

## **A Report on the Department's Approved Online Learning Provider Three-Year Review Process (FY2013)**

In 2013, there were 14,703 unique students served by the state's approved online learning providers. The inventory of approved online programs in Minnesota provides students with opportunities to enroll in comprehensive or supplemental programs starting in kindergarten all the way through to the 12th grade.

Department approved online learning providers are able to offer students an alternative to traditional public schools. Currently there are 30 approved online learning programs in Minnesota and enrollments are increasing as students and their parents seek the flexibility of online learning. The list of approved providers include online charter schools, multi-district programs, single-district programs, and intermediate districts and consortia of schools and offers Minnesota students and their families many part-time and full-time online learning opportunities.

### **Approval and Three-Year Review Statute Language**

Minnesota Statutes, section 124D.095, "Subdivision 7. Department of Education. (a) The department must review and approve or disapprove online learning providers within 90 calendar days of receiving an online learning provider's completed application. The commissioner, using research-based standards of quality for online learning programs, must review all approved online learning providers on a cyclical three-year basis. Approved online learning providers annually must submit program data to, confirm statements of assurances for, and provide program updates including a current course list to the commissioner.

In these annual updates approved online learning providers submit program data to confirm statements of assurances, affirm a current course list to the commissioner and that online learning courses delivered in approved programs are rigorous, aligned with state academic standards, and contribute to grade progression.

In response to the September 2011 Office of the Legislative Auditor Evaluation Report (OLA), statute language was added in 2012 that included a requirement for the department to review its approved online learning providers every three years. The department now maintains a list of its [Approved Providers Status that includes programmatic interactions and dates for required three-year reviews](#). This list provides information on all information on when each of the 30 providers will undergo a three-year review.

### **Developing the Three-Year Review Process**

The department employs a Continuous Quality Improvement Process (CQI) approach in review of its approved providers. Thus the review process is based on: 1) meeting or exceeding the needs of all stakeholders; 2) involving approved online learning providers in reflection of their online educational processes; and, 3) analysis of data and evidence based documents and artifacts that drive organizational decision making. The Three-Year Review process, longitudinal in nature, is intended to build on the annual updates and provider assurance of compliance with existing state and federal education statutes.

In a 2011 Office of Legislative Audit (OLA), the department was charged to “make the reapproval process more meaningful” and to develop process that could “provide Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) with insights into the effectiveness of online learning.” To that end the department worked with its approved providers and the members of the K-12 Online Learning Advisory Council (2010-2013) and developed the following resources to support provider self-study during their three-year review:

- Approved Online Learning Provider Three-Year Review Process
- Guiding Principles of the Online Learning Provider Three-Year Review Process
- Online Learning Three-Year Review Rubric for Self-Study
- Logic Model of the Three-Year Review
- Frequently Asked Questions: Approved Online Learning Provider Three-Year Review Process

In addition to the online resources developed to support the three-year review process the department webinars were held two to three times per month in FY 2013. The Guiding Principles of the Online Learning Provider Three-Year Review Process set the tone for the review and were referred to throughout the self-study process.

### **Digital Portfolio and Three-Year Review**

*"It is important for schools to know that an online learning provider systematically compares course content with state and national standards."* — **Superintendent Vern Koep, Rush City Schools District 139**

In FY 2013 the department used eFolio Project Sites, a free digital portfolio technology developed by the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities to support the approved providers' self-study. Rationale for use of eFolio was that it would:

- Standardize the MDE Three-Year Review Process through a common technology with clear standards connected to the three-year renewal
- Permit integration of International Associate for K-12 Online Learning( iNACOL) National Standards for Online Programs and provided tool to exhibit data and documents aligned to standards and assurances
- Be provided to each approved online provider and supported at no cost
- Allow providers to document, manage, and display resources for program assurances and Three-Year Review online in a site owned and managed by the provider.
- Encourage use of a process in which programs can be showcased and accountability can be demonstrated, shared and updated on a continual basis.
- Support asynchronous review of self-study work by reviewers.

