States Graded on Legislative Efforts to Improve Digital Learning

By Benjamin Herold on March 13, 2014 1:21 PM

A flurry of state-level legislative activity during 2013 sent a strong signal that support for digital-learning initiatives and "next-generation" educational models is growing, according to a prominent advocacy group.

On Thursday, Digital Learning Now!, a project of the Tallahassee, Fla.-based Foundation for Excellence in Education, issued its second annual report card grading all 50 states against the organization's "10 Elements of High-Quality Digital Learning." Areas of focus include making sure all students have access to digital content and online courses, multiple providers, and digital construction—and that all are of high quality.

"Too often, new education models, including online, blended, and competency-based learning, are blocked by outdated regulations and laws," John Bailey, the group's executive director, said in a statement. "The Report Card provides a comprehensive analysis of state policy climates that create the necessary conditions to support high-quality, next-generation models of learning and the effective use of technology in the classroom."

Just two states—Utah and Florida—were awarded an 'A' by the group, while 14 were given an 'F.' [Check out this interactive map for state-by-state details.]

But the overall picture is one of progress, according to a press release from the organization. All told, the group says, 450 digital-learning bills were debated in statehouses during the 2013 legislative session, and 132 were signed into law.

Among the new laws highlighted by Digital Learning Now!:

Utah, the highest-graded state in the report card, passed "Student Achievement Backpack" legislation creating portable electronic records that can easily follow students from grade to grade and school to school.

Florida passed legislation that opened the doors for more online-education providers for K-12 students, including providers of massively open online courses, or MOOCs.

Louisiana began a "course choice" program that allows high school students to select from among a wide range of online, blended, and face-to-face courses offered by a mix of private and public providers.

New Hampshire and Texas were among the states to pass legislation encouraging "competency-based" educational models in which students advance based on mastery, rather than accumulated seat time.

"It's encouraging to see the number of states that are working toward breaking down policy barriers that prevent students from being the center of our education system," said former Florida Governor Jeb Bush in a statement. Bush is the chairman of the Foundation for Excellence in Education.

Not everyone, however, is a fan of the initiatives touted by Digital Learning Now!

Louisiana's "course choice" program ran into significant roadblocks when its initial funding mechanism was found to violate the state's constitution, for example, while the Utah "backpack" legislation raised privacy concerns among some parents and advocates.

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