

## K-12 Online Learning Activity

At present, there is a great deal of variety in the K-12 online learning activity in Ontario. The Ministry of Education continues to offer some courses directly through the Independent Learning Centre. In addition to this, fifteen school boards currently participate in the Ontario e-Learning Consortium co-operative model through agreements that they have signed with the Ministry (see <http://www.ontariovirtualacademy.ca/> for a complete list of participating boards). At least three additional school boards have their own online learning programmes (i.e., Toronto, Trillium Lakelands and Avon Maitland). As there is no central repository, there may also be other boards offering online learning opportunities.

In addition to these public boards, there are at least three private online learning schools operating in Ontario: Virtual High School (Ontario), Ottawa Carleton e-School and Keewaytinook Internet High School. All three are Ministry approved, which means that they are able to grant credits that are recognized by the provincial Government for student transcript purposes. The model utilized by one of these three private virtual schools is worthy of further description. The Keewaytinook Internet High School is focused primarily upon aboriginal fly-in communities (i.e., communities that are only accessible by plane) in Northern Ontario. The virtual school has a physical computer lab or classroom in 11 communities that students can attend in order to take their online courses. Keewaytinook uses a combination of their online teachers and classroom assistants to ensure the school has a physical presence in each classroom. The physical presence acts as a source of technical assistance for the students, and they also provide a support structure or coaching role to assist the students in the soft skills necessary to be successful in an independent online learning.

Due to this variety, there is currently no single source of information to indicate their level of participation in any of these programmes.

## 4.3 British Columbia

As noted earlier, the population of British Columbia is almost four and a half million people. However, half of this population lives in the metropolitan Vancouver area and almost three quarters of it lives in the lower mainland or on Vancouver Island. This means that like most Canadian provinces, there are significant portions of the province that are considered rural and some that are quite remote. Due to this remoteness, it is not surprising that British Columbia was the first province to begin using distance education at the K-12 level.

### History of Distance Education

The first K-12 distance education courses were elementary school courses offered by correspondence in 1919 when notes and textbooks were sent to 86 children living in isolated parts of the province, thirteen of whom were living in lighthouses (Toutant, 2003). This was followed by the creation of an Elementary Correspondence School, and by 1929 high school correspondence courses were also being offered (Dunae, 1997-2008). This model has evolved, although in some cases not a great deal. At present within British Columbia, distance learning is offered under the label of distributed learning. The majority of districts in the province have signed contracts with the Ministry of Education to allow them to operate distributed learning programmes. However, the systems of distributed learning throughout the province include everything from the traditional correspondence-style education described above to online learning opportunities that are more typically associated with virtual schooling (and several other methods of delivery between these two extremes).

During the 1980s, the province created nine regional distance education schools. These schools utilized curriculum materials developed by the Ministry. Course delivery was still done using correspondence education. These nine bodies still exist today as a regional support network for the current distributed learning programmes. In the 1990s, funded the Open Learning Agency to operate Open School BC, which was intended to provide broader provincial support for e-learning initiatives. The Open School made the first steps in British Columbia towards the use of online learning as a delivery model. Through the Open School the Ministry maintained responsibility for course development. In the following decade, the government closed the Open Learning Agency. The Open School currently operates in another government department using a shared services model on a cost recovery basis and is used primarily by school districts that want to be able to offer distributed learning but do not want to be responsible for their own programmes.

In addition, there have been other distance education organizations in operation in British Columbia. BCEd Online was an e-learning consortium of school districts that partnered with other educational institutions and organizations, along with government, to support online learning for students who learn in the classroom and at a distance. This organization merged with the Virtual School Society in 2006. The Virtual School Society is the current managers of the LearnNowBC resource, a website designed to provide a clearinghouse for distributed learning opportunities in the province.

### **How K-12 Online Learning is Governed**

The Ministry of Education is responsible for governing distributed learning programmes in the province and school districts must enter into a formal contract with the Ministry in order to operate a distributed learning programme. This is unique to British Columbia. The province also has a number of specific policies and regulations that apply to the distributed learning programmes. For example, distributed learning programmes are not limited to the traditional K-12 school year (although many do choose to follow the September to June calendar). Most of these policies are under the direction of the Distributed Learning Unit for public distributed learning programmes (it should be noted that there are independent or private distributed learning programmes that are overseen by a separate branch of the Ministry known as the Office of Independent Schools).

Funding for students in these distributed learning programmes comes from the province's allotted full-time enrollment (FTE) allocation. For Grade 10-12 students, each student's FTE is divided into eight components, with each course representing a component. If a student is enrolled in six courses in their brick-and-mortar school and two courses in their district's distributed learning programme, then the school would receive six eighths of the FTE and the distributed learning programme would receive two eighths of that FTE. K-9 students, however, can only be enrolled in one school that receives the full FTE allocation. For the distributed learning programmes, enrollment is counted three times throughout the year as a way to determine active attendance in the programme.

The Ministry also has regulations to allow for an open-borders model. Under this model, a student is not limited to the distributed learning programme within their school district, but is free to enroll in a course from any distributed learning programme in the province (and the portion of the student's FTE follows them regardless of school district). There are some restrictions under this model. For example, districts must ensure that students in their own districts are served before they enroll students from other districts. However, as long as space is available, a student from another district cannot be turned away from a course in the distributed learning programme.

The Ministry is also responsible for ensuring that public distributed learning programmes meet compliance audits (i.e., a quantitative measure of success) and quality reviews (i.e., a qualitative measure of accountability). The compliance audits are reviews and verifications of the data that has been submitted by the distributed learning programme to the Ministry related to enrollments, attendance counts, student achievement, etc.. Quality reviews are where teams of two to three individuals selected by the Ministry meet with the distributed learning programmes administrators, teachers, and students. They monitor courses over a period of time, etc. for the purposes of providing the distributed learning programme with feedback on how they can improve upon their operation and the design and delivery of their courses.

Each distributed learning programme is responsible for hiring their own teachers, some of whom work full-time for the programme, others who work part-time for distributed learning and part-time in a brick-and-mortar school. The Ministry requires that teachers who are hired into distributed learning programmes must have experience with teaching in this environment or the programme must provide the teacher with professional development.

### **K-12 Online Learning Activity**

At present, 46 of the province's 60 school districts have entered into agreements with the Ministry for the operation of distributed learning programmes. There were approximately 49,000 individual students enrolled during the 2007-08 school year, representing over 16,000 FTEs. These enrollments ranged from students taking a single course to students taking their complete programme, with the average student taking two or three courses at a distance.

Students enrolled in distributed learning at the kindergarten to grade nine levels must be enrolled full-time in their distributed learning programmes. The historical completion rate for these students was in the 90% range. At grade 10 through grade 12, students can be enrolled on a full-time or a part-time basis. The historical completion rate for these students was in the 20% to 50% range depending on the type of programme and geographic location; however, this figure is currently in the 65% range.

In addition to the public distributed learning programmes that are currently available, there are approximately a dozen independent or private schools that also maintain distributed learning programmes.