

A Parent's Guide to Choosing the Right Online Program



PROMISING PRACTICES
IN ONLINE LEARNING

**A Parent's Guide to Choosing
the Right Online Program**

Written by

John Watson and Butch Gemin, Evergreen
Education Group, and Marla Coffey

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About *Promising Practices in Online Learning*

Online learning within K-12 education is increasing access and equity by making high-quality courses and highly qualified teachers available to students. Online learning programs offer courses, academic credits and support toward a diploma. They vary in structure and may be managed by a state, district, university, charter school, not-for-profit, for-profit or other institution. Thirty states and more than half of the school districts in the United States offer online courses and services, and online learning is growing rapidly, at 30% annually. This growth is meeting demand among students, as more than 40% of high school and middle school students have expressed interest in taking an online course.

The most well established K-12 online learning programs are more than 10 years old, and many programs have between five and 10 years of operating experience. The newest programs are building on the expertise of those early adopters, as well as the experience of online learning in postsecondary institutions and the corporate world. A body of knowledge, skills and practices has been developed by individual programs, in collaboration with practitioners, researchers and policymakers. Because there are so many types of online programs (full-time, supplemental, state-led, district-level, consortium), there are also many different approaches to teaching, student support, professional development and other issues.

This series, *Promising Practices in Online Learning*, explores some of the approaches being taken by practitioners and policymakers in response to key issues in online learning in six papers:

- Blended Learning: The Convergence of Online and Face-to-Face Education
- Using Online Learning for Credit Recovery and At-Risk Students
- Management and Operations of Online Programs: Ensuring Quality and Accountability
- Socialization in Online Programs
- Funding and Policy Frameworks for Online Learning
- A Parent's Guide to Choosing the Right Online Program

The title, *Promising Practices*, deliberately avoids the term "best practices." There are too many approaches to online learning, and too many innovative teaching and learning strategies in the 21st century, for one method to be labeled "best." Instead, this series aims to discuss the issues and explore examples from some of the many online programs across the country, with a goal of illuminating some of the methods showing the most promise.

Online learning offers the advantage of personalization, allowing individualized attention and support when students need it most. It provides the very best educational opportunities to all students, regardless of their ZIP code, with highly qualified teachers delivering instruction using the Internet and a vast array of digital resources and content. Through this series of white papers, we are pleased to share the promising practices in K-12 online learning that are already under way.

A Parent's Guide to Choosing the Right Online Program

Introduction

Online learning continues to grow rapidly across the United States and the world, opening new learning opportunities for students and families. Informed estimates put the number of K-12 students in online courses at over 1 million, as parents and students are choosing online courses and schools for a variety of reasons that grow out of their individual needs. They may seek courses that otherwise would be unavailable at the local school; options to learn at the student's own pace; or accelerated coursework or a class to make up for lost credit. Students who have benefited from virtual schooling include those who have not had success in the traditional school setting, those who wish to learn in a manner that is individualized to their own learning style and pace, with medical conditions that make traditional schooling difficult, teen parents, student athletes, performers and children of military personnel who move frequently. In addition, some states now require an online learning experience as a condition for high school graduation, and even absent this requirement, online courses help prepare students for college and career. Most universities have embraced online learning and many employers use web-based technologies to teach workplace skills.

With this growing interest from students and parents, the number of online learning providers continues to grow as well, ranging from state virtual schools, to online charter schools, to the student's district of residence. These options may be public or private, full-time or supplemental, fully online or a blend of online and classroom instruction, creating a potentially bewildering array of options from which students and parents can choose.

This guide will assist parents in understanding what online learning is and in selecting the right online school, program or course.

What is online learning?

Online learning, also known as virtual or cyber schooling, is a form of distance education that uses the Internet and computer technologies to connect teachers and students and deliver curriculum. Students may also communicate online with their classmates, students in other schools around the world and experts to whom they might otherwise not have access. Online learning may take the form of a single course for a student who accesses that course while sitting in a physical school, or it may replace the physical school for most or all of a student's courses.

“I loved that I could study at my own convenience, not at a specific time. Although it required work and persistence, it was less stressful knowing I was studying on my own time, rather than a set time.”

– Idaho Digital Learning Academy student

Typical online courses may include simulations and virtual lab activities, collaboration with other students on a group project, multimedia demonstrations of real-world examples, and live sessions in which the teacher uses screen-sharing technology to facilitate interaction among students. Courses often include some print or otherwise offline materials; the proportion of instruction that takes place online is lower for younger students and higher for older students. Communication between the teacher and a parent or guardian is also an important component of instruction, particularly for younger students.

