Announcing the Washington Digital Learning Commons

Washington Digital Learning Commons

Overview

Concerned by the shifting educational needs of Washington's citizens over the past few decades and the imperative for the state to harness all of its resources to address this shift, Governor Gary Locke decided to act. In February 2002, he convened a task force of leaders from education, business, and government to consider how Washington can make more effective use of technology, especially the Internet, to meet these needs. The Governor believes that providing statewide access to the highest quality and most diverse online courses, digital resources, and learning tools is a powerful and cost-effective way to help students better prepare for higher education and satisfying careers.

While there were once abundant jobs for high school graduates with minimal literacy and numeracy skills, these jobs simply no longer exist. In the past, schools expected only a small percentage of their students to attend college. Today, we know that in order to earn a living wage, a minimum of two years of post-secondary education is needed. This means that all students must graduate from high school with mastery of core subjects such as reading, writing, math, and science. It also means that children both need and want the opportunity to take courses to prepare for college in subjects such as foreign languages, calculus, physics, and AP courses in high school. Because many schools have limited offerings, not all students have the opportunity to pursue these subjects or other rigorous courses.

In the last few decades, a widening divide has opened among Washington State communities, especially between rural and urban areas. While income differentials have primarily created this divide, geographical factors also cause our smaller and rural communities to have fewer educational resources and opportunities than those found in large, urban environments. Whether it is low student numbers or lack of a trained teacher that prevents a calculus or foreign language class from being offered, the aspirations and potential of our children in these towns are limited by these deficits. Even in our larger urban districts, many low-income children have limited opportunities because of school budget constraints or simple lack of information about what is available.

Governor Locke's vision is that all students in our state – regardless of location, regardless of background, regardless of district resources – will have access to more than merely online courses: they will have access to great courses in every subject they wish to pursue, and to great tools and resources to maximize educational and career opportunities. The task force focused on determining a vision for the future of education in Washington State, identifying challenges, exploring relevant public-policy issues, and defining workable first steps.

Process

The task force identified the state's existing assets, programs, and resources, and examined digital education efforts in other states, regions and countries. Task force members and research professionals organized community forums and conducted focus groups in six diverse communities around Washington, and commissioned a professional telephone survey that generated valuable and illuminating statistical data.

73% of parents approve the development of online education

66% of parents would be willing to pay for an online middle school class

71% would do so for a high school class

81% for advanced placement or college-level class

Findings

Over a five-month period of study, the task force discovered a wide range of strengths and opportunities upon which a comprehensive and exemplary digital education initiative can be built in Washington. Current assets, investments and infrastructure in Washington provide a solid foundation.

The K-20 Network:

The K-20 Educational Telecommunications Network provides high-speed telecommunications to 430 public education sites throughout the state. Due to this network, approximately 95% of the instructional classrooms in the state's public schools can access the Internet from one or more computers.

Current Status of Online Education in Washington State:

A survey conducted by the state in November 2001 found that 25% of the secondary schools in the state had some students enrolled in online classes during the 2001-2002 school year. Similarly, the task force's statewide telephone survey determined that 13% of the students surveyed had taken an online class at some time during their educational life, and that over half (53%) of these children received credit for online courses from their schools or districts. Several online schools and programs exist around the state, provided by school districts or other educational organizations. Significant numbers of collaborations, special arrangements, and programs provide a wealth of opportunities for students and teachers to take advantage of online learning. However, many students and schools know little or nothing about the resources and options available, and the lack of a central source of information about these resources keeps many students and schools from making use of them.

Strong Demand:

Community forums and focus groups conducted around the state reveal high interest in and strong demand for new digital education opportunities, which is consistent with the findings of other states. Telephone surveys with a random sample of parents and students generated additional data. Support for access to digital learning tools, digital resources and online classes was broad, with the telephone survey data showing that a majority of parents (73%) approve of the development of online education for Washington's middle and high school students. Students surveyed said they would be interested in taking, on average, 2.74 classes online; parents would limit that number to an average of 1.90 classes. Regarding interest and motivation for online learning, the data revealed little difference between urban and rural areas of the state. Improved access to quality education, increased flexibility, and greater choice were cited most frequently.

