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Online schools need policy guidance

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By Lorenzo A. Trujillo

The issue of online education in Colorado public schools now is not “Should it be offered?” but “To whom, in what manner and of what quality?”

In a December report, state auditors found that oversight of K-12 online schools was abysmal. Specifically, the auditors concluded that:

- The Colorado Department of Education did not effectively oversee school districts.
- Some school districts did not effectively use their own accreditation and chartering processes to ensure quality.
- The state and local school districts didn’t have adequate capacity to appropriately oversee online schools.

The most notable of these oversights related to HOPE Online, a novel approach to online education that pushed the limits of public education.

The audit created a sense of urgency. Legislators announced plans to impose quality accountability, the State Board of Education created its own task force to consider the issues, and online schools took steps to “clean house” and explain why the report was inapplicable, incorrect or incomplete.

Almost 8,000 students in Colorado have chosen online studies — either full-time or supplemental. While Colorado must be accountable for taxpayers’ dollars, it should not restrict students’ and parents’ choices. Ill-conceived laws, rules and regulations could threaten opportunities for students across Colorado to gain an education. Colorado must find the right balance between ensuring that online programs are accountable, of high quality and cost-effective for the state, while allowing online programs the freedom to innovate and grow to best meet student and school needs. The growth of online programs demonstrates an unmet need within traditional education.

In the midst of this environment, the Trujillo Commission on Online Education was formed by the Donnell-Kay Foundation as an independent review panel to provide guideposts for sound policy. The commission’s members represent varied organizations and extensive input has been sought from stakeholders.

In 2004, the Colorado Department of Education was one of four organizations that commissioned a report that studied online education issues across the country and made policy recommendations. That report has been used by other states to determine best practices and appropriate online education policy frameworks. While other state education agencies, online programs and foundations have used the report extensively to move forward, sadly Colorado has been noticeably absent in this endeavor.

In 2001, the National Association of State Boards of Education issued a warning about online education. “In the absence of firm policy guidance, the nation is rushing . . . toward an ad hoc system of education that exacerbates existing disparities and cannot assure a high standard of education,” the association wrote. Our commission has concluded this prediction has proven true for Colorado. The Trujillo Commission seeks a more deliberate approach that builds upon substantive policies and best practices.

Colorado has the opportunity to move to the forefront of online education policy in the country once again. The issues that the audit has raised and the next steps are being watched closely across Colorado as well by as other states.

The commission believes that technology and online education are keys to enhancing educational opportunities and improving educational outcomes. While recognizing that the growth of online education is challenging existing education policy, administration and oversight, we also believe that where a child lives or the limitations of financial, social or other resources should not curb access to educational opportunities. We can only hope that full access to these 21st century learning tools might become reality for every Colorado student.

Lorenzo A. Trujillo is the chair of the Trujillo Commission on Online Education and is the assistant dean in the Law School at the University of Colorado at Boulder. To receive information about the Commission’s work, view its draft report, or provide input, go online to dkfoundation.org and click on “In the works.”