Why is online learning growing so rapidly?

Online learning brings new possibilities to K-12 education: individualization for a wide variety of learning styles and special needs; flexibility in scheduling and location; and access to learning opportunities that may be limited in the traditional classroom due to funding, geography or a lack of highly qualified teachers at local schools. For example, students can take Mandarin Chinese even if their local school only offers Spanish, learn it through a variety of activities, and participate from home or school even if there isn't a certified Chinese language teacher within a thousand miles. Because it is delivered via the Internet, online learning enables the curriculum, the classroom and the teacher to meet the student when he or she is ready to learn. It also provides an alternative for students and families who prefer the online environment for myriad personal reasons.

Students of all ability levels can use online courses to make up lost credits, accelerate their learning and explore challenging material at their own pace. Special-needs students can have lessons tailored to their strengths and take as much time as they need to master the content, and academically gifted learners can dig into subjects about which they are passionate with as much depth and intensity as they can muster.

Parents benefit as well when their children learn online. Online learning allows access to coursework and grades at any time, so parents can follow their child's progress and provide encouragement and motivation as needed, whether the child is taking one course or a full schedule online. Virtual schooling adds flexibility to the family's schedule and allows parents to spend more time with their children and participate actively in their education.

Physical schools and traditional school districts are also benefiting from online learning. Additional courses can be offered without hiring additional staff, especially in subjects suffering from a shortage of highly qualified teachers. Individualization for learning styles and differentiation for special needs are often embedded in the course content, allowing a single course to accommodate students with significantly different needs. Districts can use the technologies and methods of online learning to meet state and national technology standards and teach 21st century skills to all students using a combination of traditional classroom teaching and online curriculum, a technique known as blended learning.

How is online learning different from homeschooling?

Taking an online course or attending a full-time online school is not homeschooling. The online learning options discussed in this paper are provided by school districts, charter schools, state education agencies and other entities that are part of the public education system. Because these are public school online learning opportunities, curricula must meet state academic standards; teachers must be licensed according to state requirements and specially trained in online learning; and students must take all assessments required by federal and state laws.

How is online learning delivered?¹

In the early days of online learning, it became evident that students and teachers needed a consistent, easy-to-use Internet-based environment with which to interact with course content and each other. Software was developed specifically to support the learning experience of students and to facilitate the development of online courses by teachers and other educators.

Online courses are now delivered via a software package called a learning management system (LMS). An LMS allows instructors to manage distribution of materials, create content and assignments, and administer communications and other aspects of instruction for their courses. The software has numerous features, typically including:

- Authoring tools that make it relatively simple for educators to structure the course and course content to meet the goals of a specific curriculum, pace the rate at which content is made available to students, post content of various types and easily change content as the need arises.
- Course structure that divides content into lessons and units and that allows the posting of assignments for students by the teacher.
- Tools that allow synchronous (i.e., real-time) and asynchronous communication between the student and teacher, as well as among students. Asynchronous communication tools include email and threaded discussions. Synchronous communication tools include instant messaging, online chat and web conferencing; some programs also use phone calls between teachers and students to supplement communication via the Internet. Communication is a critical part of an online course, and many programs have specific communication requirements of teachers and students.
- Student activity tracking by the software. The LMS may also track other information including discussion board posts, emails and assignments submitted.
- Assessment tools and automatic grading capability.

¹ This section is based on The Michigan Online Learning Report, published by the Michigan Virtual University and available at <http://www.mivu.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=aKThN%2bgeKZA%3d&tabid=373>

“I think using the technology on a daily basis is giving my child an advantage educationally. When she leaves school and enters the workforce, she will have stronger computer skills.”

– Connections Academy parent

“... online courses enabled our daughter to take AP Physics B when she couldn’t take it at school due to a scheduling conflict. It was an excellent option for us!”

– Apex Learning parent

Using this guide

This guide is designed to help explain online learning options. It is written primarily for parents contemplating a full-time online school for their children, although many of the issues discussed are appropriate considerations for supplemental online courses as well. The guide describes key elements of online education programs and how they may vary from school to school. It also provides checklists to compare online schools side-by-side as you search for the best options.

To help explore online learning options from a parent’s point of view, this guide will follow an imaginary family, the Robertsons, as they consider virtual schools for their three children: Jake, a 10th grade junior hockey league player trying to balance school and his sport; Jane, a shy and gifted seventh-grader; and Buddy, a rambunctious first-grader who’s been diagnosed with mild Attention Deficit Disorder.

