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What is virtual school? Is an online education right for my child?

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What is virtual school? Are virtual schools considered homeschools?

Virtual schools are, for the most part, like attending a traditional public school without the “bricks and mortar”. They include all academic services and must provide accountability of their virtual programs as required by the state agency governing them. Students attending virtual schools are not considered “homeschooled.” Some describe virtual school as “the 21st-century, middle-class version of the private tutor.”



One plus is that students can move quickly through their stronger subjects and spend more time on their weaker areas, like math; but, there’s a catch. Because virtual schools are so new, there is little research yet to measure the quality of the programs or determine which students benefit from them. There are no valid studies showing that children participating in virtual or computer-based learning models are performing any better than in traditional schools.

Not all virtual programs are alike. It’s important to know the difference between high-quality, full time, statewide public virtual schools and other programs that simply offer correspondence or supplemental courses.

Parents must educate themselves extensively and weigh the decision to enroll their child in a virtual school very carefully. Talk to other parents about the pros and cons of virtual schools and about the particular school you are considering. Virtual schools are accountable to the same standards and rigor as attending traditional school. Parents or other responsible adults that assume the role of the child’s adult learning coaches must also discipline themselves to execute day-to-day assignments and activities.

Public virtual schools are the same as public schools in that:

- State-certified public school teachers, administrators, and office staff are responsible for overseeing and managing student learning and academic progress while ensuring that the school meets accountability requirements while ensuring the school meets academic progress accountability requirements.
- All students must participate in state assessment tests and meet attendance requirements.
- Virtual schools are subject to federal Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) goals under *No Child Left Behind*.
- Schools must use and follow an established curriculum of core subjects that align with state standards. *Families cannot pick and choose or eliminate subjects.*
- Grades, transcripts, report cards, and parent conferences are mandatory.
- Any eligible student may enroll, regardless of income, race, academic ability, special needs, etc.
- Special education staff must identify and meet needs of special education students through IEPs and related services.
- Schools are subject to academic and fiscal audits and must report results of these audits to the state.
- Schools must strictly adhere to policies and procedures by way of discipline and due process.

What is the role of the virtual school teacher?

In a virtual school, every student is under the supervision and management of a state-certified public school teacher. This teacher works remotely and is responsible for overseeing student learning. As in the “brick and mortar” school, virtual teachers:

- Work directly with both the student and parent (learning coach) to develop an individual learning plan, provide instruction, guidance, and support as well as grade assignments.
- Track student attendance and academic progress.
- Evaluate student work.
- Develop strong partnerships with parents or responsible adults.
- Work in consultation with parents to recommend remedial or enrichment programs as well as make placement and promotion decisions.
- Communicate regularly with students via phone, e-mail, and face-to-face meetings, including academic workshops.
- Organize social and academic outings in order to promote a sense of school community.
- Participate in regular training and professional development.

What is the role of the public virtual school parent?

Strong parental involvement is, without question, extremely important to a child’s academic success. Public virtual schools expect parents to be active participants in their child’s education (as encouraged in all public schools), working in close partnership with teachers. Virtual schools encourage parents to:

- Work closely with their child as a learning coach and actively participate in daily lessons.
- Monitor their child’s academic progress.

- Communicate with teachers on a regular basis to review their child's progress learning, academic achievement, etc.
- Be actively involved in parent groups, workshops, school functions and events, and student activities.

Homeschoolers join in certain activities with some public school groups in their communities, but how do public virtual school students socialize if their only contact is with a teacher via computer?

Virtual schools offer many opportunities for students, parents, and teachers to come together (offline) in order to build friendships, lasting relationships, and a sense of school community.

Teachers conduct and encourage periodic outings—social and academic—for students and their families. Students become involved in a variety of extracurricular activities. School-sponsored activities and events might include teacher and parent workshops, community service projects, clubs, field trips, and school academic events like spelling bees, science fairs, visits to historical sites, etc.

Do public virtual schools receive the same funding as traditional schools?

Believe it or not, there are significant costs to operating a high-quality public virtual school. A 2006 report by Augenblick, Palaich & Associates on behalf of the BellSouth Foundation titled, *Costs and Funding of Virtual Schools*, concluded that "the operating costs of online programs are about the same as the operating costs of a regular brick and mortar school."

- Virtual schools receive approximately 30% less funding (on average) than traditional schools.
- Most public virtual schools do not receive local property taxes.
- Majority of costs in a public virtual school go directly to student instruction.
- Teachers are most often the highest expense category.
- Virtual schools do not have high facility costs, but the technology and curriculum costs in quality public virtual schools are much higher than in traditional schools.
- Curriculum costs vary, depending on the quality, depth, rigor, and technological sophistication of the learning program used by the public virtual school.



Resources

Barthe, Patte; Hull, Jim; St. Andrie, Rebecca. (2012). Center for Public Education National School Boards Association. *Searching for the Reality of Virtual Schools*. Retrieved September 2015 from <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Organizing-a-school/Searching-for-the-reality-of-virtual-schools-at-a-glance/Searching-for-the-reality-of-virtual-schools-full-report.pdf>

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K-12 Incorporated. (2014) *Facts about K-12 Public Virtual Schools*. Retrieved September, 2015 from <http://www.k12.com/facts-about-k12-public-virtual-schools.html>

Ross, Carrie Jean. (2014) Connections Academy. 5 Myths about Virtual School <http://www.connectionsacademy.com/blog/posts/2011-07-18/5-Myths-about-Virtual-Schools.aspx>

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