



Embracing Virtual Learning:

How School Leaders Can Leverage Technology to Revolutionize Education



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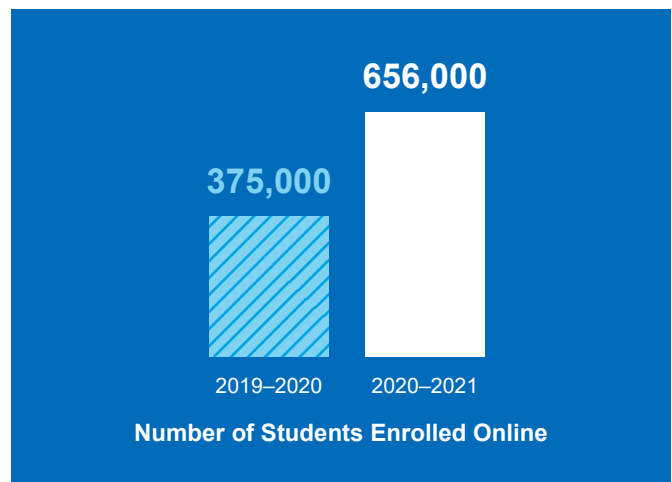
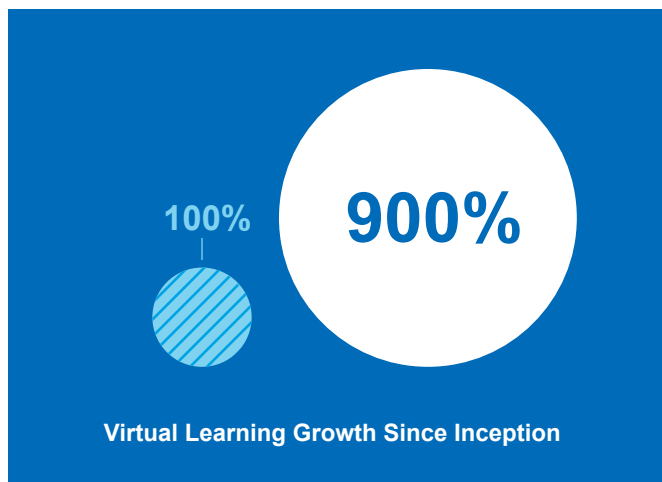
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Introduction

Virtual learning has **grown 900% globally** since its inception, with **online enrollment growing** from 375,000 students in 2019-2020 to 656,000 students in 2020-2021.



This trend shows no signs of slowing down, even in a post-pandemic world. The students of this generation are more accustomed to digital experiences than ever, and embracing technology can be an effective method for engaging students in new ways.

As more schools adopt some version of a virtual, blended, or hybrid learning model, it's essential that they are aware of the technologies that enable **successful virtual learning environments**. While implementing virtual learning is not without its growing pains, schools that do it effectively stand a lot to gain in a variety of areas:



Inclusion & Accessibility

Granted that schools are able to provide students with adequate devices and access to the internet, virtual learning can in many ways mitigate inclusion and accessibility challenges present in a traditional classroom.

The Benefits

More flexible accommodations for students with different learning needs.

Transportation and access to high-quality instructors is no longer a barrier with virtual learning.

Improved data intake for better monitoring of student performance.



Enhanced Flexibility for All Learners

Virtual learning can benefit all students. Everyone learns at a different pace and in different ways. And with the **global self-paced learning market set to grow at a CAGR of 8.2%**, there's proof that school leaders are seeking more personalized methods to help their students get the most out of their K-12 experience.

The Benefits

Individualized instruction with learning formats tailored to each student.

More choice in curriculum from several different providers.

Enhanced digital literacy for an increasingly digitized workforce.



Scalability

Previously, personalized learning was effective in theory but difficult to implement at scale. Now, with the right tools, educators can leverage virtual learning to deliver a truly 1:1 learning experience to each of their students.

The Benefits

Easy access to educational resources

Effective communication between educators and students

Real-time collaboration

Streamlined documentation and compliance for alternative learning programs.

To achieve the long-term benefits of virtual learning, school leaders must embrace new technologies and cultivate a flexible and adaptive approach along their journey. No matter the extent to which your school offers virtual learning, this white paper will serve as a helpful resource for:

- **Overcoming** the inherent challenges with virtual learning.
- **Learning** the essential tools that enable an effective virtual learning environment.
- **Understanding** the real-world impact virtual learning can have on your school.

By the end, you'll be equipped with a comprehensive understanding of how to leverage technology to transform education and prepare students for the challenges ahead.



Overcoming Challenges in Virtual Learning

The Digital Divide

With **over a third of K-12 students** in the U.S. living in households without an internet connection or an adequate device for remote learning, addressing the digital divide will be a crucial factor in determining virtual learning's long-term viability for all students. Not only will circumstances like these create a barrier for many students, but the adoption of critical technology to achieve success requires a degree of digital literacy that will make it challenging to overcome steep learning curves in some cases.

