



## Education As We Know It Is Finished

Clayton M. Christensen and Michael B. Horn 07.12.10, 5:10 PM ET

School is out, and for most students enjoying their midsummer pleasures, class time is a distant memory. Changes are underway that make it likely to stay that way. The schools students return to in the fall will look quite different from those they left behind.

School budgets are continuing to tighten, as the drop in state and local revenues has not abated and there likely will not be another \$100 billion in federal stimulus funds coming any time soon. Even if the economy rebounds, the situation for public education will remain bleak. With baby boomers set to retire en masse, state and local governments, which provide the majority of school funds, will face mounting retiree health care and nonpension benefit obligations for which they haven't made proper allowances. And local districts haven't yet felt the full pain of the housing crisis in reducing revenue from property taxes. In other words, we have only seen the beginning of the red ink.

Many schools have framed the looming cuts as a threat to how they operate--even though the teaching force has grown by 10% since 2000, while student enrollment increased by only 5%. But others are seeing the hardship of the moment as an opportunity to transform what they do with the implementation of online learning. Pressured by not only widespread cuts but also increasing demands for accountability, these innovative leaders recognize that online learning is a key reform for doing more with less.

For example, the people who run many schools realize that they can save considerably by cutting back on traditional classroom versions of non-core courses--advanced placement, foreign language, economics and so forth--and instead offer them online, thereby aggregating demand across many school districts. Likewise they can cut back on the number of periods during which they offer certain classroom courses and still affordably meet student demand by offering those courses online.

More than 70% of school districts already offer some form of online learning, and that number is growing among traditional brick-and-mortar middle and high schools. With big budget cuts looming, online learning is likely only to grow, as students increasingly look to it for courses they want to take and credits they need for graduation. Many of the leading online learning providers have experienced sharp growth over the past few years, and that's unlikely to slow.

The adoption of online learning is much more than just a cost-saving move for school districts. It has the potential to transform schooling more broadly by allowing students access to a wide range of high-quality offerings and teachers, regardless of where they live. Some students whose classroom courses have been replaced with online versions will be thrilled to find out that they now have access to not just one provider's online courses but a whole marketplace of high-quality options, in a naturally technology-rich environment quite compatible for them.

Online learning also allows students to study unburdened by the usual constraints of time, proceeding at a pace that works best for them. The current system forces all students to learn the same material within the same time frame. That stalls the progress of advanced students while leaving others behind. This is one of the reasons online learning has been shown to produce better results overall than traditional face-to-face instruction.

In addition, school districts everywhere from Boston to Wichita, Kan., are seizing the flexibility of online learning to provide affordable credit recovery options for students who fail a course they need to pass in

order to graduate. Others are pushing the envelope even further and utilizing online learning for unit recovery. As soon as a student fails even a unit within a course, the school moves that student to an online module to get back on track.

Come the end of summer, the schools students return to will likely look different in a variety of ways. From the students' perspective, that will be a good thing.

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