Funding Online Courses:

Telephone survey statistics show that 66% of parents said they would be willing to pay for an online middle school class, 71% for a high school class, and 81% for an Advanced Placement (AP) or college-level class. It should be noted, however, that parents at the community forums felt that that digital education should not be funded at the expense of local district or state budgets for traditional classroom education.

The task force recommended that Washington State design a digital education initiative that meets the following five criteria:

1. Impacts the largest possible number of Washington State students, teachers, and parents
2. Offers more than just the online classes offered in many states
3. Takes advantage of the wealth of existing resources, both within Washington State and elsewhere
4. Is built with an eye on the future of education and technology
5. Creates a "magnet of innovation" that draws the best providers to Washington State.

Digital Learning Commons

The findings demonstrate that there is an urgent, significant demand for digital education and digital learning resources. The state's existing investments have created many components that, if united under a centralized organization, would serve this demand well. The critical element here is centralization, as coordination is the only way to prevent multiple digital learning initiatives that are disconnected, duplicative, and inequitable. The task force also believes that this is the right time to embrace digital learning. Therefore, the task force unanimously recommended the creation of the Washington Digital Learning Commons.

Washington Digital Learning Commons

At Governor Locke's instruction and in accordance with the task force's recommendation, a dedicated non-profit organization has been established to build and run the Washington Digital Learning Commons (WDLC) in accordance with the task force's detailed recommendations. This 501(c)3 organization will operate through a small staff and a board of directors representing a range of communities, and will be accountable to funding agencies and to stakeholders. This organization will build and maintain the site, adopt structures and incentives to integrate high-quality materials with best practices in teaching and learning, and meet an ultimate responsibility to serve customers well. It will use existing infrastructure whenever feasible, subcontracting and licensing the best available tools and content.

The overall objective of the WDLC is to improve education in Washington State by delivering high quality learning materials, technology tools, and online coursework to all students and teachers in our state. The WDLC, now in development, is the ideal vehicle for achieving this objective because it:

1. **Leverages the K-20 Network:** Our K-20 Network is sophisticated, robust, and nearly universal in public schools. It will allow the WDLC to use advanced technology in its resources, tools, and coursework, rather than designing them for use via 28.8 modems.

2. **Creates educational opportunity:** All students, schools, and communities will have access to rich educational resources.

3. **Facilitates the development of small schools:** The WDLC will provide the variety of classes that students need and families want but small schools often cannot provide.

4. **Empowers students and families as consumers of education:** Students will have more options for which classes to take, and how and when to take them.

5. **Aggregates demand to foster the development of additional content:** The private sector hasn't found digital learning to be highly profitable, but the WDLC will aggregate demand in our state for online education resources and services. WDLC credit-authorized courses will be easily accessible to all students, eliminating the current need for students to obtain separate permission to take and get credit for each online course.

Digital Resources | Learning Tools | Online Classes

The WDLC will be a Web-based portal and will operate from a single robust Web site, centrally hosted and integrated to the K-20 Network, where students and teachers from around the state will have access to the following:

Digital Resources

One section is a repository for exemplary applications of rich multi-media digital content that will enhance curricula in schools. It will offer active links to a broad range of educational and cultural organizations such as science centers, museums and archives.

Learning Tools

Another section provides customizable digital tools for students, teachers and parents, all accessed through a single user log-in. They include online technology integration tools that will help teachers and librarians incorporate digital resources, and a means for students to create personalized portfolios that can capture, preserve, and present their work.

Online Classes

The third section offers a continually growing range of media-rich, interactive, and engaging courses. These include middle and high school core, AP, ESL, adult education, workforce training and teacher training courses.

Proof of Concept and Statewide Launch

The task force recommended that the Washington Digital Learning Commons use a phased approach for development, starting with a "proof of concept" to field test and evaluate the implementation, outcomes, policies, and related issues with a carefully selected group of schools. The objective of this phase is to design and test the WDLC before scaling up and rolling out to the rest of the state.

