



## **District and School Handbook**

IDEAL-NM is sponsored by:

New Mexico Public Education Department  
New Mexico Department of Higher Education  
New Mexico Department of Information Technology  
New Mexico Learning Network

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Dear District and School Officials,

Welcome to IDEAL-NM, New Mexico's portal to eLearning services!

There is a lot of buzz about online learning. Not only does it reduce geographic and capacity barriers common to many New Mexico schools, but it also increases the technology skills students need for today's globally competitive world.

Our mission is to help schools expand educational opportunity for their students via high-quality online courses taught by highly-qualified New Mexico teachers. This means that students can now take a wide variety of world languages, plus any number of other electives, including Economics, Journalism, Art Appreciation, Personal Finance, Civics, Health, Career Planning, Web Design, Flash Animation, Digital Video Production, and others. Credit recovery courses are also available.

This handbook is designed to be the A to Z guide for district and school staffs in implementing online courses. It will give all the basics, plus important tips to promote student success.

Our talented staff stands ready to help in every way. Please contact Sharon Purcell for immediate assistance. She can be reached at [sharon.purcell@state.nm.us](mailto:sharon.purcell@state.nm.us) or 505-892-7222 x 300.

On a personal note, I would particularly enjoy visiting your school to provide information, demonstrate courses, and/or meet with staff, students and/or parents. Please contact me to make those arrangements whenever you'd like.

I continue to be in awe of all that educators do (thank you!), and look forward to helping New Mexico schools provide even more opportunity and access for their students.

Timothy D. Snyder, Ed.D.  
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## Background

Twenty-first century learning tools enable schools to overcome the limitations of size and geography. Now, students from small schools can enjoy the educational advantages enjoyed by their large-school peers. They can access a complete repertoire of world languages, Advanced Placement, dual credit, enrichment, and credit recovery courses. They can complete these courses in asynchronous formats affording flexibility and self-pacing, and they can learn new technology skills that will be important as they enter post-secondary training and the workforce.

Since online courses require students to personally engage their teachers and course, it is clear that online courses also help students gain new skills in directing their own learning.

Both small and large schools can use these tools to ameliorate dropout rates, personalize curriculum and its delivery, and resolve scheduling conflicts. Today's diverse, media-savvy students need many educational options, and online courses can be effective and affordable.

For these reasons, and others, IDEAL-NM (with its associated Cyber Academy Act), and the High School Redesign Act have been put in place by state government.

**IDEAL-NM** (Innovative Digital Education and Learning) creates a structure for the implementation of statewide online learning. It establishes an **eLearning Services Center** which will provide a statewide support system for all learners served by PK-12, higher education, and state agencies through an advanced technology infrastructure.

The **High School Redesign Act (SB 561)** was passed in the 2007 legislative session. It requires the following programs, beginning 2008/09:

- Each school district shall offer a program of distance learning courses.
- Algebra 1 shall be offered in 8<sup>th</sup> grade regular classroom settings or through on-line courses or agreements with high schools.
- Instruction shall be provided in health education for students in grades 9-12.
- Students must complete ½ credit in New Mexico history.
- Each high school shall offer at least two years of a language other than English.

It also requires freshmen entering 2009 to complete an Advanced Placement, dual credit, honors or online course prior to graduation, and for this to be part of a student's next-step plan.

IDEAL-NM online courses are important tools for schools to use in meeting these requirements.

*A note of appreciation—the departments of Public Education, Higher Education and Information Technology have partnered with the New Mexico Learning Network in facilitating the work of IDEAL-NM. Their efforts are very appreciated, as are those of the lawmakers, steering committee members, and others who have generously donated their time and expertise in enabling these programs.*

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## How It Works

IDEAL-NM provides online courses to supplement the curricula offered by local schools. Click [here](#) to view the course opportunities available to students.

Although online learning can accommodate a wide range of individual circumstances, students accessing IDEAL courses typically are scheduled into the regular school day of their local schools; i.e., the students go to a computer lab or other school location with a computer during a set period during the day to work on the online course.

The course is taught by an online teacher who interacts personally with the student via email, web conferencing tools, or phone. The online teacher may reside anywhere in the state.