A Robust Student Information System: The Key to Understanding Your Digital Divide Needs

By collecting data from students and their families, you can better understand their specific needs pertaining to their connectivity, digital literacy, number of people sharing access, and other data points that will help you build a long-term strategy for closing the digital divide. Having a robust set of data will also help down the line when seeking funding from state or non-profit organizations.

Of course, **you need a centralized system that will house all of this data and ensure compliance.** It's important to evaluate **whether your SIS is armed with the necessary tools** you will need.

Lack of Student Engagement

It's no surprise that there are a lot of challenges when it comes to keeping students engaged when they are not physically in the classroom full-time. With less constant oversight from teachers and other school officials, it's easy for students to become disengaged and fly under the radar if the proper processes are not in place.

Tactics For Maximizing Student Engagement

It's no surprise that there are a lot of challenges when it comes to keeping students engaged when they are not physically in the classroom full-time. With less constant oversight from teachers and other school officials, it's easy for students to become disengaged and fly under the radar if the proper processes are not in place.

When students can participate in hands-on breakout sessions with their peers, it ensures that virtual learning doesn't feel like a siloed experience.

Interactive Group Sessions



Students and families need reassurance that they will have support, whether through accessible resources or virtual office hours throughout the day.

Virtual Help Lines



Teaching "Zoom Etiquette"

Not every engagement tactic has to be a large-scale initiative. Teachers can set expectations for students to have their cameras on, contribute if called on, and attend class at specified times.



Engagement Monitoring

Educators should consistently monitor student engagement levels and learning activities during the school year so they can recognize when outreach or intervention is needed.



Keeping Families Involved to Boost Student Performance

Families cannot be overlooked when considering the engagement of each student in a virtual learning environment. **Studies show** that meaningful family engagement is a strong predictor of positive student performance, especially when given guidance and resources. Some strategies for encouraging and maintaining family involvement in a student's education are:

Establishing two-way communication

Offering resources for additional at-home learning

Inviting families into the day-to-day learning

Cultivating a sense of belonging

By fostering two-way communication, incorporating families into the learning journey, actively engaging families, and offering helpful resources throughout the year, school leaders can strengthen the collaborative educational journey for their K-12 online school and hybrid-learning students.



Technologies That Power Virtual Learning

For all the possibilities EdTech has created for a wide variety of learning environments, it's only effective if its users are able to get the most out of it. According to an [Edweek survey of teachers](#), principals, and district leaders, **79% said they felt their teacher colleagues were tired of all the tech use they have experienced over the past two years.**

Between the sheer quantity of EdTech products on the market to the increased complexities for schools offering virtual learning options, it's become more important for schools to:

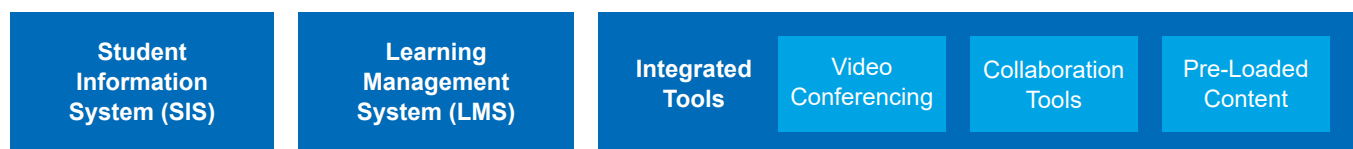
- Utilize technology stacks that minimize bottlenecks and make their varied offerings more seamless
- Focus on enhancing, engaging, and extending learning to provide high-quality instruction for students

The magic starts to happen when all of your tech works together, reducing the pain points your staff feels by:

- Training staff quicker
- Lowering overall budget spend
- Reducing manual data management
- Standardizing processes and operations
- Minimizing the amount of tools they have to learn
- Supporting learning outcomes with a healthy teaching approach

By knowing which tools are essential to a successful virtual learning model, you can begin to audit your existing tech stack and prioritize tools that will set your staff and students up for success.

The essential tools for any virtual learning environment include:



We'll cover each of these tools in the following pages.

Student Information System

Accurate, consistent record-keeping is not just necessary for compliance reasons, but for the day-to-day well-being of your staff and students—from student profiles, to course information, attendance, grades, transcripts—the list goes on.

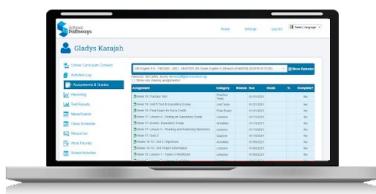
This is even more important in any manner of virtual setting when paper collection isn't always an option and data is being collected in a number of ways through various channels.

