Digital Learning Sparks Debate over the Pace of Change Needed in American Schools

The potential for digital learning to boost student achievement seems boundless, but will the long-established organization of schooling embrace or hinder it?

CAMBRIDGE, MA—More than 2 million K-12 students are enrolled in online courses today, and that figure is projected to increase five-fold by 2014. Even so, the much-heralded expectations for education technology to truly transform teaching and learning are not yet fully realized. In a forum released today by Education Next, Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Michael B. Horn discuss the question of whether technology will be powerful and attractive enough to change long-standing tradition, or whether we first must alter a host of other entrenched practices. “Can Digital Learning Transform Education?” is available at www.educationnext.org.

Finn states that digital learning is “more than the latest addition to education reformers’ to-do lists.” Fulfilling digital learning’s enormous potential to boost student achievement, he says, “will require a wholesale reshaping of the reform agenda itself, particularly in the realms of school finance and governance.”

Digital learning offers the potential for more cost-effective use of taxpayer funds for education, Finn observes, as the influence of good teachers can grow exponentially through technology, and students can customize the learning process to fit their needs. Fundamental change is needed first, though—changes like “moving money as students move, and paying for unconventional forms of instruction.” Rather than today’s system, which focuses on “input regulations” such as textbook mandates; seat time rules; cumbersome, outdated certification requirements; and professional development units, public officials should place greater emphasis on vastly improved data systems, better teacher evaluations, curricular quality, and meaningful accountability.

Horn agrees that the factory-model structure of American education must change, but he puts stock in the inexorable pull of technological innovation rather than in the push of dramatic policy reform. Directly confronting the established system—for example, by advocating for pay-for-performance measures for the entire education system rather than just the emerging digital learning one—will invite battles (which are likely to be lost) with interest groups that protect the system.
Online learning is a “disruptive innovation,” states Horn. As innovations—such as the personal computer—improve over time, “people gradually abandon their old solutions and adopt the disruptive innovations.” These dynamics are in play with online learning, as it gradually disrupts the century-old classroom system.

“Policies governing digital learning will and should be adopted piecemeal,” he says, leading toward systemic change. Proponents of digital learning must choose battles carefully, so that “as online learning continues to develop, it can do so within a newly imagined regulatory framework that puts students and their learning at the center.”

**About the Authors**
Chester E. Finn, Jr. is president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, senior fellow at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution and a contributing editor of *Education Next*. Michael B. Horn is executive director of the education practice of Innosight Institute and executive editor at *Education Next*.

**About Education Next**
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