Understanding your online learning options and choosing among them

A basic understanding of online learning options and opportunities will help you with your research.

Types of programs

Virtual schooling covers a broad spectrum of learning opportunities. Programs range from small providers offering single courses to large, comprehensive online institutions. Some programs are fully online, while others blend web-based delivery with elements of traditional classroom learning; some are highly structured in their curriculum and teaching models, while others are flexible.

THE DEFINING DIMENSIONS OF ONLINE PROGRAMS

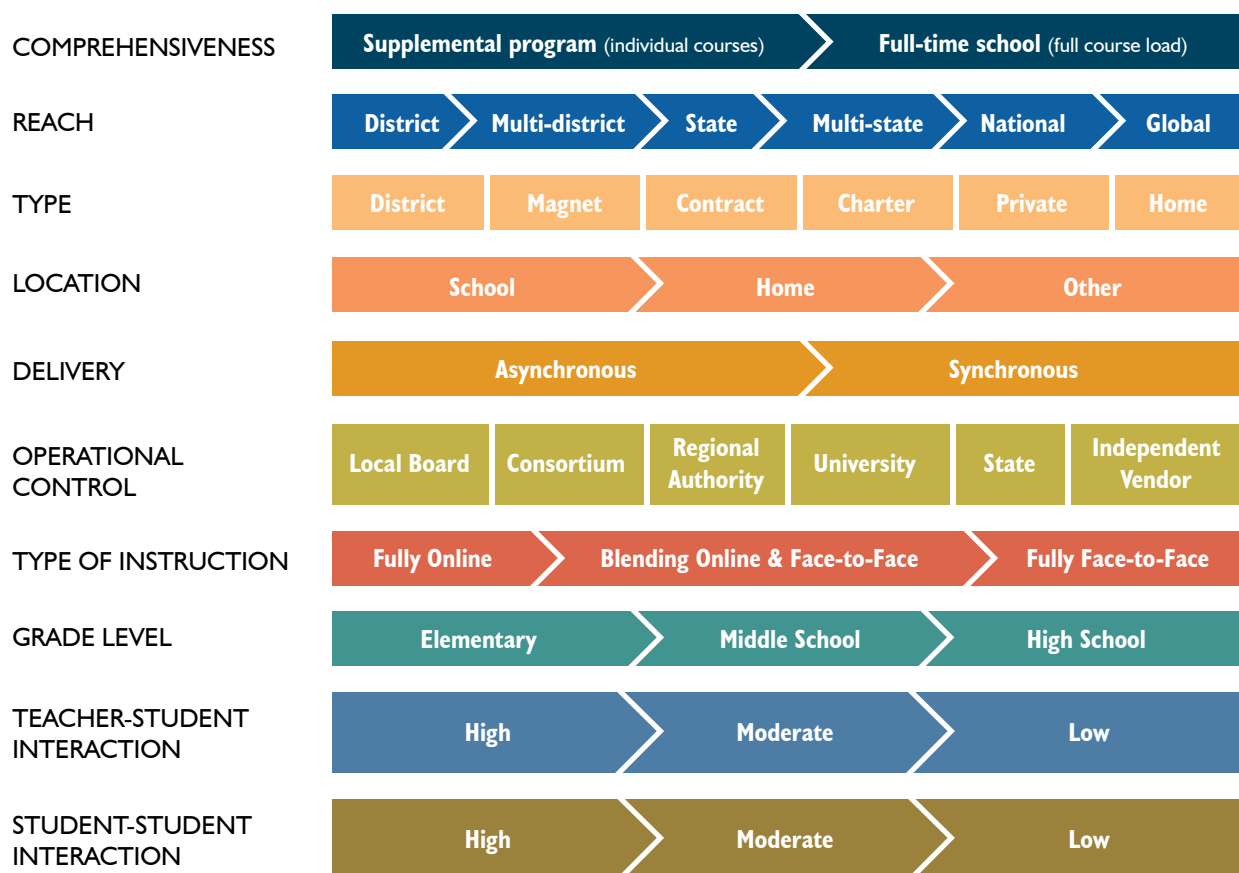


Figure 1: Defining dimensions of online programs. Figure adapted from Gregg Vanourek, *A Primer on Virtual Charter Schools: Mapping the Electronic Frontier*, Issue Brief for National Association of Charter School Authorizers, August 2006

When choosing an online school, several factors will have a significant impact on whether a program is a good fit for your family.