A good SIS accounts for all of this, centralizing the data your school deals with on a daily basis and allowing anyone in your organization with the proper credentials to have secure access.



Top Characteristics to Look For in an SIS for Virtual Learning

 <p>User-Friendly Interface</p>	<p>With more day-to-day interactions taking place online, your SIS should be easily accessible by administrators, teachers, students, and their parents. You should look for platforms that are cloud-based and mobile-friendly for maximum accessibility.</p>
 <p>Integration Capabilities</p>	<p>In a virtual setting, teachers will need to rely on various EdTech platforms to make coursework more engaging for their students. Data captured in these platforms (such as an LMS or other EdTech platform) should seamlessly translate to the records kept in your SIS. This will ensure that your SIS can always be trusted as a single source of truth.</p>
 <p>Customization & Scalability</p>	<p>SISs from certain vendors are tightly integrated with specific platforms, which could make the transitioning of data from one SIS to the next a very tedious process. Having a list of your schools' needs that projects well into the future is best practice to validate that you will be able to stick with a given SIS for an extended period of time.</p>
 <p>Data Safety & Compliance</p>	<p>In any school setting, there is going to be lots of student and family data that you will want to keep safe and in compliance with the laws of your state. Data encryption, user authentication and access control, audit trails, and built-in compliance reporting tools are all qualities of a safe and compliant SIS.</p>
 <p>Customer Support and Service</p>	<p>Collecting and analyzing data is essential, but continual training and support must be in place to use the technology effectively. An SIS with a proven track record in customer support will help teachers maximize their time and impact with their students. Not only will differentiated customer service help enhance the learning experience, but it can also help educators build the confidence and support systems to innovate where it can benefit instruction and learning.</p>
 <p>Mobile-Friendly Family Accessibility</p>	<p>An SIS should ensure that teachers, students, and families have the plans, content, tools, and visibility they need to engage inf students' learning outcomes. A family portal accessible from one portal on any device makes it easy to keep everyone on the same page to drive academic growth and accountability.</p>



School Pathways' Student Information System was built with over 20 years of input from educators to provide a tailored solution for virtual and non-traditional schools with unique compliance requirements.