The courses are asynchronous—accessible at any time during the day or night—so school scheduling problems should be minimal. The courses also allow self-pacing, so students can complete requirements as quickly as they would like. However, student learning is enhanced when the instructor can keep a cohort of students moving at approximately the same pace. This gives opportunity for synchronous group instruction, conferencing, conversation and peer interaction.

It is important to note that it is the interaction between the student, teacher and curriculum that creates good learning. The technology is only the medium through which that occurs.

Incidentally, the “medium” in this case is a state-of-the-art Learning Management System (LMS), an interactive technology platform specifically designed for online learning. IDEAL-NM presently uses the Blackboard LMS.

## Roles and Responsibilities

Online learning tools are most effective when used in conjunction with the onsite support provided by local site coordinators, counselors, and school and district administrators.

### **Site Coordinators**

Each school needs an enthusiastic and knowledgeable coordinator of online courses. This is the go-to person for all the details associated with registering students, monitoring their progress, troubleshooting any issues that arise, and ensuring that final grades are properly recorded on student transcripts. Experience shows that the knowledge and attributes of site coordinators can significantly affect student success rates. Depending on the number of students taking online courses, there may be multiple site coordinators.

It is recommended that schools give released time to site coordinators. They will need it for ongoing professional development, and for their daily tasks in facilitating student success in online learning.

The professional positions of site coordinators aren't as important as their attributes. They must be knowledgeable, good communicators, people-friendly, innovative problem-solvers, self-starters, task-oriented, and have an interest in creating learning opportunities in new and exciting ways—the definition of every organization's model employee!

Site coordinators can be counselors, library media center directors, computer lab monitors, technology teachers, or any other kind of teacher. They can also be principals or paraprofessionals.

Good site coordinators make a difference, too, in the value the district and school receives for the dollars invested in online courses. If student success rates are high, schools receive the full value for their investments.

Site coordinators are the bridge between the student and the IDEAL-NM staff. Their communications and professional relationships will ensure the productivity of the online experience for students and schools.

*Tips for site coordinators:*

- 1. Make sure students and parents understand that online courses are as important as onsite courses. They count toward GPA's and graduation. They factor into weekly eligibility processes required for participation in extracurricular activities.*
- 2. Online courses require greater degrees of self-discipline than onsite courses in that there is no teacher reminding them to pay attention. Students should log into courses every day, follow instructions, and initiate communication with online teachers.*
- 3. Some students may say that the technology has somehow been lost in cyberspace—a variation of the “computer ate my homework” theme. This can be forestalled by having students automatically cc'ing the site coordinator when homework is sent.*
- 4. Be sure to submit the Site Coordinator Contact form to IDEAL-NM so our staff has accurate contact information. Click [here](#) to access the form.*

## **School Counselors**

School counselors are the gatekeepers to online learning. Their job is to inform students and parents of online opportunities and facilitate student scheduling. They advise students about graduation requirements and the preparation that online courses can give for career goals.

One way to do this is to include a list of online course opportunities as part of the school's course catalog. Counselors work with school administrators and site facilitators to make sure the information given to students is consistent and accurate.

A function generally reserved for counselors is ensuring that school transcripts accurately reflect grades earned in online courses. Some schools identify online courses with special numbering, some do not. Grades for online courses will be sent to the school by IDEAL-NM staff in a timely manner, with priority given to graduating seniors. Online grades are given in the form of percentages, with the school expected to translate the percentage grades into letter grades in accordance with their individual school policies.

Of course, school counselors can also serve as site coordinators.

*Tips for school counselors:*

- 1. Students are seldom successful in online courses if they are expected to complete coursework on a zero-hour basis. They need to have a defined period and place during the day when/where they are expected to be working on the course.*
- 2. Click [here](#) to access a boilerplate one-page online-opportunity addendum that counselors can attach to school course catalogs.*
- 3. Back-to-school nights or other traditional meetings are excellent venues to explain online coursework to parents and students. See Appendix A for an explanation of common misconceptions about online learning.*

## **District and School Administrators**

District and school administrators set the tone for online learning with their staffs, and they put necessary policies, procedures, and resources in place.

Setting the tone involves meeting with appropriate staffs to facilitate understanding that online learning can be an effective 21<sup>st</sup> century tool in enabling and supporting student academic performance. It is designed to supplement, not supplant, the efforts of onsite educators. When efficiently integrated into school processes, it will run smoothly and yield solid benefits.

