Online Learning
State of the Field Survey

Summary Findings Report
Abridged Version

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Introduction

The AVI CHAI Foundation, in October 2010, began work on a new initiative: online/blended learning. To that end, the Foundation established a two-fold goal: 1) to improve the quality of education by increasing individualized instruction and enabling students to develop skills and ways of thinking needed in the 21st century; and 2) to bring down the cost of education. Furthermore, AVI CHAI's work to promote the adoption of online learning by day schools is three-pronged: 1) supporting the adoption of online courses at established Jewish day schools; 2) supporting entrepreneurs who are willing to experiment with the model of a day school in service of both educational and cost-saving goals via the incorporation of online learning (and other 21st century learning ideals); and 3) to stimulate the development of Judaic studies offerings online at both the middle and high school levels. In order to gain a better understanding of the status of the field in regard to online learning, the Foundation launched an online survey in the fall of 2011 to gather information about the depth and breadth of online course offerings throughout Jewish day schools in North America.

The survey was administered online and distributed to AVI CHAI's email database of 529 Jewish day schools throughout the United States and Canada and a 48% response rate was achieved (241 schools). Survey findings can be interpreted with confidence, as the respondents are highly representative of AVI CHAI's school database population as a whole, mirroring similar portions of school type, size and geographic region.

The following report describes the general findings discovered through this initial state of the field survey research effort. A fully unabridged summary findings report can be found on The AVI CHAI Foundation website.

Summary Findings

Jewish day schools across the United States and Canada currently offering online courses are outnumbered by those schools who do not by more than three to one – yet survey data suggest they may not remain the minority for long. While the overwhelming majority of respondent schools use the Internet to access Judaic resources (84%), provide faculty professional development (83%) or for networking purposes (60%); less than one-quarter (23%) offer online courses to their students. Further still, among the limited number of schools that do offer online courses, relatively few of their enrolled students are actually taking these courses – most often less than 10% of their total enrollment. Put in the perspective of the entire respondent population (241 schools), only 2% (5) of these schools report that "most" of their students are enrolled in the online courses. Most schools who are offering online courses are "new adopters;" more than half (57%) began offering the online courses this year or last.
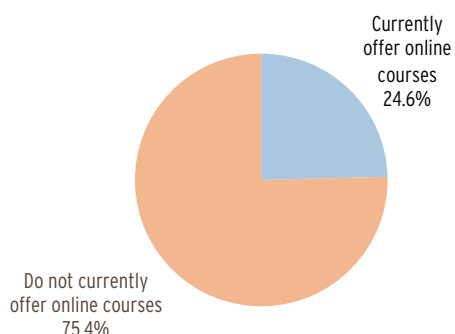
Yet survey data show that steady growth can be anticipated in the number of schools offering online courses soon, with as many as 15% of these schools adopting each year for the next few years. If these projections continue, **60%** of respondents could be offering online courses in the near future. Still, 25% of these schools have no plan to offer online learning – founded primarily in their belief that online learning is not as effective as face-to-face learning or is not appropriate for curricula in the primary grades. Yet for those who do plan to adopt online courses, resources needed to get their offerings "up and running" fall into three consistent categories: more funding (67%), more technical expertise on their staff (50%), and finding content providers (50%) top the list as the most critical issues, significantly ahead of all other needs. Schools are not considering online courses now or in the near future due to three primary issues: a) concern that online learning is not as effective as face-to-face; b) their students are too young to effectively benefit from online courses (primary grades); and c) the perceived lack of funds or technology infrastructure.
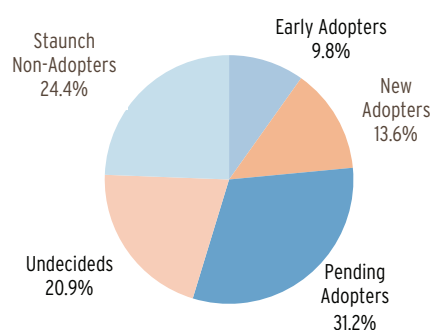
Motivations to offer online courses stem almost exclusively from meeting individual student learning needs – cited by 81% as their primary motivator. Expanding course offerings beyond faculty expertise followed closely (77%). Consequently, respondents cite individualization, whether for remediation or challenge, and the opportunity to meet all students' needs as the overwhelming **value** of their current online offerings.