The schools participating in the proof of concept will field-test all three sections of the WDLC: digital resources, learning tools, and online courses. Even in the initial phase, however, the resources section should be available to all state teachers and students. This approach allows the WDLC to grow at a rational pace, to test sticky finance issues, and to give time for the collections and resources of the WDLC to grow prior to the full statewide launch. By beginning on a small scale with a "proof of concept," the WDLC organization will concentrate on delivering a rich experience to participants while field-testing implementation strategies, policy options, organizational structures, and funding approaches.

Initially, the proof of concept will involve approximately seven to ten middle and high schools, enough to capture statistically valid, representative data from 7-12 grade users. Participating schools represent a diverse cross-section of the state including urban and rural, and both poor and more affluent communities. Schools were selected for their willingness to support students, their connectivity to the K-20 Network and, to some degree, their ability to provide technical support. In order for the proof-of-concept phase to be successful, strong local support – from school boards, school administrators, teachers, students and parents – is essential.

The proof of concept phase will run for approximately two years. Throughout this time period, the site will be evaluated on a host of criteria, including but not limited to: level of use and re-use; level of satisfaction of users (students, teachers, parents, and administrators); costs; technical support needs; and ability to meet teacher professional development needs. In addition, the online courses will be specifically assessed regarding completion rates and impact on school curricula.

During the initial phase, the organization will continually analyze feedback, improve the offerings, and refine the delivery of the services of the Washington Digital Learning Commons. After approximately one year of operation, the organization will develop a plan for the long-term that addresses issues of rollout, funding, fees, and sustainability. By 2005, after two years of field-testing, a statewide launch should be possible.

Funding the Proof of Concept

The task force believes that ongoing funding of the Washington Digital Learning Commons is the responsibility of the state and its school districts. However, given the novelty of the concept, the imperative to begin immediately, and the current revenue situation facing the state, the task force also believes that a public-private partnership is essential to launch the WDLC. Financial support for the proof of concept phase should be a mix of private grants and development seed money from the state. The task force firmly believes that, the current fiscal situation notwithstanding, the state must take a leadership role in providing start-up money for this effort. For the initial phase only, participation should be free to schools and users. The relative public and private roles will evolve, with the state assuming an ever-greater financial role over time.

Long-Term Funding Plan

The long-term budget for the Washington Digital Learning Commons will be developed during the proof-of-concept phase. The clear goal is that the cost of delivering online courses should be borne by school districts, while learning resources, technology tools, and selected course development should be funded by the WDLC using a combination of state, federal, and foundation funding. After the third year, foundation funding should be focused on enterprise opportunities, growth, evaluation, and coordination with other states.

