

Panel: Bolster online schools

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Colorado should boost spending for virtual school students and encourage districts to serve more kids online, a state Board of Education task force recommended Thursday.

The 32-page report also said the state should allow any student to attend an online school, regardless of the type of school they attended before enrolling in an Internet-based program.

Current state law allows students to enroll in a public online school only if they attended a public school the prior year.

"If you're in a home school or private school, you actually have to go to a public school first," said Jared Polis, a former state board member who, along with State Sen. Nancy Spence, co-chaired the online education task force.

"Our committee felt all students should be able to enroll," he said.

The committee was formed following a scathing state auditor's report released last year. The auditor found there was little state oversight over the quality of online schools or how funds for online schools had been spent.

The committee emphasized its support for online schools as an innovative approach to learning, but called for greater accountability.

Its list of 10 recommendations included boosting the per-pupil funding for online students. Traditional brick-and-mortar schools get per-pupil funding that ranges from \$5,865 per student to more than \$13,000 per child, based on a variety of factors such as poverty or the cost of living. Online schools receive a flat rate of \$5,865 per student.

Committee members said the low level of funding creates no incentive for school districts, which receive the per-pupil money, to create online programs.

The report also said the board of education should encourage school districts with online schools to partner with those that don't offer online options to allow funding to be negotiated between districts.

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