Supplemental or full-time

Supplemental online learning programs offer individual courses to students enrolled in a local school, and usually don't provide support services already in place at the student's regular school. Full-time online schools provide students with a complete education, including all classes, activities and support services. Full-time schools are responsible for their students' state achievement test scores and other "accountability" measures while most supplemental programs are not.

In the case of the Robertson family, Jake's regular brick-and-mortar high school offers supplemental online courses in some subjects, but the local middle and elementary schools do not. However, there are several full-time virtual schools serving various grade levels that the Robertsons could choose from instead.

Funding source

Most online students are in state- and district-led programs and online charter schools that are public school programs supported by tax dollars. In most cases, these programs are provided at no additional cost to in-state students, and they may provide textbooks, computers, printers and Internet access. Private online schools typically rely on tuition payments for their operating funds, although some are funded by benefactors or grants and may offer scholarships or other financial aid. Private online schools often require families to provide their own hardware, software and all supplies.

Fully online or blended

Many virtual schools have neither classroom facilities nor a location for students to gather because their services are provided entirely online. This meets the needs of many families, but for students who thrive on personal interaction, a blended program may be a better solution. Blended learning programs combine online learning with elements of the traditional classroom environment. This may mean that students attend a physical school but use online curriculum and instructional methods to complete their work, or that students work from home four days a week and at a learning center one day for group activities, or some other combination of online and face-to-face learning.

One of the full-time virtual schools the Robertsons are considering for Jane is a blended program in which students come into the school building two days a week and spend a third day in the community.

Credibility, effectiveness and accountability

Accreditation and transferability of credit

Accreditation is an important piece of the online learning puzzle. It is a way for schools to show that they meet high standards and are willing to allow an outside agency to evaluate their management practices, curriculum, teaching and resources in order to establish credibility. This assures parents that their child is learning in a school that is committed to accountability and continuous improvement.

Perhaps just as important, accreditation allows other institutions to feel confident in accepting the school's credits since there has been substantial effort to prove that the credit was earned from a quality program.

Schools may refuse to accept credits from their unaccredited counterparts, or from schools that are not accredited by widely recognized agencies, so parents must be vigilant in choosing a program whose credits will be accepted by other schools as well as by colleges and universities.

CHECKLIST: Getting Started With Online Learning	
	Does this school offer full-time education, supplemental courses or both?
	Does the school offer the grade levels needed for my child(ren), and does this program offer the range of courses my child needs, such as general studies, credit recovery, Advanced Placement or postsecondary programs with college credit?
	Does our local school district allow us to customize our child's education through concurrent enrollment (taking some courses at traditional school and some courses online)?
	Are there any costs associated with the program, such as fees for materials?
	Does the school provide the use of a computer, printer, monitor, microphone, keyboard, modem, etc., while the student is enrolled?
	If computers are provided, does each student enrolled get his or her own computer, or do multiple students in the household share a computer?
	Who pays for Internet access—the school, the family or the state?
	Does the school have student and parent handbooks, and can I access the handbooks before making a decision about enrolling in the school?
	Does the school provide "day in the life" information so that I can understand what a typical school day should include?
	When I have questions about school policy or my child's needs, is it possible to speak to a live person (phone or live chat) who is knowledgeable about the program and support options?
	Is coursework fully online or is there a face-to-face component? If there is a face-to-face component, is it required?
	Does the school follow a traditional nine-month schedule or enroll students year-round (also known as "open enrollment")? Can my child start at any point during the school year if necessary?
	What is the school's policy for dropping individual courses?
	Do I have to take my child to a specific site for state achievement tests? How often is this required? How far away is the closest testing site?
	Can my child work at his/her own pace, accelerating when possible and slowing down when needed? Are there any limits to how quickly he/she can work through one course and move onto the next?
	Does the school have any real-time (synchronous) components such as live chat, video conferencing, etc.? If so, is my child required to attend these events? Are these events archived to be accessed at a later time or for review?
	How many credits are required for graduation? What are other requirements for graduation (e.g., community service, senior project, etc.)?

Many states don't require public schools to be accredited by an outside accrediting body even if they operate partially or fully online, because the state itself oversees the same factors that would be evaluated by an accreditor; in these states, accredited often means "approved by the state." Virtual charter schools are public schools, too, and when their charter is evaluated and renewed by the state, it signifies the state's approval of the school's credibility in place of, or in addition to, accreditation from an outside agency.

Supplemental programs that offer individual courses may or may not be separately accredited. For example, local school district online programs typically fall under the umbrella of the district's accreditation status. If a district is meeting state standards overall and is state-accredited, so is its online program; if a district has been accredited by an outside agency, its online program may be considered accredited as well.