Some difference is evident in online course offering by school size. Larger schools are more likely to be offering online courses; schools with 750 or more students were almost twice as likely to offer online courses than all other responding schools.

Current status of online course offering

Currently offer online courses
24.6%

Do not currently offer online courses
75.4%

Respondent Clusters

Staunch Non-Adopters
24.4%

Early Adopters
9.8%

New Adopters
13.6%

Undecideds
20.9%

Pending Adopters
31.2%

Five clusters representing the various phases of online course adoption emerged clearly from this data – from "early adopters" to the staunch "non-adopters." Fostering growth in online learning lies strategically in better understanding the motivations, obstacles, needed resources and concerns of those phases of online course adoption. Cluster descriptions include: 1) early adopters: schools who have offered online courses for three or more years; 2) new adopters: schools who have begun offering online courses within the past year; 3) pending adopters: schools who do not currently offer online courses but plan to do so soon; 4) non-adopters/undecideds: those who do not currently offer online courses and are unsure about doing so in the future; and 5) staunch non-adopters: those who do not offer online courses and have no intention to do so.

Cluster 1: Early Adopters. The smallest cluster includes those schools that have been offering online courses for three or more years, and generally speaking, are fully invested in delivering instruction online. Representing just 9.8% of all respondents, the early adopters tend to be smaller schools; likely evidence of their interest in expanding course offerings beyond the range of their faculty's expertise and their number of traditional course offerings. The early adopter schools are ten percentage points more likely to be growing in enrollment and more than half as likely as all schools to have shrinking enrollment. Almost all early adopters are orthodox schools (79%) – an increase of 22 percentage points over the general population.

Only small portions (5% and 9% respectively) of the early adopter schools enroll **most** or **many** of their students in online courses. They use school funds most often (67%) to facilitate the course offerings and less than 10% have grants from other donors. Having established these online offerings for several years now, the early adopters are less likely than the other adopters to be actively seeking additional funding sources or to be relying on start-up grant funding.

Early adopters conduct their online courses either fully online (27%), in a blended/hybrid manner (33%), or a combination of the two (38%). Here, the largest subset of these students access the courses through school computers (43%) and 15% access the course fully from home. Almost all utilize instructors from outside providers with less than one in ten using their own teachers to conduct the courses. Regarding course content,

offerings remain a largely secular venture. Most early adopters are interested in expansion (65%) and none intend to decrease or eliminate these opportunities. The perceived benefit is consistent across the early adopters: providing differentiated instruction for their students. Said one respondent, "*differentiating for our gifted or learning challenged students is critical.*" Credit recovery for transfer or failing students was cited as well. Few obstacles have been substantial enough to halt the growth of online offerings among these early adopters.
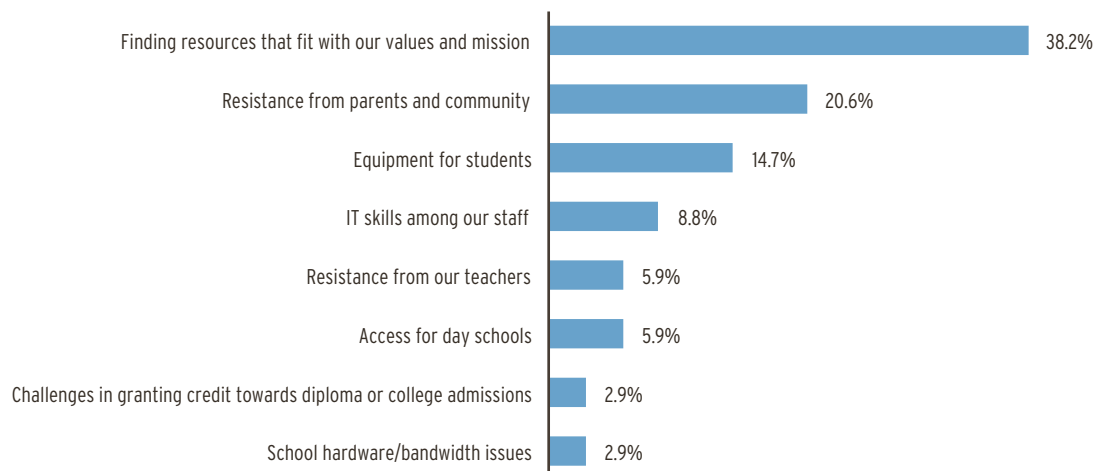

