

## EDUCATION WEEK

TECHNOLOGY  
COUNTS 2011**K-12 Seeks Custom Fit**

Schools Test Individualized Digital Learning

Sponsored by:



Published Online: March 14, 2011

Published in Print: March 17, 2011, as **Policies Seen to Slow Innovation****State, Local Policies Seen to Slow Personalized Learning****Digital advancements force policymakers to rethink rules**

By Ian Quiller

As momentum for customized, online instruction grows, its supporters say the biggest obstacle to implementing more adaptive curricula and personalized approaches isn't popular will, but state and local policies.

Often those policies date from a time when phrases like "distance learning" and "blended approach" conjured images of a telegraph wire and a home economics course, and when educational jurisdiction had to be defined by place and time.

Now that technology holds the potential to erase both limitations, K-12 education is at a policy crossroads, experts in educational technology policy say, as seat-time requirements, school funding models, textbook-adoption procedures, and teacher-certification requirements restrict the growth and effectiveness of emerging learning methods.

Yet just how to rip away those barriers without causing unintended new side effects is a question that sets off intense debate among a usually tight-knit ed-tech community, and perhaps gives rise to more questions than answers.

"I don't know anyone who has been effective at doing that and providing new regulations and providing flexibility," says Myk Garn, the director of educational

**Technology Counts 2011:  
K-12 Seeks Custom Fit**

Overview

**Schools Use Digital Tools to  
Customize Education**

Site Visits

**Web-Based, Russian Math  
Curriculum Shows Positive Results****NYC Innovation Zone Tests  
Customized Digital Learning**[← Back to Story](#)**EDUCATE YOUR  
EDUCATORS.****SHARE  
EDUCATION WEEK  
WITH YOUR COLLEAGUES.****+ Click here  
for unlimited access.**

technology for the Southern Regional Education Board, in Atlanta. "I think the truth is we are in a system that is going to change slowly. So the folks that are arguing for complete restructuring are also dependent on those who are

**NYC's School of One Customizes Math Learning**

**Navigating the Path to Personalized Education**

**Vt. Initiative Seeks to Balance Innovation, Accountability**

**Interactivity**

**Digital Gaming Goes Academic**

**Students Seek the Right Digital Fit**

**Curriculum**

**Ed. Customization Lessons Learned from Online Credit Recovery**

**Universities Run E-Schools for K-12 Gifted Students**

**Individual Challenges**

**Tailoring Testing with Digital Tools**

**Spec-Ed Tech Seen as Potentially Beneficial for All Students**

**What Works?**

**Researchers Evaluate Tech.-Oriented, Personalized Learning**

**Teachers & Technology**

**State, Local Policies Seen to Slow Personalized Learning**

**Digital Edition**

**PDF Download**

deeply committed to making incremental improvements to our existing system."

### **Seat-Time Constraints**

Moves to replace seat-time mandates, which set the amount of time students must spend in a class before completing it, with requirements that students demonstrate competency in the skills needed to master the course appear to be gaining traction. Such changes have implications beyond online-only and blended learning, which combines face-to-face and online instruction, but their impact in those settings is especially great, since time constraints are one of the barriers easily erased in virtual education.

Already, 12 states have policies supporting some form of "proficiency-based credit," according to "Keeping Pace 2010," the latest in an annual report from the Evergreen Education Group, an Evergreen, Colo.-based firm that researches online education.

The trend "gets a lot of press, and people are aware of it," says Lori Gully, a senior project manager at the Florida Virtual School, which operates as an independent school district and has been freed from Florida seat-time requirements by the state. "It makes conversations easier to start in our home states."

But some policy experts caution that a complete abolition of seat-time requirements could adversely affect the social and collaborative aspects of learning.

Bradley J. Hull, the deputy executive director of the Arlington, Va.-based National Association of State Boards of Education, says that "being more sensible about meeting seat-time requirement" to allow for more flexibility is a better idea.

And a complication could arise in states like New Hampshire, where traditional Carnegie units have been abandoned as a measurement of coursework and individual districts establish their own competencies for high school courses. It's unclear what the adoption of common-core academic standards, an initiative backed by most states, including New Hampshire, will mean in a competency-based environment.

"All of the competencies ... [will] need to be reworked," says Irv Richardson, the coordinator of public education and school support for NEA-New Hampshire, the state affiliate of the National Education Association. The affiliate supported the move to district-established competencies in 2006.

"Someone is going to have to do a crosswalk," Richardson says. "Then, with a common assessment, what will be the relationship between course-based competencies and those assessments?"

The hope is that when those and other issues surrounding competency-based pathways are solved, more states will move toward them, setting off other changes friendlier to adaptive online learning and other personalized teaching and learning approaches.

Textbook policy is one realm that some observers have tabbed as the next for a significant shift.

While publishers are adapting to digital platforms, however, even those inside the textbook industry say policies for how the new platforms are utilized are too rigid.

For example, an internal survey by the New York City-based Association of American Publishers indicated that most if not all of the 20 states that identify lists of approved textbooks for districts include digital texts. But policies generally don't specify acceptable ways to combine print and digital resources in a manner that could give rise to more adaptive blended-model courses, says David Anderson, a Texas education lobbyist and a former curriculum director for the state education agency.

"What's frustrating on the school side is, they want to have the flexibility to take advantage of these technological innovations and breakthroughs with content delivery," Anderson says. "Not every district wants to use print only, but very few districts are ready for online-only delivery."

The range of district preparedness for technology integration prompts most district-level policy discussions, which often pertain to students' and teachers' use of hardware and software.

### **Mobile Devices**

The past year alone has seen hundreds of districts grapple with how to regulate social networking and mobile computing, each of which has the potential to expand the school day but also raises



concerns about online privacy and safety. For instance, schools have to decide whether students should be allowed to take school-issued laptop computers home, as well as whether to support the use of student-owned mobile devices for in-school learning.

Last October, the Center for Education Policy and Law at the University of San Diego issued guidelines to help districts write mobile-device policies that would help schools facilitate responsible, educational use of personal devices, without treading on free-speech issues.

Back at the state level, there is hope the common-standards movement could make some changes easier. So far, the **Common Core State Standards Initiative** has produced standards in reading/language arts and mathematics. Common standards would make mapping adaptive content easier, and potential common teacher certification would make online instruction easier across states, some experts on ed-tech policy say.

But others insist major changes won't flow without a more radical restructuring of the education landscape.

"The reason things reach mass audiences in other fields is there are powerful incentives to scale them up," says Andrew Coulson, the director of the Center for Educational Freedom, an arm of the Washington-based Cato Institute, who advocates changes that would make education more reflective of the business world. "Rather than trying to reproduce in a monopoly things markets do naturally," he contends, "it makes a lot more sense to just create a market."

Yet the 98,000-student Florida Virtual School, which has been funded by the state on the basis of per-student course completion since 2003 and has been aided by its freedom from seat-time requirements, achieved substantial change without a truly radical overhaul. It owes its success to a combination of knowledgeable state legislators, population growth that made districts eager to find learning alternatives for students, and public support for new approaches, says Mark Maxwell, the school's chief government-affairs director.

"At the time, [then-Gov. Jeb Bush] had a lot of support for change, the legislature understood Florida Virtual School, and some of the people ... were still around [the legislature] that supported it from the beginning," Maxwell says. "The districts did not fight it. ... They had so many things on their plate, they didn't come in and fight it."