The department offered webinars on the self-study process and eFolio technology throughout FY2013. These began in November 2012, and ended in July 2013. Provider self-studies were open for department review on August 1, 2013.

### **Call for Review Teams**

The Center for Postsecondary Success at the Minnesota Department of Education, renamed the Office of College and Career Success, sought volunteer review teams to assist in evaluating the 12 online provider self-studies in spring semester 2013. The review teams were made up of specialists in education, curriculum, program planning, special education, charter schools, technology, finance, organizational development, standards, as well as individuals with other kinds of expertise appropriate to a review of online providers.

The volunteer review teams were led by the department's Online and Digital Learning Specialist. Individuals wishing to become review team members completed an interest form, attended training and then completed the review which began on August 1, 2013, and ended on September 30, 2013.

### Three-Year Review Results (2013)

Approved Online Provider self-study work was reviewed by teams of four. Reviewers used the rubric developed by the department and approved by the Online Learning Advisory Council. Review ratings were combined and averaged for point values assigned.

The reviewer recommendations and the self-studies underwent an additional department review and results were sent to each approved online provider.

Remarks of the reviewers were summarized and shared in letters to providers and included explanation of the point value assigned to each standards area. Results letters sent to each provider in November 2013, included the ratings table, values assigned to each area of the digital portfolio, strengths noted, improvement opportunities and the result of the formal review in which they were either:

1. *Approved for an additional three years; provider is only required to submit annual/reports/data/assurances to MDE, or*
2. *Approved for an additional three years; however, approval is contingent on submission of annual reports and data to MDE addressing specific review concerns.*

### Three-Year Review Self-Study Rating Table

Inadequately Developed=1	Minimally Developed=2	Moderately Developed=3	Substantially Developed=4
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### Twelve Providers Reviewed

Department approved online learning providers listed submitted digital portfolio self-study work in August 2013 for the re-approval process. In each self-study providers developed online project sites that:

- Assessed how well they met or exceeded iNACOL Standards for Online Programs and provided a summary of how the organization would use its self-study to effect continuous improvement.
- Exhibited provider data, documents and other artifacts aligned with iNACOL standards and then analyzed the information to support how well they aligned, met, or exceeded the standards.
- Reaffirmed and provided assurances to the department for each provider as outlined in M.S. 124D.095.

### Range and Median of Digital Portfolio Ratings

As the differences between the ranges of ratings appear extreme a median rating is provided in the table below. In this first review of digital portfolios the median is a better representation of the average scores the twelve providers received.

**Table 1 - Range of Ratings and Median**

Self-Study Rubric Areas	Range of Rating (Mean)	Median Rating
Overall Rating of Self-Study	Highest Rating 3.8 Lowest Rating 1.4	2.3
Institutional Standards	Highest Rating 3.7 Lowest Rating 2.0	2.9
Teaching and Learning Standards	Highest Rating 3.8 Lowest Rating 1.2	3.0
Support Standards	Highest Rating 3.8 Lowest Rating 1.5	2.9
Evaluation Standards	Highest Rating 3.7 Lowest Rating 1.8	2.8

**List of Online Line Project Sites**

- blueskyollreview.project.mnscu.edu
- cyberollreview.project.mnscu.edu
- edvisionsollreview.project.mnscu.edu
- infinityollreview.project.mnscu.edu
- mnohsollreview.project.mnscu.edu
- mpsollreview.project.mnscu.edu
- mscollreview.project.mnscu.edu
- mnvaollreview.project.mnscu.edu
- mv2872ollreview.project.mnscu.edu
- mtsmcaollreview.project.mnscu.edu
- nbollreview.project.mnscu.edu
- nsoollreview.project.mnscu.edu

**Overall Results of the Three-Year Review**

Eight providers were approved for an additional three years; provider is only required to submit annual reports/data/assurances to MDE.