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Yet, "*finding resources that fit with our values and mission*" was reported by almost all as a barrier – twice as significant as all other obstacles. Resistance from faculty (11%) and parents/community (27%) were relatively minor concerns. Equipment and IT expertise were of moderate concern, cited by just under half of these early adopters (44%).

Cluster 2: New Adopters. The new adopters (schools who have begun offering online courses within the past year) represent only 13.6% of the total survey population. Like the early adopters, the new adopters represent larger portions (69%) of Orthodox schools than the whole population of schools. These new adopters are more likely to have school leaders (i.e. Principals, Deans, Heads of Schools, Executive Directors) encouraging use of online courses, but most still suggest that adoption is slow.

The new adopters enter the online course environment most frequently "*to provide differentiated learning to meet individual student needs.*" They also cite the perceived efficiency of online offerings, such as this respondent who noted, "*(We value) customized instruction delivery, and students may register for one of a large number of college level classes. Unlike a traditional class, there is no minimal enrollment number; a class can be offered for one or two just as easily as for ten.*" Yet despite the value perceived in these courses, the new adopters still report a relatively small portion of students enrolled in these courses. Seventy-two percent say less than 10% of their enrollment is involved – twice as few as their "early adopter" counterparts.

Most challenging obstacle faced by those currently offering online courses

Finding resources that fit with our values and mission	38.2%
Resistance from parents and community	20.6%
Equipment for students	14.7%
IT skills among our staff	8.8%
Resistance from our teachers	5.9%
Access for day schools	5.9%
Challenges in granting credit towards diploma or college admissions	2.9%
School hardware/bandwidth issues	2.9%

New adopters appear to be venturing into offering Judaic studies courses more frequently than their early adopter peers and less heavily into AP course offerings. For example, 38% of the new adopters are offering Judaic studies courses including: Hebrew, *Chumash*, *Navi*, Bible, *Brachot* and *Pirkei Avot*, compared to only 9% of the early adopters. Further study is required to see whether or not the new adopters change the type of courses offered over time.

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Clearly in growth mode, expansion is already anticipated among the new adopters, as 75% intend to offer more courses and 21% are still evaluating their status. Resistance from parents and the community emerged as a more challenging obstacle among the new adopters than in the early adopters. Here, 30% cite parent/community resistance as the most challenging obstacle, compared to only 12% in the early adopters – possible evidence of a community's initial reluctance to change.

Cluster 3: Pending Adopters. The largest cluster is characterized as the "pending adopters;" those who are **not** currently offering online courses, but hope and intend to do so very soon. More community schools, fewer Orthodox schools and more stable enrollment make up this cluster.

These pending adopters are interested in establishing online course offerings for the same reasons as their peers who have already begun the process: providing differentiated learning (83% say it is very important) and integrating 21st century skills and technology into the school (80% say it is very important). Said one "pending adopter" respondent, "*(We believe it is important to be) ... moving Jewish education to the cutting edge as opposed to being 30 years behind the times.*" Increasing enrollment and saving faculty hiring costs appear to hold less importance overall among this cluster.