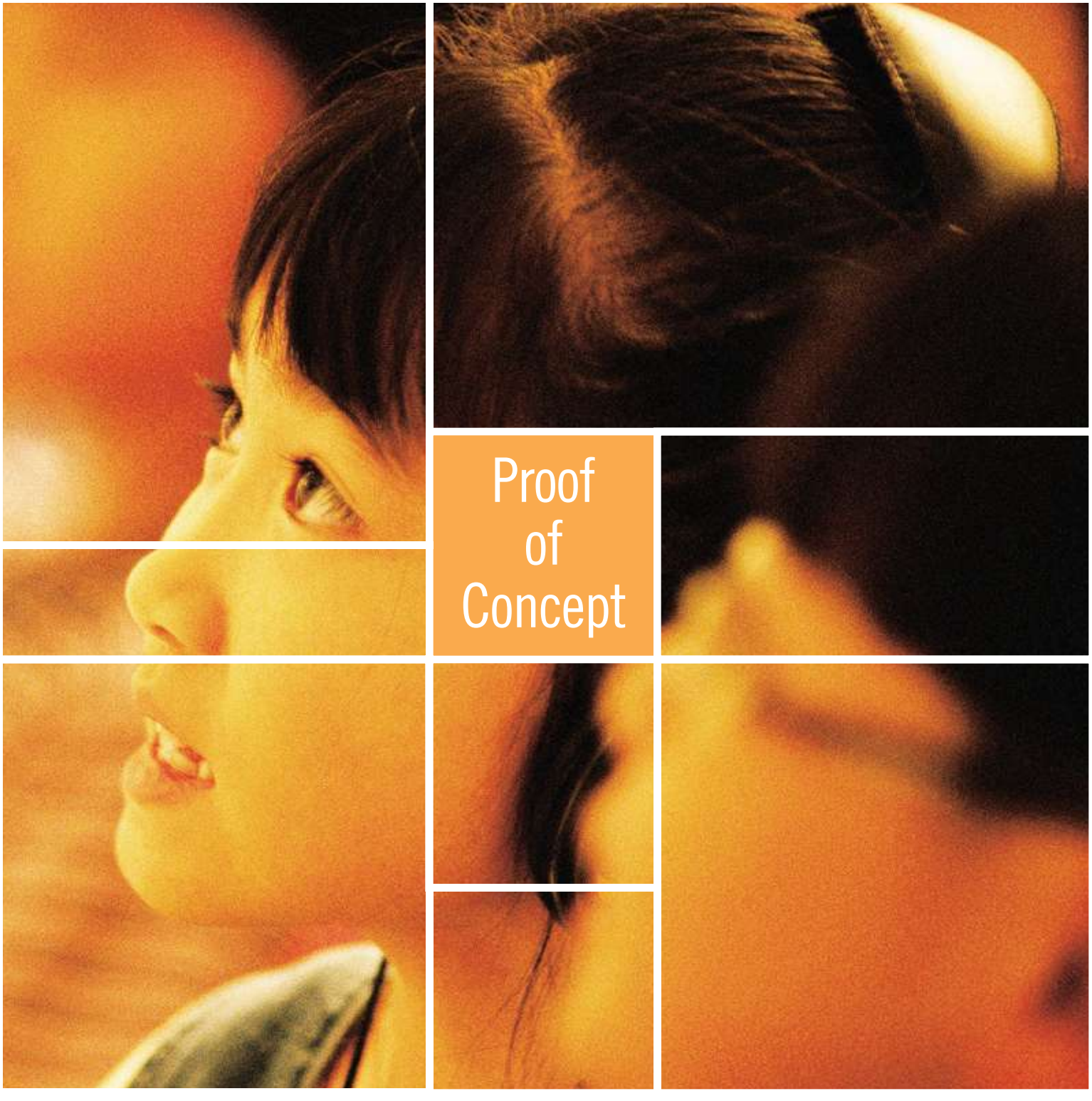
The proof of concept will concentrate on delivering a rich experience to participants while field-testing implementation strategies, policy options, organizational structures and funding ideas.

