

# The Value of Online Learning: Rationale and Results

Key findings from ICF's external evaluation



## Background

This document summarizes key findings from ICF's external evaluation of the Maine Department of Education's Rethinking Responsive Education Ventures (RREV) program. RREV is funded by a \$16.9 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Rethink K-12 Education Models program and is intended to promote innovation in Maine schools so that all students across the state have access to high-quality and responsive learning opportunities. Since August 2021, over 40 school districts throughout Maine have been awarded federal funding from RREV to support the implementation of innovative education pilot projects, including eight Online Learning programs implemented by seven Adopter Schools.

## About Online Learning

Online Learning programs are an alternative education pathway that offer students more options than 100% conventional in-person schooling. Many of these learning programs emerged from the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic when some students and their families realized they were happier and learned better online than in-person. These students include those who experience anxiety about being in in-person school settings as well as those who desire greater autonomy over the pace and content of their lessons. Many Online Learning programs also include in-person components, such as field trips and community service, to strengthen students' social-emotional skills and sense of community.

## Why Online Learning Opportunities Are Important and Innovative

ICF's evaluation identified several reasons why Online Learning programs are innovative:

- 1 Continuation of Remote Learning** – Online Learning programs offer students and families who thrived in remote learning during the pandemic an opportunity to continue in the modality that worked well for them. For many of these students, the return to in-person instruction in 2021 risked undoing progress they had made while learning remotely, especially among students with social anxiety or those with learning styles more conducive to online learning.
- 2 Community-Building** – Online Learning programs intentionally build community and camaraderie among their students and teachers, often by embedding in-person activities such as field trips and community service. These experiences helped students develop social relationships with each other and their instructor, and also helped them gain comfort and confidence with traditional in-person learning.
- 3 A Whole-Child Approach** – Online Learning models provide students more agency over their learning while also offering individualized support delivered by specialized staff. These educators, often referred to as Remote Learning Specialists, help students set up goals and develop a learning plan that involves identifying necessary courses; monitoring student progress; and conducting regular check-ins with students about their academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs. This structure contributes to the whole child's growth by giving students the tools and support to develop their curiosity and grow their self-confidence.

"My daughter loves being able to go at her own pace. ... She feels a great sense of accomplishment ... she is more ready for the real world when she graduates as she has been 100% responsible for her own success the last 2 years."

– Parent

**4 Flexibility and Personalization** – In Online Learning programs, students are offered opportunities to choose what and how they learn and to take greater ownership over their learning, and ultimately become more independent learners. Personalization is also embedded at the heart of these programs where the online learning platforms and support from the Remote Learning Specialist reflect each student’s unique learning needs.



*An example of a whole-child approach, RSU 60 (Noble) constructed a yurt for their students to help them feel comfortable and at home in their learning.*

## Results

Here are some emerging outcomes ICF has found at RREV schools implementing Online Learning pilots:

- 1 Academic Outcomes** – Most students (78%) and parents (85%) surveyed indicated that they learned a lot that by participating in their school’s Online Learning pilot. During interviews, several students attributed the flexible nature of these programs to their academic growth as they could complete coursework at their own pace. For example, one student in regional school unit (RSU) 22 (Hampden) was on track to graduate early because they could enroll in classes that were not offered in a typical semester schedule.
- 2 Increased Satisfaction and Engagement** – Students in Online Learning programs reported being more motivated to learn with more than three-fourths of students surveyed (78%) indicating agreement with the statement that they liked their experience in the Online Learning programs. A majority of parents surveyed (93%) agreed that their child enjoyed participating in the Online Learning programs. During focus groups, students and parents attributed this increased sense of satisfaction, with online learning to students being able to learn at their own pace from the comfort of their own homes and having the autonomy to choose what and how they learned. Several students credited the Online Learning program with restoring their enjoyment of learning, which they had not felt since they were young children.
- 3 Re-Engagement with In-Person Learning** – Students across Online Learning programs reported positive high school experiences as a result of participation in these programs, with some attributing it to the positive in-person experiences. For example, RSU 71 (Belfast) High School’s Learning Intentionally Online Now (LION) summer semester’s goal was to re-engage students identified as truant or chronically absent in in-person instruction throughout the school year. About 86% of students in their LION summer semester enrolled and persisted in the fall and spring semesters of the school year.
- 4 Growth of Online Learning Models** – Several Online Learning pilots expanded their reach to include more students to benefit from the services within the programs. For instance, RSU 60 (Noble) FLEX’s Be Well Connected program included 9th grade students to facilitate a smoother transition for those who are heading into high school but are not quite prepared for conventional in-person instruction. RSU 25 (Bucksport) expanded their reach to include full-time in-person students who were experiencing credit shortfalls so that they remained on track for graduation.

“I love the fact it gives me independence and I feel like it is helping me with my work ethic and motivation.”

– Student