Funding is the primary critical issue in assisting the pending adopters with their plans to implement online courses. Almost two-thirds (63.5%) indicate funding, followed closely by those who say that finding content providers is a critical concern. IT expertise on staff and technology infrastructure rated highly critical as well. School leadership is not an issue; and school leaders are "moderately concerned" that a lack of faculty cooperation will stand in the way of online course adoption.

Cluster 4: Non-Adopters – Undecideds. Nearly 20% of all respondents are simply unsure about venturing into online course offering. These "undecideds" are not currently offering online courses, and while they do not express direct objection to offering online courses, they describe themselves as unsure and report **no** plans to consider online offerings. About one-third (30%) of the undecided schools are community schools, 14% are Conservative and one is a Reform. Enrollment in these schools is reported to be growing at a slower pace than the early, new and pending adopters.
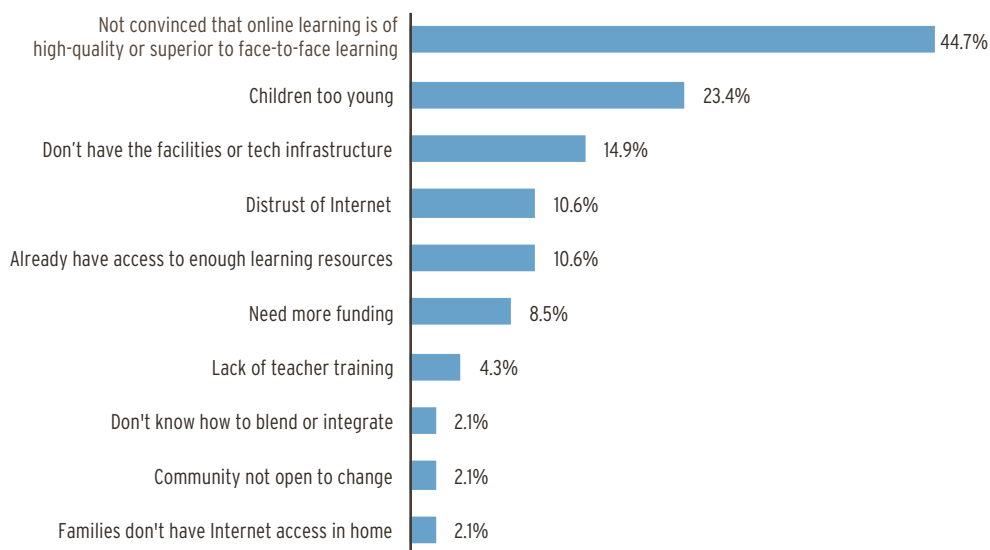
Several factors are reported as important to this cluster in considering a move to offer online courses. Differentiated learning options and integrating 21st century technology, like their "adopter" counterparts, are equally important to these schools.

This group appears, however, more skeptical about the effectiveness of online learning, reporting much more critical concern than schools who intend to start offering online courses soon. Here, 41% report a critical issue in getting their courses up and running as the "*need for more scientific data proving the effectiveness of online courses,*" compared to only 31% in the pending adopters. Likewise, almost 80% of the undecided schools suggest funding is a critical issue, and 54% need more technical expertise on their staff.

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These schools also reported higher concern over garnering faculty cooperation and student and family interest in online offerings. Generally speaking, the undecideds remain "in limbo," openly aware of online course value and benefits, yet stalled by critical funding, interest and infrastructure issues.