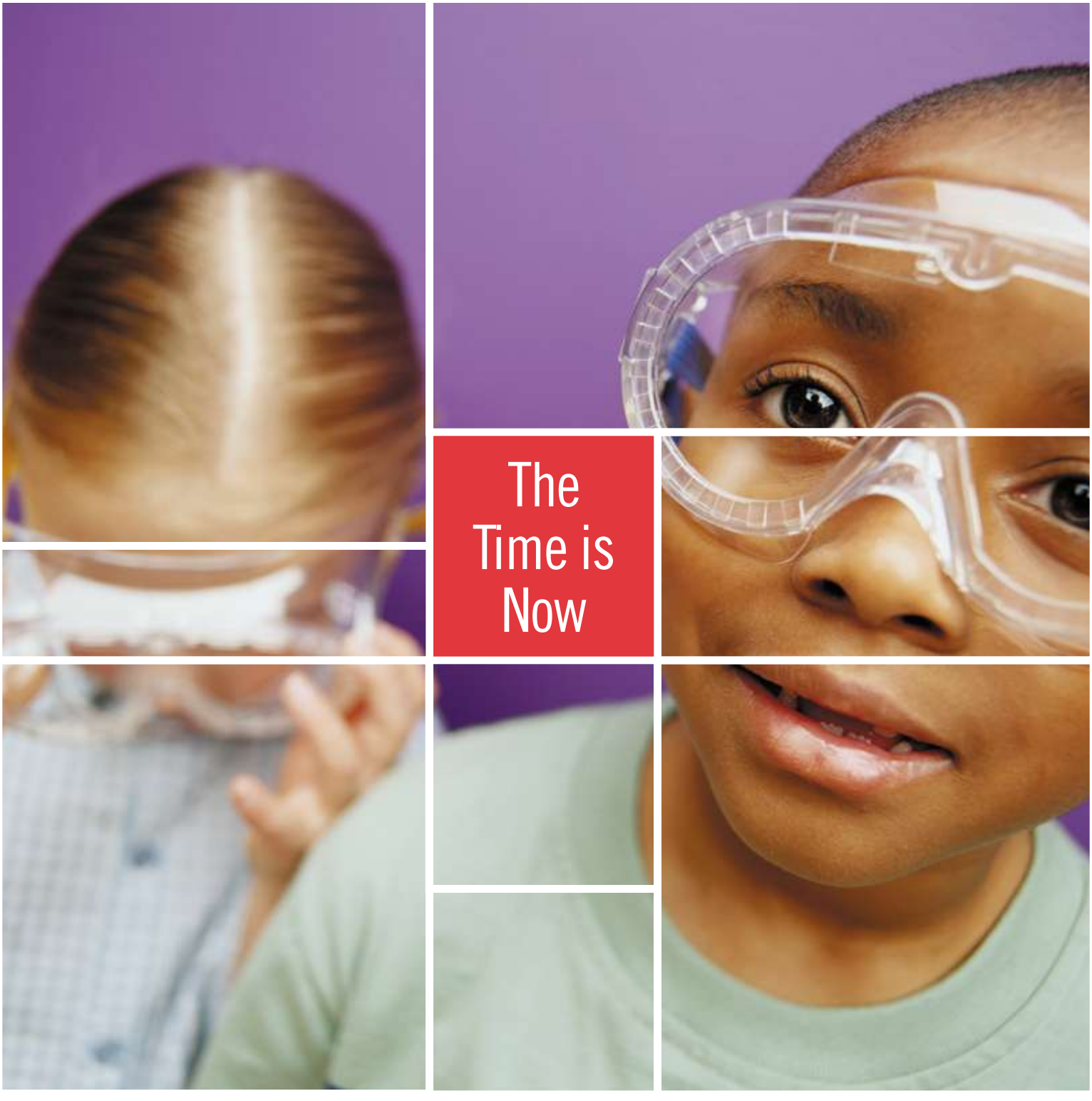
Other Considerations

A number of critical guidelines, state policies, and factors of success have also been identified by the task force. These will need to be addressed during the proof-of-concept phase.

These key issues include the development of: a process for expanding and strengthening the K-20 Network; a process for reviewing digital courses and establishing a statewide minimum "standard credit" for online courses; a policy that allows students to transfer their state funding apportionment for an online class.

The task force strongly believes that the Washington Digital Learning Commons will be a common, shared infrastructure for the state's education system, and accordingly will need reliable, sustainable, state-supplied funding in order to be successful. The K-20 Network may be the best model to follow, namely, one where the common, shared infrastructure is funded by the state and the balance is picked up by local users and other funding sources.


Proof
of
Concept


The
Time is
Now

From the responses received and data collected, there is widespread agreement that "the time is now" for increasing access and opportunities in digital education. Citizens are clearly willing to invest in these opportunities for their children, and the students are eager for the opportunities online learning provides.

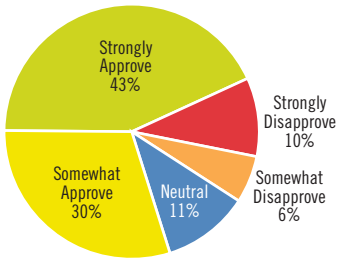
We know that education in the 21st century will be more important than at any other time in our state's history. For our graduates to be gainfully employed, for our businesses to have the workers required to successfully compete in an increasingly competitive global market, for our local and state economies to be strong and growing so that a reliable tax base exists to support government infrastructure and services, Washington State must provide world class educational opportunities for all of our citizens.

The creation of a statewide Digital Learning Commons is absolutely "the right thing to do at the right time." It builds on the success of the K-20 Telecommunications Network, that established a statewide, high quality, reliable infrastructure, enabling our schools to connect to each other and to our institutions of higher learning. Now is the time for our state to take the next step, and provide the tools, content, and resources to ensure all students in our state obtain, regardless of location or family income, a truly 21st century education.

