originally sponsored by Senators Oemig, Morton, McAuliffe, Tom and Eide).

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Education: 3/17/09, 3/27/09 [DPA].

**Brief Summary of Substitute Bill
(As Amended by House)**

- Requires digital programs that are eligible for state basic education funding if students are enrolled in them to be accredited by the Northwest Association of Accredited Schools or another national, regional, or state accreditation program.
- Directs the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction to conduct a review of online courses and programs offered in 2008-09 to create baseline information about a variety of issues and submit a report by December 1, 2009.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

Majority Report: Do pass as amended. Signed by 13 members: Representatives Quall, Chair; Probst, Vice Chair; Priest, Ranking Minority Member; Hope, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Cox, Dammeier, Hunt, Johnson, Liias, Maxwell, Orwall, Santos and Sullivan.

Staff: Barbara McLain (786-7383)

Background:

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

According to an annual survey conducted by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), approximately 14,000 students enrolled in one or more online courses in 2007-08, an increase from just over 6,000 students in 2002-03. Online learning occurs in three primary ways:

1. The student is enrolled in his or her resident district and takes an online course while at school, using the school's computer lab. This may occur because the student needs to recover credits or because the course is not offered at the school.
2. The student is enrolled in his or her resident district, but takes one or more online courses from home. Sometimes the student is homeschooled for a portion of the day and enrolled in online learning offered by the school district for the other portion of the day.
3. The student takes most or all courses through online learning. The student might be enrolled in his or her resident district if that district offers a complete online learning program, or the student might enroll in another district for this purpose.

In 2005 the Legislature created a mechanism for students taking online courses away from school to be counted as enrolled in the district for purposes of state funding. The Alternative Learning Experience (ALE) rules adopted by the OSPI also apply to other types of learning that occurs away from school, but the 2005 law clarified their application particularly to online programs (the law uses the term "digital" programs). The law requires digital programs to be accredited through the state or regional accreditation program. However, legislation enacted in 2006 eliminated the authority of the State Board of Education to accredit public schools, so there is no longer a state accreditation program. For a temporary period, the Educational Service Districts continued this process, but it has been discontinued. The ALE law and rules comprise the primary state regulation of online learning programs.

The Northwest Association of Accredited Schools is one of six regional accreditation agencies that accredits distance education, foreign nation, K-12, post-secondary non-degree granting, and special purpose schools.

Summary of Amended Bill:

Digital programs that are eligible for state funding for students enrolled in them must be accredited by the Northwest Association of Accredited Schools or another national, regional, or state accreditation program listed by the OSPI after consultation with the Washington Coalition for Online Learning.

The OSPI is directed to conduct a review of online courses and programs offered in 2008-09 to create baseline information about student enrollment, how programs are offered, contract terms and funding, the fiscal impact on levy bases and levy equalization from interdistrict enrollment, staffing ratios, course completion and success rates, dropout and retention; and how issues such as assessment, special education, and teacher certification are addressed. A report is required by December 1, 2009.

Amended Bill Compared to Original Bill:

The amendment replaces all provisions of the underlying bill. The underlying bill created a definition of a multi-district online course provider and required the OSPI to adopt criteria and a process for approving and rescinding approval of them, as well as an appeals process. The OSPI was also directed, if funds were provided, to contract with the Digital Learning Commons to assist in approving multi-district online course providers, post comparative information about providers on its website, and negotiate standard agreements between school districts and providers.

Beginning in the 2010-11 school year, state funding for students enrolled in online courses could be provided only if the courses were offered by an approved multi-district online provider, through a school district program where fewer than 10 percent of students in the program were from other districts, or through an inter-district cooperative. By June 1, 2010, school districts were required to adopt policies and procedures regarding student access to online learning, and the OSPI to develop model policies and procedures to assist the districts. Beginning in 2009-10, the student record system and student transcripts would be required to designate whether a course was an online course.