Most prevalent reasons non-adopters are not interested in offering online courses

Reason	Percentage
Not convinced that online learning is of high-quality or superior to face-to-face learning	44.7%
Children too young	23.4%
Don't have the facilities or tech infrastructure	14.9%
Distrust of Internet	10.6%
Already have access to enough learning resources	10.6%
Need more funding	8.5%
Lack of teacher training	4.3%
Don't know how to blend or integrate	2.1%
Community not open to change	2.1%
Families don't have Internet access in home	2.1%

Cluster 5: Staunch Non-Adopters. Almost one-third (29%) of all schools that do not currently offer online courses (76% of all respondents) remain strictly opposed to adopting online courses and will likely remain opposed for some time to come. This cluster can be characterized as the "staunch non-adopters." More Conservative schools are present here and fewer Orthodox schools (48% in this cluster compared to 75% on average among the online adopters). Slightly more non-adopters report shrinking enrollments than the whole or among the adopter clusters. Internet use for accessing resources, accessing faculty professional development and for building community is still prevalent among schools in this cluster. However, they remain largely skeptical of the efficacy and value of online courses compared to face-to-face learning. According to one respondent, "*We have not seen the efficacy or evidence of these courses being high quality, and we are a pretty small school in which the student-teacher relationship is very important.*" Another quoted a recent *New York Times* article that called into question the value of online learning, reporting it as "inferior to classroom learning."

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Others declared themselves "*believers in the Torah being transmitted by a live rabbi.*" For some, opposition was strictly due to the nature of their school population: K – 8th grades; and the perception that online learning was less suited to this age group. Distrust of the Internet and concerns over Internet safety emerged as well. Said one respondent, "*we want to make sure that everyone in our community is comfortable and not all families allow their children to use the Internet.*" Others simply remain unsure about how to effectively integrate and blend online learning and an overriding sense of "*where to begin the investigation.*"

Implications and Recommendations

The survey content analysis reveals several key implications and recommendations for next steps in The AVI CHAI Foundation's investigation into the status of online learning in Jewish schools across North America. This snapshot provides ample fodder for the strategic planning critical to programmatic efforts to foster learning excellence throughout school systems. Still, as with all survey research, continued data collection through diverse means is recommended to further test and understand the conclusions made using this sample. Schools represented here would also provide an excellent sounding board and focus population to further test new initiatives related to online learning. Next steps might include:

1) AVI CHAI should consider distributing, gathering or sharing current best practice research with Jewish school personnel regarding the quality of online learning on promoting student learning outcomes. Alternatively, an additional research study could be launched to study the efficacy and effectiveness of online learning should it be determined through a literature review that current research is inconclusive. Clearly, these study results indicate a hesitation on the part of all non-adopters to believe that online learning can be as effective in promoting student learning as more traditional face-to-face learning.

2) AVI CHAI should consider offering professional development seminars and webinars to foster professional learning communities among Jewish schools on the topic of effective use of online courses in schools, particularly with regard to how to integrate and blend online learning options into a traditional curriculum. These survey respondents see online learning as "all or nothing" and indicate an interest in better learning how to "blend and integrate" new learning options for all students. K–5/Elementary school leaders in this study were particularly unclear about how online courses could benefit a younger population and could benefit from available professional development or shared learning communities within the Jewish school network.

3) Clearly, opportunities for seed funding as fostered or leveraged by AVI CHAI must find a key place among these recommendations. Funding new technology infrastructure remains a key stumbling block for many schools.

4) Shared "best practices" and lessons learned regarding online learning could be fostered between the two disparate clusters revealed in this study. Adopters, in this case, could serve as key resource people to the non-adopters, particularly given the relatively large number of non-adopters who suggest a keen interest in development and expansion of these efforts. This population appears to be excellent fodder for a professional conference or nationwide learning community (in-person or virtual) that could be fostered and facilitated by AVI CHAI.

5) Finding online course resources that fit with the schools' missions and values was cited most often as an obstacle in offering online courses. Consequently, future efforts to nurture, locate and share appropriate resources could be warranted. AVI CHAI, or some subset of the early adopter schools, could serve as a clearinghouse or "recommended" resource directory to streamline the content provider search and selection for the pending adopters.