

# Quick Study

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## Summary

- SQE study reports online learning initiatives have stalled and Canada now overtaken by U.S.
- Teachers' unions show tepid support for online learning.
- Collective agreements of teachers' unions set restrictive limits.
- School choice works well in other jurisdictions and is relatively inexpensive.
- Private providers are filling the gap.

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## THE SKY HAS LIMITS: What's Thwarting Online Learning in Schools?

by Paul W. Bennett

Ontario's flagship program, *e-Learning Ontario*, proclaims that "The sky is the limit!" in its marketing message, but the reality is markedly different. Online learning is very much in vogue, as are futuristic calls for public schools everywhere to embrace "21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Skills." A small band of Information Communication Technologies innovators, inspired by futurists like Toronto author Don Tapscott, New Brunswick IT guru William Keirstead, and Vancouver teacher David Wees are certainly out there championing the cause.

A brand new Canadian study covering all provinces and territories, commissioned by the Toronto-based Society for Quality Education, demonstrates that, with the exception of British Columbia, the spread of online learning and virtual schools has stalled and, for the vast majority of Canada's 5 million K to 12 public school students, the sky has limits.

Whether it's Ontario or anywhere except for B.C., ministry of education authorities still remain wedded to modes of teaching and learning circumscribed by the 'brick and mortar' model of public schooling. New online learning initiatives are viewed as potential threats to the prevailing status quo, buttressed by a resistant organizational culture, public sector contract entitlements, and regulations designed to contain the spread of e-learning.

After enjoying an initial advantage, Canada has been overtaken by the United States in the rate of growth of online learning over the past two years. In 2010-11, Canadian distance education plateaued at about 4.2% of all students. While online learning continues to grow in provincial leader BC, those gains are offset by static numbers and losses in other provinces such as New Brunswick and Quebec.

America's leading private enterprise promoting online public schools, K12 Inc., founded in 2000, has expanded into 28 different states, boasts of having delivered over one million online courses to students, and foresees skyrocketing growth. A newly acquired Division of Pearson Education, Connections Education, now operates in 21 states and forecasts unlimited growth potential. In late 2011, *The New York Times* also flagged the tremendous proliferation of full-day virtual charter schools.

Online learning is now accepted in Canada as a critical component of the future in K-12 education. So why the hesitancy to move forward?

The first instinct of educational policy-makers, senior administrators, and teacher unionists is to monitor, regulate and control the educational domain. While other factors come into play, that reflex reaction is particularly pronounced when it comes to the dynamically changing field of e-learning and the frontier of mobile social media.

Educational officialdom is inclined to speak glowingly about the potential of unlocking "21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills" in our classrooms. Yet the same key system stakeholders are consumed with promoting educational equity and few recognize the fact that federal infrastructure investments have already ensured that Canada's poorest communities, such as Labrador, actually enjoy the best access to ICT.

Whether it is Ontario, Nova Scotia, or even Nunavut, educational researchers tend to focus on the so-called digital divide, promoting quality of access to ITC and seeking to close the "competency gap" faced by students in lower socio-economic or remote communities. Research ventures such as that of Dianne Looker at Mount Saint Vincent University tend to support policy initiatives directed more at bridging the divide than on generating prosperity and unleashing the creative potential of learning technologies.

Most provincial teacher unions show tepid support for online learning, holding fast to labour contract agreements which effectively limit online learning to a supplemental role in the K-12 public system. Even in B.C., where "distributed learning" is well-advanced, the provincial teachers' federation remains torn on the question.

The Nova Scotia Teachers Union collective agreement, running to 191-pages, limits innovation with its 11 different clauses specifying the number of days of instruction, program hours, group sizes, and working conditions. Union activists, such as those in the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF), pass resolutions to block virtual school initiatives and to hold the line until "equality of service" can be guaranteed for all students.

Free from public sector constraints, private educational ventures like Virtual High School (Ontario) and Christian Heritage Online School (BC) have jumped in to fill the need for innovative, online learning school options and are growing by leaps and bounds.

The recent successes of VHS(O) and more than 14 such schools in B.C. directly challenge the 'one-size-fits-all' public system in districts where school options were once strictly limited for students and parents. Such lighthouse school ventures offer a glimmer of hope that school choice, innovation, and quality, first seeded in Alberta, may yet spread to other Canadian provinces