*District administrators* will want to ensure that appropriate policies are in place to support online programming. Policy development in this arena will involve resolving the following issues:

- Who will be served via online programming—grade levels, circumstances, etc.
- What restrictions should be placed on programming—how many courses students may access for graduation credit, will students be allowed to take courses online that may already be available at the local school, etc.

- How and if online courses will be separately identified on student transcripts.
- The review mechanisms desired to ensure courses meet local standards for rigor and quality.
- How online programming will be facilitated at schools.
- How online opportunities will be communicated to students and parents.
- Funding mechanisms for online programming. While it is recognized that course fees in the \$200 per semester seat range are very reasonable as compared to SEG dollars, it is always challenging to redirect budget allocations to accommodate new programming.

*Tip for district administrators:*

*IDEAL-NM staff members are always available to visit districts/schools to provide consultative services and/or meet with school boards, faculty and staff, students and parents.*

*School administrators* will want to ensure that procedures are in place to support the efficient integration of online programming into daily school processes. Procedures to consider include:

- Designation of an enthusiastic site coordinator as per the description earlier in this eBook.
- Internal and external communication processes to facilitate programming and stakeholder information.
- Availability of adequate technology, including platform requirements and student computer accessibility.
- Scheduling of students and locations/supervision of students.
- Needed/desired reporting and accountability mechanisms—weekly student progress reports, regular updates from the coordinator, counselor, technology specialist and other involved staff.
- Mentoring/tutoring mechanisms for students with special needs—high risk, special education, 504 plans, etc.

*Tips for school administrators:*

1. *Make sure that attendance is taken daily for online students in the same way that it is taken for onsite students.*
2. *IDEAL-NM staff members are always available to visit schools to provide consultative services and/or meet with staff, students and parents.*

## REC Trainers

Inger-governmental agreements are in place with Regional Educational Cooperatives 3, 8 and 9, to provide the following annual training components for the district and school staffs in their respective regions:

- Offer periodic training sessions based on IDEAL-NM materials and workshop templates. At least one session will train the local eLearning site coordinators, and at least one session will train academic advisors and administrators on how to best utilize IDEAL course options for students.
- Provide technical assistance to schools in accessing online courses.
- Provide outreach to schools and communities to promote online learning.

It is expected that funding will be added by the state to include all the REC's in the future. In the meantime, the IDEAL-NM staff is prepared to offer those services on a complimentary basis.

### *Tips for RTSC Trainers:*

1. *Be sure to coordinate your efforts with IDEAL-NM staff, and feel free to ask for assistance.*
2. *Training sessions are especially valuable when timed to coincide with school planning for the next semester and/or academic year.*

## IDEAL-NM Online Teachers

Online teachers are responsible for teaching, managing and monitoring participation in their courses. If an online course teacher is experiencing a problem with a student's participation, attendance or performance, the instructor will contact the student's school site coordinator and the IDEAL-NM staff as soon as practicable.

IDEAL-NM teachers participate in their online courses as fully as they would a traditional classroom course. At a minimum, online teachers will log in and review their course and student participation at least once a day. Teachers are expected to respond in a timely manner (within 24 hours on school days) to student communications. Online course formats provide some flexibility for teachers who are ill. In general, there will be no substitutes since teachers can adjust their courses as needed. In cases of an extended illness or other emergency that prevents the teacher from continuing to participate in the course, the teacher will immediately contact applicable site coordinators and the IDEAL-NM staff to resolve the situation. Any selections of qualified substitutes will be made by IDEAL-NM.

## Funding

The state of New Mexico subsidizes program costs by providing for course development and revision, Learning Management System purchase/maintenance, and central services. School districts pay \$200 per semester seat to cover online teacher and other support costs.

Districts will be invoiced upon student registration. If a student drops the course within four weeks of the official class start date, a 50% refund will be given. Further discounts cannot be applied because, similar to brick and mortar schools, IDEAL-NM must pay contracted teachers even though students may drop from courses.

It is noted that a district's SEG is considerably more than \$250 on a per student/course/semester basis; however, there are personnel (released time for coordinators, etc.) and technology costs that must be absorbed by the district in the implementation of online courses.

