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Survey shows big jump in online learning enrollment

by Kimberly Beltran

(Calif.) The number of K-12 districts and charter schools offering online learning opportunities is growing, and more students are taking advantage of those courses than ever before, new survey results released today show.

While the number of local educational agencies who say they offer some form of virtual or blended online learning increased in 2013 by 7 percent, more noticeable is the 39 percent jump in the number of students enrolled in those programs this school year, according to the California Learning Resource Network’s eLearning Census.

“Early on, an awful lot of schools had fewer than 10 students – it was a very small population – doing any sort of online course work. Maybe they were allowing students to take an [Advanced Placement] course or a world language – courses that a student couldn’t normally get at a school,” said Brian Bridges, director of CLRN, a state-funded agency that evaluates online learning programs.

Now, however, said Bridges, more and more schools are offering full blended learning programs where increasing numbers of students take one or many courses online while in the school setting. Also, more independent study programs use some form of electronic learning, and many more districts are offering summer school online than ever before as well “so across the board, all the numbers are up.”

Bridges initiated the voluntary California eLearning Census in 2011 as part of a national campaign to develop better data on who is using online systems and what type of models are being used.
The number of LEAs responding to the CLRN survey has hovered right around 30 percent, representing just over 1,800 districts and charter schools. Within that number, 174,632 students participate in either full-time virtual school, where all courses are taken online away from the school setting, or in blended learning – a 39 percent increase over 2012-2013 school year.

While the 2012 census indicated adoption of online learning courses was fairly consistent between charter and traditional schools, the 2014 census found that 60 percent of charter schools embraced virtual and/or blended learning as compared with 48 percent of traditional districts. However, traditional districts account for the majority (67 percent) of California’s blended learning population, while charter schools contribute 82 percent to the virtual population.

While the blended learning population grew 49 percent this year, the majority of that growth has occurred in charter schools. Since 2012, blended learning in traditional districts has grown 43 percent while charters have experienced a 287 percent increase.

The continued growth of online courses as an education tool, said Bridges, cannot be attributed to the implementation of new national standards in math and English language arts or impending new science standards – although all three call for more “hands-on” project-based learning to incorporate knowledge from text lessons.

In this sense, he said, expectations are that the incorporation of the Next Generation Science Standards and the Common Core State Standards “will significantly improve the quality of online courses.”

Bridges said that now armed with three years of data from the survey, longitudinal results are becoming more evident – offering a broader picture of online learning in California as whole.

“We have 131 districts who’ve taken the survey all three years, and that longitudinal data tracks the same – we see the same growth in those 131 districts as we see in the whole,” Bridges said. “That’s why I was excited to do the survey for a third year so we have three years of data – we can see those trends in a much clearer way.”

The growth in online learning comes even as Bridges’ CLRN program will cease to exist.

Under Gov. Jerry Brown’s restructuring of the school finance system, funding for a lengthy list of programs, including CLRN, will no longer be made available.

Bridges said he plans to retire but also hopes to remain connected to the burgeoning online learning community through consulting work. He said he is seeking a sponsor to be able to continue the eLearning Census work.

“Unfortunately, the governor’s budget eliminated from the Education Code CLRN, the only agency that reviewed online courses for their alignment to both content standards and to national standards for quality online courses,” he said. “So now there is no one to do reviewing of online courses, and that’s the great tragedy – just as we’re at the point where this revolution is taking off, schools will no longer have a ‘consumer reports’ product available to help them choose quality courses.”

The good news, however, according to Bridges, is that the survey results also show school districts are becoming more careful about which online course vendors they choose and they’re using materials from more than just one or two vendors – although 79 percent of LEAs reported that the number one criteria for purchase is still price.