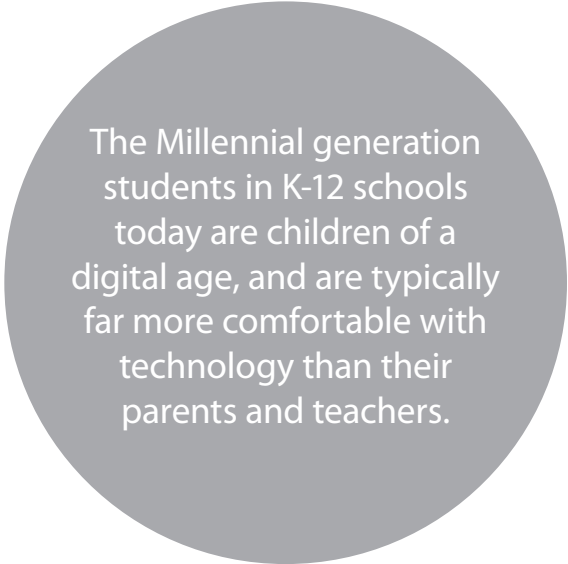


2.5 Challenges in online learning

The fact that online learning has been successful for many schools across the country does not mean that it has been free of challenges or controversy. Indeed, there are numerous issues and challenges in online learning; many are covered in more detail in other sections of this report. A few of the most pressing issues include:

- **Many parents, administrators, educators, and legislators do not fully understand online education:** Online learning is new enough that many people in administrative decision-making positions, and in the general public, do not understand it (see “Common misconceptions,” above). As a result, policies governing online learning may be outdated or inappropriate.
- **The growth in online education has outpaced education policy in many states:** In many states, online programs are guided and overseen by rules and regulations created for traditional schools. In 2001, the National Association of State Boards of Education, writing about online education, stated “In the absence of firm policy guidance, the nation is rushing pell-mell toward an ad hoc system of education that exacerbates existing disparities and cannot assure a high standard of education across new models of instruction.”¹⁶ Six years later, many states are only beginning to address these policy issues, and in some states there has been controversy surrounding the effectiveness and legality of cyberschools.
- **Funding for online students and programs has not been resolved:** Funding of online students, and in particular online charter school students, has been controversial in several states. This controversy is due in part to the fact that online schools sometimes draw students across district lines, and funding often follows the student. The result is students leaving their “home” school district for the online school, resulting in a drop in funding for that school district. A related issue concerns online schools attracting students who were formerly home-schooled, because when a student goes from being home-schooled to being in a charter school (cyber or otherwise), the state pays the cost of educating that student. Because of online schools’ transcendence of geographical boundaries, the controversy they have created in some states belies their small size; across the country online students in charter schools make up only about 3% of all charter school students.¹⁷
- **Equal access remains a challenge:** Online courses require, at a minimum, that the student have access to a computer, basic software, and the Internet. For students in affluent areas such access is expected, but for students in poor inner-city and rural areas the hardware and Internet access are not a given. Educators must work to ensure that the opportunities of online education are available to students across all income levels, geographic regions, and ethnic groups. In addition, online courses can pose challenges for students with learning or physical disabilities. Most schools have been quite good about



The Millennial generation students in K-12 schools today are children of a digital age, and are typically far more comfortable with technology than their parents and teachers.

¹⁶ *Any time, any place, any path, any pace: Taking the lead on e-learning policy*, National Association of State Boards of Education, 2001.

¹⁷ Center for Education Reform (2005) National Charter School Directory, Washington, DC., quoted in *A Synthesis of New Research on K-12 Online Learning*, Smith, Rosina; Clark, Tom; Blomeyer, Robert, Learning Point Associates, October 2005.

ensuring that online programs are available to students with disabilities; as online programs become increasingly mainstream, they must continue this commitment.

- **Determining the proper role of technology in education:** The growth of online programs has highlighted the general lack of technology in many of our public schools. Some would argue that virtual classrooms should be part of all teaching and learning, especially as more and more of the jobs and lifestyles for which we are preparing students have critical technology components. Many students in the 21st century don't think of technology as something separate from daily life, and perhaps online learning should not be thought of as separate from the teaching and learning that goes on in schools every day.