Four providers were approved for an additional three years; however, approval was contingent on submission of annual reports and data to MDE to address specific review concerns.

**Contingent Approval: Requests for Additional Information**

- Four providers receiving contingent approval were asked to submit documents and/or provide a link to online information to permit the department to review course syllabi, standards alignment, and assessment information by December 20, 2013.
- Of the four providers with contingent approval, two were asked to submit follow up information on policies connected to eligibility for the program, practices for students with disabilities, and information on how it ensures equitable access for students consistent with its mission and purposes by December 20, 2013.
- All information requested was received by the department and an updated list Approved Providers Status that includes programmatic interactions and dates for required three-year reviews was [posted to the department web site in January 2014.](#)

## Strengthening the Required Annual Update Reporting

The 2011 OLA Report stated that the department was not reviewing its required update information or the assurances submitted in annual reports. The department has now integrated three-year review results into its annual reporting process. Providers who underwent review in August 2013 were asked to provide updates on continuous improvements. The table below lists out some of the information providers will report out on in their required annual update. Items on this list are provider specific and the department does not expect that all of the providers report out on all of the items on this list. Nor are providers limited to sharing just the updates that are listed.

**Table 2- List of Updates Requested**

Annual Updates Requested for July 15, 2014
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New policies developed over the course of the year must be described and/or linked to for department review.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Updates on required state deadlines for curriculum implementation should be presented.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Report progress toward next steps outlined in the executive summary area in the self-study.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outline guidance services and communication between parent, student, teacher, and a case manager.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Report out and/or include links to Q Comp data, Read Well by Grade 3, IS#024 Annual Reports, and any stakeholder survey information it has collected as this is a good way to prepare for the next three-year review.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New music and career and technical course titles, numbers, and descriptions of any new offerings must be entered into the ISEEK inventory and updates on any mandated policies should be shared.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Report out on strategic and long range planning processes, progress toward new goals outlined, and course review and teacher evaluation processes.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe and or link to new partnership policies developed over the course of the year. List progress on any of the 11 improvements identified as provider set work goals.</li> </ul>

## Self-Study Outcomes (2013)

- Twelve providers developed reflective self-studies in which they reviewed their programs against agreed upon iNACOL Standards for Online Learning Programs.
- Process confirmed current course descriptions were in ISEEK and that course syllabi were in the format prescribed by Minnesota's commissioner are available.
- An objective review of data, documents, and artifacts selected by providers to demonstrate how they met or exceeded research based national standards.
- Providers assessed whether or not they met or exceeded standards, identified their own strengths and weakness, and developed related plans for program improvements.
- A rubric with research-based standards of quality for online learning programs was used by volunteer review teams and department staff in evaluating and rating the digital portfolios.
- Twelve providers were reapproved for an additional three years with only annual required reporting to the MDE per statute language.

## **MDE Approved Online Provider Strengths**

State law requires that online courses in public schools be rigorous, be taught by teachers licensed in Minnesota, and meet or exceed state standards. The self-study process builds on annual updates and assurance requirements currently in place. The use of a digital portfolio permitted a transparent process in which the department can better understand and report on its approved online learning providers.

Through this first self-study the department has aggregated a list of provider strengths and suggested areas for provider improvements. A few of the noted strengths seen in this first reapproval process included:

- Use of national research based standards and accreditation standards
- Use of technology to support alignment of course content to MN K-12 Academic Standards
- Use of ADDIE, Backward Design, and National Instructional Materials Accessibility Instructional Models
- Collaborative Professional Learning Communities
- Tier 1 Military Standing, NCAA, and AP course approvals
- 24/7 tech support and 24-hour turn-around respond to student/parent inquiries
- Identified measures of quality and communication with stakeholders
- Mentor programs for new teachers
- Notable student achievements in state and national testing
- Fabulous Fridays in which students are invited to have face-to-face interactions with fellow students and online teachers.
- Evidence of alignment to MN K-12 Academic Standards
- Syllabi formatted in the manner prescribed by the commissioner with clear sets of required interactions and stakeholder expectations
- Internal, formal, bi-annual analysis of student success using state level achievement assessments and course completion rates

## **MDE Improvements to Process**

This self-study process used a digital portfolio technology in 2013 that is no longer available to the department and has begun training six approved online learning providers who will undergo review in 2014 on the use of a digital portfolio technology hosted by Schoolchapters.com.