IDEAL-NM recognizes the challenges involved with reallocating budget items, and appreciates the efforts of district and schools officials in that regard.

## Technology and Email

Click [here](#) to view the system and computer technology specifications needed to support online learning courses. To minimize the need for additional plug-in downloads, we recommend using Microsoft Internet Explorer 6.0 or higher on a PC and Safari 1.2 or higher for Mac OS X.

At least 64 MB RAM and 56kpbs modem capability are required, along with sound card and speakers. Individual courses may require special software applications to access course features.

Pop-up blocker programs may hinder your ability to view course features. For best results, we suggest you disable your pop-up blocker prior to viewing your course. It is recommended that school networks be configured to allow some streaming to allow students to access those components of their coursework.

Schools may want to consider designating and configuring technology stations specific to the use of online courses.

Students will be able to email their teachers within the LMS, but they will need school or private email accounts to allow this two-way communication between students and their online teachers. Students utilizing private email accounts must ensure their addresses are appropriate to school settings.

IDEAL-NM eLearning Services provides a help desk for any technology-related problems. That number is 505-892-7222 x 300.

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## Bits and Bytes

*Note: Unless otherwise stated, IDEAL-NM instructors and students will adhere to the policies of the participating students' school districts.*

**Academic Watch.** IDEAL-NM staff will maintain academic watch lists and employ a variety of strategies to engage students. Site coordinators are requested to advise online staff of possible strategies to facilitate the success of individual students.

**Acceptable Use Policy.** The school of record is responsible for the Internet acceptable use policy. Complaints or violations should be handled by the school of record.

**Attendance.** NMCA recommends that students participate in their online courses as much they would in a traditional classroom. At a minimum, students are required to log in and perform work at least four days a week. Schools are responsible for their students, and are expected to monitor their attendance and course progress. *Tip: Students should be reminded that the Learning Management System allows school officials to electronically track the work being performed, and associated dates and times.*

**Calendar.** A calendar for registration and course beginning and ending dates is posted on the IDEAL-NM website. Open enrollment is offered to students in unusual circumstances.

**Conduct and Discipline.** Each district has its own conduct and disciplinary code with associated rights and responsibilities. As with any classroom, the online teacher will attempt to address conduct and discipline problems directly with the student prior to referring the student to another individual. However, if the teacher is unable to resolve the problem or if the infraction is such that it requires administrative notification, the teacher should contact the student's site coordinator and the IDEAL-NM staff. The site coordinator will have responsibility for either addressing the problem directly or bringing the problem to the attention of the school's administration. The site coordinator will also have the responsibility of sharing with the teacher any action taken in the situation. Local discipline codes and policies/procedures for student rights and responsibilities will be used in handling the situation. If a student is experiencing a problem with an online teacher, the student should talk with his or her site coordinator who will address the issue with the IDEAL-NM staff if necessary.

Cheating/plagiarism is not typically much of an issue since online teachers get to know their students—and their writing styles—so well that they can spot many instances of cheating. Online course pedagogy also employs a variety of means to minimize unethical behavior. For example, more performance-based assessments are used, as well as timed assessments. Another strategy is to do an Internet search for a string of words that may be used in student compositions. Online teachers can speak with students personally via web conferencing or phone calls to reinforce instruction and validate student ethics. IDEAL-NM staff will contact a student's site coordinator anytime that cheating is suspected. If cheating is confirmed, the

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student's school officials will be asked to advise online staff regarding appropriate consequences in accordance with local school policy.

**Credits.** IDEAL-NM courses should be treated like any other course offered at the school, with credit assigned as determined by local school policy.

**Customer Satisfaction.** Students, parents, and school officials will be surveyed at least once per semester to determine levels of satisfaction with IDEAL-NM course implementation and operations, and to solicit suggestions for ongoing improvement.

**Down Time.** Although the IDEAL-NM server network is 99+% reliable, there may be an occasional time when the web site goes down. Students are advised to call the IDEAL-NM help desk when technology problems arise. That number is 505-892-7222 x 300.

**Dual Credit.** IDEAL-NM is working on agreements that support concurrent enrollment in dual credit coursework. That information will be posted on the IDEAL-NM website when available.

**Grades.** Weekly progress reports will be sent to school site coordinators by IDEAL-NM staff. Site coordinators may also request grades or other information directly from the online teacher.