The Numbers:
Results of Telephone Survey of Washington Parents and Students, May 2002

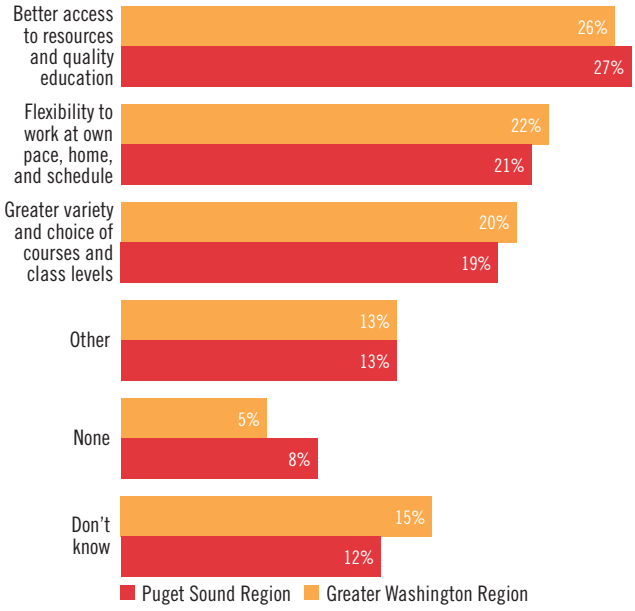
Support for Development of Online Education

All Households



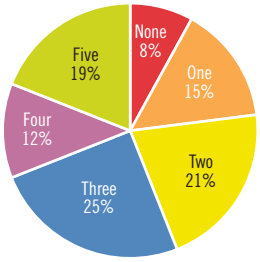
Perceived Primary Benefit of Online Education

By Region of Households



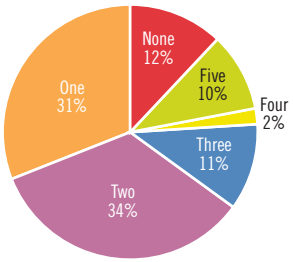
Number of Online Classes Students Would Take

All 6th-12th Grade Students (Per grading period)



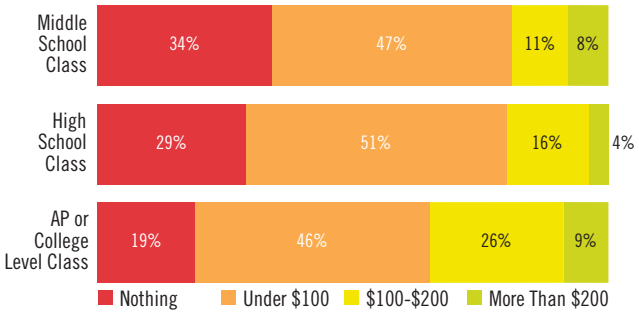
Number of Online Classes Parents Would Allow

All 6th-12th Grade Students (Per grading period)



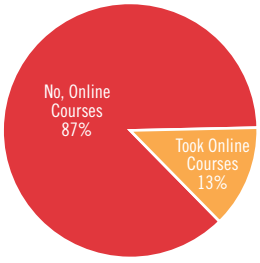
Amount Parents Willing to Pay for Online Courses