Review is an ongoing process and a self-study is not dependent on a particular digital portfolio technology to be effective. All of the department's supporting documents for the process will be edited in FY2015 to remove any reference to a named technology, but the process itself, its guiding principles and the rubrics developed to evaluate the self-study remain the same.

Despite the change in tool to create the digital portfolio, the approval process still provides the department with iterative reports that build on a program's initial application. Through the rigorous application process, required annual reporting, and the addition of the three-year review requirement, quality education based on results and special needs services to students is validated.

## **MDE Stakeholder Survey on Approval Processes**

A survey was created in 2012 to ask new applicants and approved online learning providers to rate the support received, process and materials used, and to share their thoughts about the experience and interactions with the department. Providers who underwent the 2013 three-year review were invited to respond to the survey. Responding to the survey was voluntary and the results are being used to effect needed improvements to all of the department approval processes.

The department collected and compiled initial suggestions for improvements on the new process of reapproval from the twelve providers who underwent the review. Suggested improvements and related actions listed in Table 3 are the results of the department's review of the online survey (66 percent of Self-Study Providers) and feedback from phone conversations (50 percent of Self-Study Providers) in December of 2013.

**Table 3 –Suggested Improvements and Related Actions**

<b>Suggested Improvements</b>	<b>Department Action</b>
Meet with approved provider to review the results of the portfolio review prior to receiving an official results letter.	This step is added to the process in all subsequent reviews.
Process should include an opportunity to correct any ' <i>errors of fact</i> ' in the review.	This step is added to the process in all subsequent reviews.
A user friendly digital portfolio tool should be integrated into the process.	2014 Approved Online Learning Providers are using a new portfolio tool to create their self-studies. <a href="http://schoolchapters.org">schoolchapters.org</a> .
Any new technology tool should permit 2013 self-study work to be captured and stored.	Work is being captured and stored. The department is moving 2013 work into the new portfolio tool.
Post 2013 Review of the rubric by providers and review teams.	2013 Provider and Reviewers will be invited to review the rubric and make suggestions for improvement. The review is slated for spring 2014.
Additional training materials on platform, process, scope of the review, and exemplars.	List of webinars to support the 2014 Self-Study are available to the public and a library of exemplars will be developed.

### **Next Steps and Improvement Cycles**

Improvements to this process will follow the following improvement cycles:

- **Plan** — identify barriers or challenges, using data whenever possible, and specify the plan to move programs or interventions forward as well as the outcomes that will be monitored.
- **Do** — carry out the strategies or plan as specified to address the challenges,
- **Study** — use the measures identified during the planning phase to assess and track progress, and
- **Act** — make changes to the next iteration of the plan to improve implementation.

Approved Online Learning Provider Review Team Members (2013-2014) will be asked to make suggestions to improve the process. Suggestions will be sought through online surveys and/or focus groups by spring 2014.

In compliance with Minnesota Statutes, section 124D.095: Online Learning Option Act, Subdivision 10. The department will seek input on its review and approval process to ensure the quality of on online learning providers by seeking input from newly formed Online and Digital Learning Advisory Council in spring 2014.

### **Overall Improvements to Online Learning Program Approval Processes**

From March 2011 through December 2013, the department made the improvements connected to auditor recommendations and/or subsequent statute language. Department outcomes connected to the recommendations in the 2011 *OLA Evaluation Report K-12 Online Learning* are:

- MDE has adhered to a 90-day timeline for all new and expanded program applications and subsequent approval of new and/or expanded program requests.