At the end of the semester (or upon course completion), final grades will be sent to the site coordinator within two weeks of the end of the semester. The site coordinator may coordinate with the student services director to obtain grades on an expedited basis for students graduating early. Grades are reported in percentages so that schools can assign the appropriate letter grade as determined by district policy. For example, a 92% may be an A in some schools and a B in other schools. Grades will be based on the teacher's assessment of student work and the degree to which the student has met the requirements of the course. Course requirements may include:

- Student participation, effort and completion of homework;
- Responsibility, as reflected in timely preparation of online coursework;
- Growth and achievement in meeting content standards;
- Skills/knowledge gained as evidenced by performance on assignments, exams and projects.

Course requirements, including grading and assessment procedures will be available to students, parents, counselors, site coordinators and administrators at the beginning of each course. Online course teachers will identify the value of each assignment and determine student grades. Penalties and consequences for late submission of work are up to the instructor. Students, parents and school officials may request information relative to how a grade was determined and the online teacher will provide that information.

**Materials.** IDEAL-NM courses require no physical textbooks with the exception of some Aventa courses. Other materials may be required from time to time to meet the needs of unique courses. If so, they can be easily purchased by either the student or school, depending on local school policy.

**Mentors.** Although site coordinators can fulfill a general mentoring function, student or adult mentors can give valuable assistance to students doing online coursework. That is something left up to the school, and, unless unusual circumstances exist, it is not necessary to coordinate those activities with IDEAL-NM staff.

**Progress Reports.** The IDEAL-NM progress reporting system provides communication to parents, students and site coordinators about the online teacher's assessment of student performance. Progress reports will be emailed to the student and the site coordinator for appropriate distribution. Online teachers are required to provide progress reports to students and IDEAL-NM staff at mid-term and semester end.

**Registration.** Students may not register without school approval. Students may register themselves, or they may be registered by any school official. However, IDEAL-NM will confirm the registration with the school's designated site coordinator prior to issuing a student user name and password.

**Special Need Students.** The needs of special education, 504, or other special students can be accommodated via online coursework. It is critical that IDEAL-NM staff be informed of any students on an IEP or 504 plan to enable the proper protocols and service mechanisms.

**Summer Courses.** Schools may register students for summer online coursework. However, students should be informed that summer coursework is compacted into four or eight week blocks so more time per day has to be devoted to coursework. For this reason, and others, the best success rates for summer students will be achieved when schools provide for a structured environment that requires regular student attendance.

**Transfer Students.** Schools may request transfer status on a student in which the student would enter a course from the point determined by the school and IDEAL-NM staff.

**Tutors.** While it is the responsibility of the online teachers to provide individualized instruction to needy students, there may be occasions when it makes sense for the school to provide additional tutorial support. Schools are requested to coordinate these services with the online teacher so that the tutor and teacher can work together.

**Withdrawals.** Students may drop only at the request of the site facilitator. Students who withdraw from an online course will receive a percentage grade based on work done up to that point. The student's school will determine whether the student will receive a grade, an indication of withdrawal, or any other annotation on the student transcript.

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## Federal Disclaimers

**Anti-Discrimination/Harassment.** IDEAL-NM is committed to safeguarding the right of all participants to work and learn in an environment that is free of discrimination or harassment. Discrimination/harassment on the basis of race, color, ancestry, religion, national origin, age, sex, sexual orientation, or disability in any form will not be tolerated. All schools in the IDEAL-NM network should have an anti-discrimination policy and procedures for addressing discrimination/harassment complaints. Compliance with will be the responsibility of each participating school. Complaints should be filed with the complainant's school and the IDEAL-NM Executive Director, and should follow procedures of the policy for that school. Situations involving two or more schools will require the collaboration of administrators in each of those schools. IDEAL-NM can assist when appropriate.

**Equity.** IDEAL-NM is committed to an equal education for disadvantaged and underserved students, and will recommend policies and procedures to ensure that all students can take advantage of the opportunities created by the project. Schools should set a priority on recruiting disadvantaged and underserved students. Online instructors will make every effort to ensure that the content, approach, and goals of the online education courses meet their needs.

**FERPA.** IDEAL-NM adheres to the requirements of the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act, and actively pursues policies and procedures that protect the privacy of student records.

