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How states can ensure the rise of virtual schools will lead to better learning opportunities

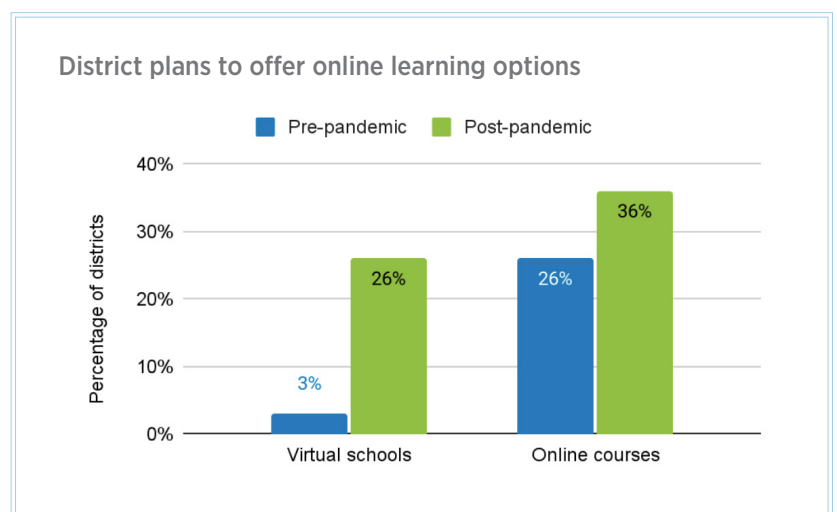
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THE ISSUE

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a national movement toward online learning. In a matter of months our country saw investments to [expand broadband access](#), [provide devices for students](#), and [increase use of education technology](#). More students shifted into online schools. Districts increased their offerings of virtual schools and online courses. But students tended to see dismal academic results in pre-pandemic online schools and remote learning during the pandemic. The question is whether state and local leaders are ready to ensure that the significant expansion of online learning options leads to high-quality learning opportunities for students.

WHAT WE FOUND

In June 2021, the [American School District Panel](#) found a large uptick in district provision of online schools and courses (see chart). As many as one-third of district leaders perceived strong parental demand for remote schooling. The perceived demand was highest in suburbs (35%) and in districts where a majority of students are of color (31%).



WHAT POLICYMAKERS CAN DO

While the spike in demand for online learning is unquestionably related to the pandemic, there are still longer-term trends that suggest online learning is here to stay. In addition to critical investments in broadband and infrastructure, policymakers can inform a new direction for virtual learning.

- 1. Give districts guidance about short-term online instruction post-pandemic.** District leaders see potential for online learning to help make snow days or sick days a thing of the past. But they will need clear state guidance on how to track attendance and instructional time for students who shift between online and in-person learning.
- 2. Create and improve regulatory systems of virtual schools.** With online learning options increasing, states should establish clear standards for authorizing new schools, expectations for their operations, and standards for measuring academic outcomes, as well as identifying funding systems that are suited to the [unique governance needs](#) of online schools.
- 3. Invest in research and development about K-12 online learning.** There is a dearth of evidence on what aspects of online learning work best for which students and in which contexts. States play a critical role in establishing an evidence base that helps inform high-quality instructional design during online learning. States and consortia of states can invite districts and charter management organizations to apply for grants affording them flexibility and funding to study new innovative models—e.g., learning pods or micro-schools that blend online learning with in-person support to meet student and family needs in new ways. State funding can also support open source content for high-quality standards-aligned instruction.