The null and void clause is removed.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date of Amended Bill: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) The power of online learning is huge. It reaches so many demographics: gifted students, struggling students, rural and homeschooled students. We want to expand access to online programs, but also assure the quality of programming. There needs to be a more clear process to assure the quality of courses. The bill is a work in progress. If there are specific concerns, we should find ways to address them. There is no doubt that online learning can be fabulous. However, there are some problems. There have been cases of students getting high school credits placed on their transcripts in a week's time from an online provider under contract with a school district. This is really about consumer protection. Part of the bill is a website providing comparative information on various programs; currently that information is difficult to find. The hope is to have the OSPI negotiate agreements with providers so that school districts do not have to do all that work themselves and may be more willing to sign up for online courses so that their students don't have to transfer to another district. There are cases of students enrolled in two districts at the same time in order to participate in band and sports, or for special education. There is a need for school districts to have thoughtful policies on these and other issues to support online learning.

Online learning belongs in the school system. It has blossomed rather unexpectedly. It is very appropriate for the state to impose some regulatory authority because it is state dollars

that are being used to pay for these programs. Some problems were identified in a State Auditor report. Students and parents should have access to better information. The Digital Learning Commons (DLC) has been very responsive to the needs of school district subscribers and when they have observed a problem with a provider, they have removed them. Some school districts would like to be able to offer programs, but can't because the contractor has an exclusive arrangement with another district.

(With concerns) The effort is appreciated, and it is realized that this is a work in progress. There are some key elements that should be in the bill: the website, the requirement for Washington certified teachers, and the retention of local district authority to grant credits. But the authority and responsibility for oversight must rest with the OSPI. The DLC is a fellow provider and therefore in the nature of a competitor. Regional accreditation already offers quality assurance. The concept is supported, but there are concerns about the role of the DLC. The timelines are problematic. However, the comparative website is a resource that all providers support. Accreditation provides high standards, and the ALE rules also provide a high quality assurance. If this approval process is going to work, it must be done well and done by the OSPI.

(Opposed) If the bill passes without amendments, online schools will be shut down. The approval process should be moved to take effect in the 2010-11 school year. Approval should be fully placed under the OSPI. Existing programs should stay operational and continue to receive funding. Students who were struggling with school are now on the honor roll and show great confidence in learning. Experienced teachers are doing their best teaching online because it is possible to give a much higher level of individual feedback than ever before. Incredible relationships are developed. Many of the students are homeschooled and are fully engaged in this learning style. This type of education is simply not possible in a brick and mortar classroom with 30 children. Many of the students are drop-outs who have come back to school and finally feel that they fit in. It is not necessary to impose restrictions. The OSPI already oversees online learning and they have all the structure they need. National accreditation is a rigorous process that programs have already gone through. This is a time of financial cutbacks, and it would cost money to operate this regulatory program.

(Information only) The DLC was created as a public-private partnership to improve access to online resources to improve student achievement. The DLC is experienced and is ready to work with the OSPI and others on this issue. Formerly homeschooled children like online learning. They are not disrespected, bullied, or ignored. They have the opportunity for field trips and art and science projects. Online learning offers one-on-one instruction. The children are happy, and they will be equipped and ready for success in life.

Persons Testifying: (In support) Senator Oemig, prime sponsor; Bob Butts, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction; Lucinda Young, Washington Education Association; and Mark Clements, River Homelink and Battle Ground School District.

(With concerns) Marcia Fromhold, Evergreen School District; Joe Pope, Northwest Association of Accredited Schools; Susan Stewart, Washington Virtual Academy; and Ron Mayberry, Washington Internet Academy.

(Opposed) Nathan Noel, Jolene Bevill, and Sheryl Landers, Kaplan Academy of Washington; Jeffery Bush, Insight Schools; and Robert Farwell, Advanced Academics.

(Information only) Deborah Woodley, Leamon Woodley, Ginger Pagan, and Felix Pagan, Washington Virtual Academy; and Judy Margrath-Huge, Digital Learning Commons.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.