All 6th - 12th Grade Students

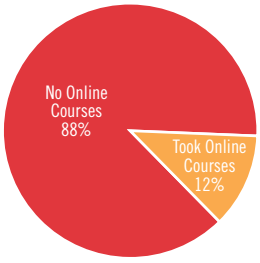


Taken an Online or Internet Course in Past Year

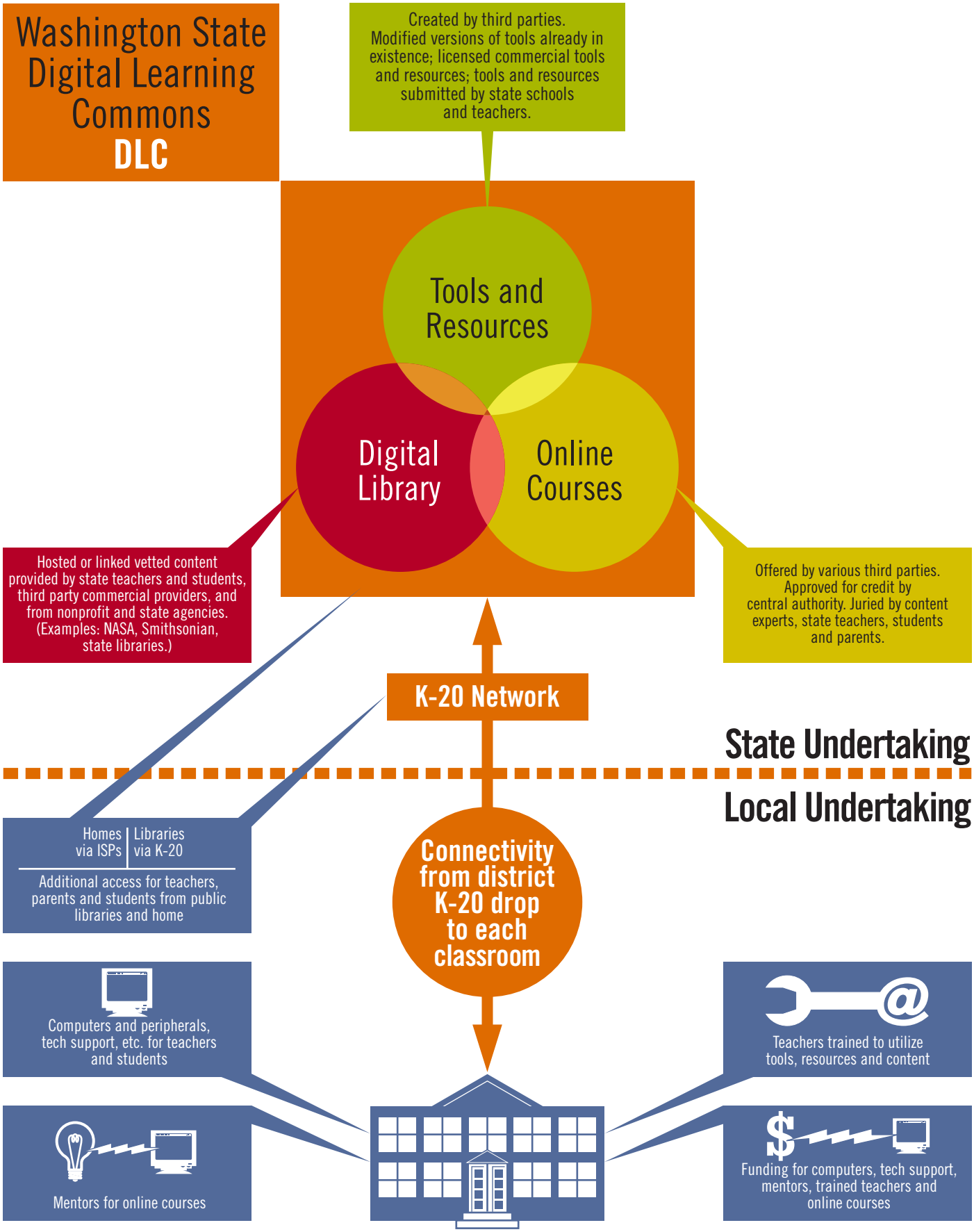
By Region of 6th-12th Grade Students



Puget Sound Region



Greater WA Region


Washington State Digital Learning Commons
DLC
Created by third parties. Modified versions of tools already in existence; licensed commercial tools and resources; tools and resources submitted by state schools and teachers.
Tools and Resources
Digital Library
Online Courses
Hosted or linked vetted content provided by state teachers and students, third party commercial providers, and from nonprofit and state agencies. (Examples: NASA, Smithsonian, state libraries.)
Offered by various third parties. Approved for credit by central authority. Juried by content experts, state teachers, students and parents.
K-20 Network
State Undertaking
Local Undertaking
Homes via ISPs
Libraries via K-20
Additional access for teachers, parents and students from public libraries and home
Connectivity from district K-20 drop to each classroom
Computers and peripherals, tech support, etc. for teachers and students
Teachers trained to utilize tools, resources and content
Mentors for online courses
Funding for computers, tech support, mentors, trained teachers and online courses

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