Demand for online learning is increasing by most measures in states and districts—and the growth in interest extends to private schools, which have traditionally lagged behind their public school peers in the virtual world.

Those were among the central conclusions of a report released here to coincide with the yearly symposium staged by the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, a gathering that brings together backers of virtual education from around the country.

"Keeping Pace With K-12 Online and Blended Learning," released by the the Evergreen Education Group, is the 10th such report of its kind meant to document the size and nature of the virtual learning in schools. The document is sponsored by the online learning association, as well as education companies, foundations, and public-sector entities.

Despite growth in some areas, the report also notes that the rise of online learning is sporadic across states, and that enrollments in some types of online schools have stagnated or fallen, partly as a result of state policies or funding systems that aren’t as favorable to virtual providers.

While there's been "continued growth," there's also been "continued unevenness in that growth," John Watson, one of the authors of the report, told Education Week. "There are still plenty of states where students don't have a full range of online courses, and online schools and blended options and opportunities."

Among the report's highlights:

• There were 310,000 students enrolled in online programs in the states that serve students from across districts in the 2012-13 school year, an increase of 13 percent over the previous year.

• State-run virtual schools continue to "bifurcate into two groups," the authors say: those that are large and growing, and those that are shrinking or holding steady. The expansion or contraction is largely dictated by funding level, the Evergreen report authors say.

• Eight states currently offer state-backed supplemental online courses and explicitly allow private and homeschool students to take them. But interest among private school operators in adding online components appears to be "expanding rapidly," albeit from a starting point that the authors say is perhaps five years behind public schools.

• Choice of individual online courses is likely to increase in the years ahead through ambitious state programs like the one established in Louisiana, as well as through the increasing array of options in existing, state and district programs, Watson said.

Why are more private school operators becoming keen on online course offerings? The authors cite several possible factors. One possibility is that while many private schools previously believed parents to be satisfied with the results they produced, those schools may now be feeling pressure to experiment in various ways, including virtual instruction.

Another possible factor is that private schools have traditionally placed a high value on the "personal connection" between teachers and students, and schools and families, and they've feared that link may be lost when moving online, according to the study authors. But they say that negative perception may be changing as private schools look for new approaches to teaching and learning.