



The Austin Online Academy offers an online learning option for Minnesota students in grades 9-12. Photo courtesy of Austin Public Schools

From Bell to Byte: Expanding Online Learning for Student Success

Austin Online Academy bridges traditional and digital education

By Jessica Cabeen, Principal of Austin Online Academy, and Dr. Joey Page, Superintendent of Austin Public Schools

As school board members, you play a pivotal role in ensuring that educational opportunities evolve to meet the diverse needs of our students. In an era where technology continues to reshape education, it is essential to move beyond traditional models and embrace online and blended learning. This expansion can provide equitable, high-quality educational opportunities for every student, regardless of their circumstances.

Austin Public Schools' Strategic Approach

Our Mission: Inspire. Empower. Accelerate.

Our Vision: Prepare every learner to make a positive impact in the world.

At Austin Public Schools, we view online education as an essential extension of our commitment to these core values. It is not about replacing traditional face-to-face learning; rather, it expands access, enhances flexibility, and ensures all students can succeed, regardless of their personal or academic needs. By integrating online education, we can better meet the diverse needs of our students and help them reach their full potential.

Why Invest in Online Learning?

Online learning isn't just about convenience — it's a tool for overcoming barriers and providing more students the chance to succeed. A robust online program allows students to learn at their own pace while receiving the

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The Austin Online Academy's passing rates have increased from 40.1% in 2021-2022 to 86.3% in 2024-2025. Also, enrollment has increased from 78 students to more than 120. Photo courtesy of Austin Public Schools

support they need when they need it.

Online learning opens opportunities for students in rural areas, those with packed schedules, or those pursuing advanced coursework that isn't available in traditional settings. Furthermore, it offers students the flexibility to balance school with jobs, extracurricular activities, and family responsibilities — an increasingly vital factor in today's educational landscape.

Beyond academics, online learning fosters essential real-world skills such as self-motivation, digital literacy, and collaboration in virtual spaces — skills critical for thriving in college and the modern workforce.

Investing in online education enables school boards to expand opportunities, improve student engagement, and better prepare students for their future careers and education.

Ensuring Quality in Online Education

While online learning offers significant benefits, it is essential that not all programs are created equal. A thoughtful, high-quality approach is necessary to maintain academic integrity and student success.

At Austin Public Schools, we focus on several key quality indicators to design and implement effective digital instruction:

- **Course design:** Our curriculum is standards-based, engaging, and interactive.
- **Educator training:** Teachers receive ongoing professional development to support effective virtual instruction.
- **Student support:** Regular check-ins, progress monitoring, and support systems ensure engagement and accountability.
- **Equity and accessibility:** We provide devices, internet access, and accommodations to ensure all students have the tools they need.
- **Family and community partnerships:** Clear communication and collaboration with families help create a supportive environment for students.

By upholding these standards, Austin Public Schools ensures that online learning is not only accessible but also rigorous and student-centered.

Austin Online Academy (AOA): A Model for Virtual Learning

Austin Online Academy (AOA) offers a supplemental and comprehensive online learning option for Minnesota students in grades 9-12, providing a flexible and supportive alternative to traditional schooling. Students benefit from comprehensive coursework aligned with

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state standards and the chance to participate in extracurricular activities at Austin High School. AOA also offers virtual tutoring, mental health resources, and personalized support services, making it an ideal option for students who require a non-traditional learning path.

Since its launch, AOA has seen impressive growth. Passing rates have increased from 40.1% in 2021-22 to 86.3% in 2024-2025, and enrollment has expanded from 78 students to over 150 today, coming from 30-plus Minnesota districts in our supplemental program offerings. These figures highlight the effectiveness of online learning when designed to prioritize student success and engagement.

Policy and Governance Considerations

As school boards continue to shape the future of online learning, there are several key policy considerations to ensure its success:

- **Sustainable funding:** Ongoing investment in staffing, technology, and curriculum development is crucial for the long-term viability of online programs.
- **Clear guidelines:** Establishing clear enrollment criteria, pacing expectations, and assessment practices helps maintain program integrity.
- **Equity and accessibility:** Closing the digital divide through device programs and expanded Wi-Fi access should remain a priority.
- **Stakeholder engagement:** Open communication with families, students, and staff ensures that online learning remains responsive to the community's needs.

By focusing on these areas, school boards can create sustainable, inclusive, and effective online learning programs.

Looking Ahead: The Future of Online Learning

Online education is not a passing trend — it is an integral part of modern education. By continuing to invest in high-quality online programs, prioritizing student success, and maintaining strong governance, school boards can help districts expand learning opportunities, increase flexibility, and better prepare students for their futures.

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