- There is no longer a backlog of requests to become an approved online learning provider.
- In partnership with the Online Learning Advisory Council (2010-2013), the department redesigned its preapproval, approval, and reapproval processes.
- Providers were led to complete their first self-study process in a meaningful manner that placed “greater responsibility on the public entities that have established the online schools.”
- 12 of 30 providers (40 percent) were reapproved. The range of initial approval dates for these twelve providers was from 1996-2006.
- An Approved Providers Status List is established to include information on program status, department interactions, and provides information on dates of upcoming three-year reviews.
- Public information on processes connected to MDE Approval of Online Learning Providers is current and available on the department’s web pages.

### **Provider Testimonials on the Self-Study Process**

Unsolicited, publicly displayed testimonials provide another way to look at how a continuous improvement focused self-study process can effect ongoing commitment to improvements over time. The testimonials included in this report were copied and pasted from the project sites of online learning providers who underwent a three-year review in August 2013.

*“Throughout this self-study, we have evaluated our past and current processes, structures, and policies as defined by the iNACOL Quality Programs rubric/guidelines; reviewing our online program leadership, instruction, content, support services, and evaluation structures. This self-study has helped INFINITY ONLINE identify areas for growth and refinement as well as areas of achievement and celebration. We view this as a continuous improvement process that does not end upon completion of the self-study; instead it assists in establishing a point-in-time from which to continue evolving and improving.”—**Infinity Online***

*“We have identified both strengths and areas for improvement tied to the standards, and the information here will continue to guide our work in the months and years ahead.”—**Cyber Village Academy***

*“The MSC Online Learning Program is a part-time, non-diploma program, where students remain enrolled in their own districts while taking courses through MSC. Having completed our self-study, we are very confident that MSC successfully meets the iNACOL standards of a high quality program. During our study, we focused on the Institutional Standards, Teaching and Learning Standards, Support Standards, Evaluation Standards, and finally the MDE Assurances.”—**MSC Online Learning Program***

*“We appreciate the opportunity to evaluate our program in connection with the iNACOL standards, and to share our processes with others. We have learned a great deal from the questions raised, and from discussing practices with other programs....we look forward to continuing our improvement processes as a result of this review.”—**Northern Star Online***

*“Clearly identifying and communicating learning targets, providing effective feedback to students and aligning assessment with other programs is a top district priority that fits perfectly with the work we need to do next in Distance Learning. Continuing to embed our staff with other district staff in PLC, Curriculum and Instruction work is critical to moving forward together - especially as our more “traditional” programs also move to greater digital content, access, and models of increasingly blended learning. Continuing to update our learning management and student information systems are also critical to ensure timely, effective communication with students and families.”—**North Branch Distance Learning Program***

## Quick links to more information about Minnesota's department approved online programs

### [Enrollment Choices](#)

(<http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/StuSuc/EnrollChoice/index.html>)

### [Online Learning](#)

(<http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/StuSuc/EnrollChoice/Online/index.html>)

### [Online Learning Providers](#)

(<http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/StuSuc/EnrollChoice/Online/OnlineLearningProviders/index.htm>)

### [Three-Year Review](#)

(<http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/StuSuc/EnrollChoice/Online/OnlineLearningProviders/Three-YearReviewProcess/index.htm>)

### [Keeping Pace with K-12 and Blended Learning 2013: Minnesota Data & Information](#)

(<http://kpk12.com/states/minnesota/2012/>)

### [International Associate for K-12 Online Learning \(iNACOL\) National Standards for Online Programs](#)

([www.inacol.org/cms/.../NACOL-Standards-Quality-Online-Programs.pdf](http://www.inacol.org/cms/.../NACOL-Standards-Quality-Online-Programs.pdf))

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