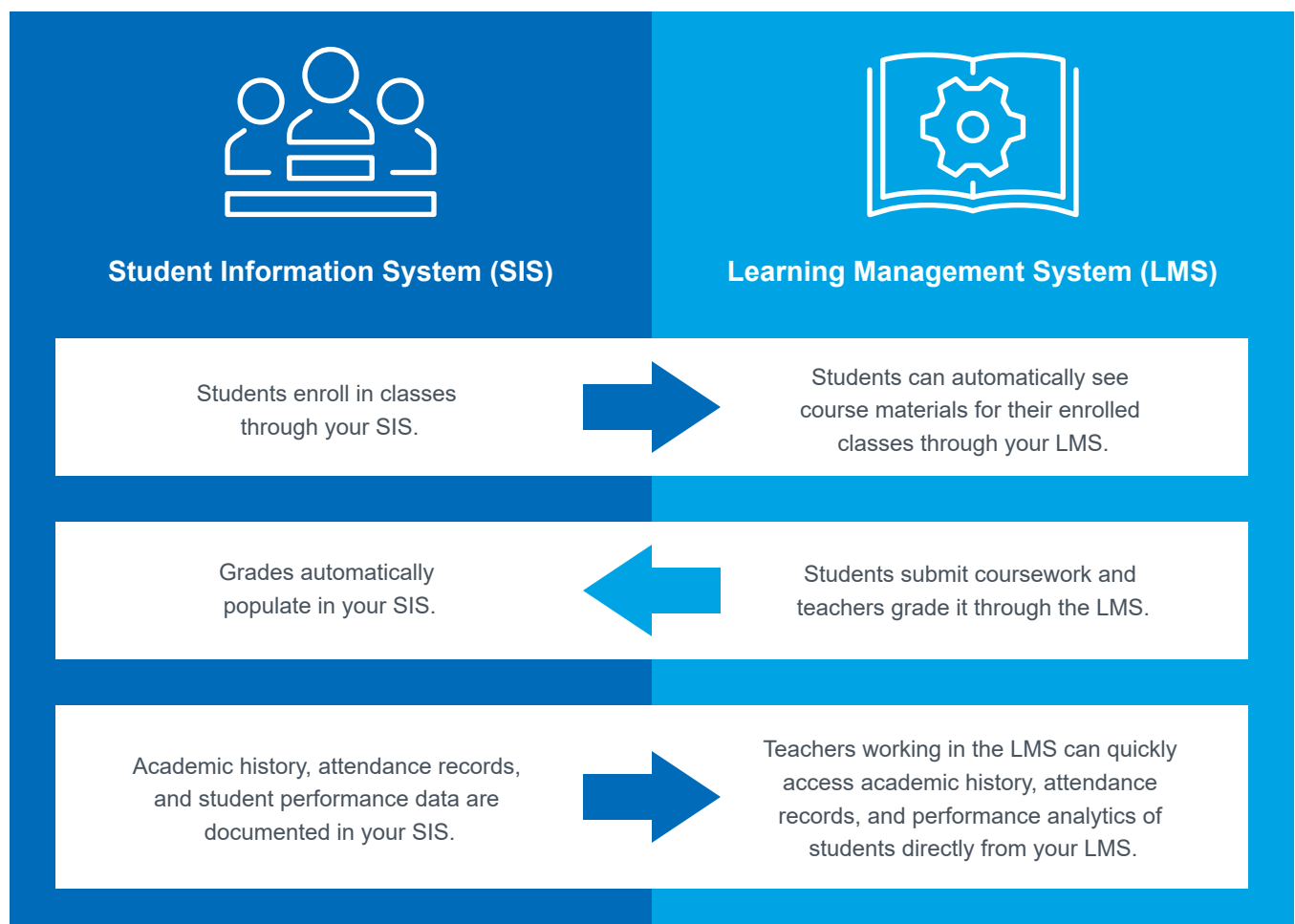
Learning Management System

As the main channel between teachers and students for the delivery and submission of curriculum and coursework, an effective LMS bridges the gap between physical and virtual classrooms.

In a virtual setting, an LMS should give teachers total control over the organization and storage of educational materials, resources, lessons, assignments, and assessments for students to access. They also need visibility over student performance data to adapt and make necessary adjustments for each student's learning needs.

Ideally, a learning management system should seamlessly integrate with a school's Student Information System of choice to ensure accurate reporting of data and avoid excessive administrative burden.

How LMS and SIS Platforms Work Together

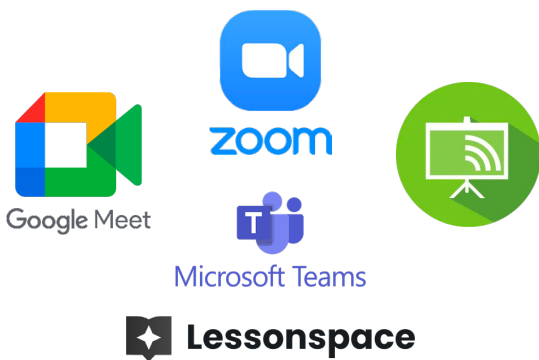


While an LMS is excellent for creating assignments and facilitating communication and collaboration among students, they don't often come with pre-loaded content or auto-generated learning data.

To truly personalize the student learning experience at scale, you'll need an infrastructure that integrates with a wide variety of external EdTech tools.

Integrated Tools for Virtual Learning

There are a few essential tools for virtual learning that augment and enhance the capabilities of your LMS. When evaluating your options, it's important to consider how well these tools will integrate with your LMS to minimize any technical difficulties or downtime for your students.




Video Conferencing Software

The ability to communicate with students and instruct through video conferencing tools is a vital part of any virtual learning model. This allows students the opportunity to get answers to their questions and individualized tutoring in real-time. It's also important for helping students develop social skills with their peers through small group breakout sessions.

Collaboration Tools

Students need tools that empower them to collaborate with their peers and teachers through the cloud, whether it be document sharing, interactive lessons or games, or safe channels where they can chat with one another.





Pre-loaded Content

While it's always good to tailor lesson plans to your students, implementing pre-loaded content into the process from trusted curriculum providers can go a long way both saving time and keeping your students engaged.

School Pathways' **Personalized Learning Platform** sits on top of your LMS providing content, data, and simple portals that streamline personalized learning. **Choose from over 7,500 pre-built publisher lesson plans.**



Dive into how using effective technology enabled CalPac to deliver virtual instruction that improved student outcomes, in this [School Pathways Success Story](#).



Final Thoughts

The growth of schools embracing virtual learning shows no signs of slowing down. While challenges certainly exist in the way of ensuring equitable access to the benefits of more flexible and personalized learning for each student, integrated and seamless technology can be the solution.

If you're looking to expand or improve your virtual learning offerings, School Pathways can help. We have over 20+ years of experience helping educators deliver outstanding online, personalized instruction. Whether you're a charter school looking for an entirely integrated Edtech stack or a school that just needs support for your SIS with our **Personalized Learning System**, we'd love to talk with you and discover how we can best meet the needs of your staff and students.

Let's Talk

About School Pathways



School Pathways is a California-based education software company with over 20 years of experience in K-12 education. We provide flexible, reliable software solutions that simplify school operations and foster student success in a variety of learning environments. We also have years of experience consulting with K-12 California educational agencies on state compliance and CALPADS reporting.

For more information, please visit schoolpathways.com.