**Title VI/IX and Other Equity Legislation.** All schools must be in compliance with all Federal Civil Rights legislation. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 protects people from discrimination based on race, color, or national origin in programs or activities that receive federal financial assistance. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 insures that no person shall, on the basis of gender, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination in any federally-assisted program. In addition, state civil rights legislation will apply to IDEAL-NM courses. Compliance with all civil rights legislation will be the responsibility of each school and complaints should be filed with the complainant's school and should follow the school's grievance procedure.

[www.ideal-nm.org](http://www.ideal-nm.org)

The IDEAL-NM web site is designed to provide a wealth of information, and answer many questions. Please send improvement suggestions to [sharon.purcell@state.nm.us](mailto:sharon.purcell@state.nm.us).

See next page for Appendix A—Common Misconceptions about Online Learning.

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## APPENDIX A

### COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT ONLINE LEARNING

Adapted from information provided by the North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL) and from *A National Primer on K-12 Online Learning* written by John F. Watson.

**Misconception 1: Online learning is just a high-tech version of the old correspondence course.**

Response: Most correspondence courses were not “taught” by anyone—unknown persons graded assignments and sent them back to students. Online courses are taught by highly-qualified teachers with interactive tools and instant messaging. Students typically have more one-on-one interactions with their teachers and fellow students in online courses, especially when team projects are assigned. Teachers report getting to know their students better, and students who are shy or do not think well “on their feet” tend to contribute more in online environments. Students are often actively interacting with both resources and others in online environments.

**Misconception 2: Online courses are for gifted and talented students only.**

Response: Online courses have worked well with students of all kinds, including at-risk students, students in urban and rural areas, those with limited English proficiency, and those with special needs. Online learning has also been used successfully as part of systemic reforms to help students who are performing below grade level in large urban school districts.

**Misconception 3: Online course are easier for students than regular courses.**

Response: Most online courses are not condensed or easier versions of regular courses. They are aligned to rigorous state standards. They require active participation and operate in settings under supervision of state-certified teachers, require students to take state assessment tests, have attendance policies, and have competency-based academic progress requirements in effect. They require high levels of initiative to complete.

**Misconception 4: A student is more likely to cheat online.**

Response: Cheating is no more prevalent online than in the classroom. In addition, there are many technological ways to deter it and track it. In many cases, the online venue and communication enables teachers to get to know their students' idiosyncrasies, skills and writing patterns much better. Teachers say that student writing has a voice and that it is often easier to spot work that is inconsistent or unlike earlier communication in online environments.

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**Misconception 5: Online students are isolated and therefore will be socially disadvantaged.**

Response: In fact, students often engage actively both online and off as they complete assignments and socialize with other students and adults in their schools, at home, and in the community. Online students typically take only one or two courses online, blending their learning opportunities with traditional instruction in brick-and-mortar schools.

**Misconception 6: Virtual schools are about technology.**

Response: Virtual schools are about curriculum and instruction for students. The “medium” is not the message because the student, instructor, content, and learning goals are key. Networks simply make it possible to provide communication, access to extended resources, and use of sound, graphics, video, text, interactivity, and other digital capabilities to strengthen instruction. Most schools have the basic technology, Web browsers, plug-in software, and access that are needed.

**Misconception 7: Online teachers have easy jobs.**

Response: Online teachers report that they work much harder and spend more hours online than in the classroom, but that they love it. They do not simply “move a class online” and “put up what they teach.” Online instructional design, writing, management of instruction, and communicating with students can take considerable time and be quite different from what goes on inside a traditional classroom.

**Misconception 8: Online learning is much cheaper than face-to-face instruction.**

Response: Studies show that the total costs of online learning approximate those of traditional settings. Course development costs are higher, and the required technology must be adequate. Onsite support is an important element of student success, and is often overlooked as part of the cost equation. Teacher costs equate to those of brick and mortar schools.

**Misconception 9: Online courses represent an “add-on” to already burdened school systems and teachers.**

Response: Online education does not represent an “add-on.” It represents an opportunity to take advantage of online resources, enable teachers to help students learn in ways that match students’ needs and learning style, and transform schools. Online courses may or may not decrease costs, depending on how budgets are allocated and how online courses are integrated into instruction. Training and support of teachers is important.