One of the schools the Robertsons are looking at for Jane is a national private virtual school. They have discovered that states differ widely on their accreditation requirements for private schools, and the state where the private school is located does not require outside accreditation. However, Jane may want to go to the local high school someday and will certainly want to go to college, so the Robertsons need to be especially attentive to accreditation issues, both for transferability of credit to other K-12 schools and for acceptance by colleges and universities. In both cases, the receiving school should be consulted since it will determine if the credit will be accepted.

All accrediting agencies are not equal

There is no single set of nationwide accreditation standards, and this guide does not attempt to give a simple formula for determining whether a school's accreditation is valid. There are over 200 private organizations accrediting schools in the United States, many of them reputable. However, a substantial number of these organizations have low standards, making the value of their accreditation questionable. The most widely accepted are the regional agencies shown in the chart below. Parents in search of the right online school for their child will have to investigate how their own state handles accreditation using the charts below and apply that information to the schools they are considering.

Regional accrediting agencies	
Agency	URL
Western Association of Schools and Colleges	http://www.wascweb.org/
Northwest Association of Accredited Schools	http://www.northwestaccreditation.org/
Commission on Secondary Schools of the Middle States Association of Schools and Colleges	http://www.css-msa.org/
North Central Association	http://www.ncacasi.org/
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools	http://www.sacs.org/
New England Association of Schools and Colleges	http://www.neasc.org/
Advancing Excellence in Education (AdvancED)*	http://www.advanc-ed.org/

*Advancing Excellence in Education is an accrediting agency that covers multiple regions across the United States.

The Robertsons are especially concerned about accreditation in their choice of school for Jake, who will be applying for college soon. However, they are discovering that there often is no simple answer to the question, "Is this online program accredited?"

The relatively short history of online course delivery has left some reputable agencies struggling to define accreditation procedures for online learning programs and to design a set of guidelines that schools should meet. The online delivery method is still under scrutiny in some cases, but even agencies without guidelines for online or distance education should address areas that are essential to a good education, such as teacher quality and certification, standards-based curriculum and plans for continuing improvement, and the assessment and authenticity of student work.

Transferring credit

Parents should investigate the history of transfer credits for the online program they are considering by calling the local school district and asking if online credits from the program would be recognized. Before enrolling their child, parents should also consider asking the online school for an enrollment agreement, a written assurance that course credit will be transferable. Not all schools have such agreements, but it is a policy that is growing in acceptance and an important service for parents to take advantage of when it is available.

CHECKLIST: Accreditation and Transferability of Credits	
	Is the school a state-approved public school, a state-approved charter school or a private school reviewed by an accrediting agency?
	Which agency or agencies have accredited this school? Is this agency accepted in my state?
	Where is the school in the accreditation or charter-renewal cycle right now?
	What is the school willing to share about its compliance with chartering guidelines or accreditation standards?
	Will this online school's credits be accepted by my local school district if we choose to transfer? Does the online school provide a written agreement that online credits are transferable?
	Will this online school's credits be accepted by the college, trade school or university my child is planning to attend?
	If my child is planning to enter the military, will the online school's diploma have the same credibility and acceptance as a traditional diploma?

Student athletes and NCAA certification

Student athletes must be especially careful when choosing an online school for full-time or supplemental coursework, particularly if they are planning to attend a Division I or Division II school after graduation.

For the Robertsons, this is a key question as they evaluate online programs for Jake, who wants to play college hockey.

In order to practice, compete and qualify for institutional athletic scholarships, these students must complete core courses that are approved by the NCAA Clearinghouse. Courses that are not on the approved list will not be counted when the athlete is seeking initial eligibility, so students should check the list at www.ncaaclearinghouse.net to make sure that the courses they plan to take are acceptable.

“Skiing is not [a career] you are likely going to make a living off of ... academics are important and we did not want to sacrifice academics for the skiing.”

– K¹² parent of elite student athlete

Schools wishing to have their courses placed on the approved list must be accredited by a regional accrediting agency, offer a state-recognized diploma, provide instruction for student athletes that meets or exceeds the rigor of courses offered to the general student population, and have security procedures in place that will ensure that the students who register for the course are actually the ones completing the work. In addition, each course syllabus submitted for approval must show that students are receiving a caliber of instruction that will prepare them for college-level work.

Many online schools and content providers meet the requirements for approval. Both Apex Learning and Florida Virtual School courses, for example, are accredited by the NCAA, which allows students to count the credits and GPA earned in their Potential Student Athlete (PSA) review. If students are only taking one or two courses and not a full-time program, however, parents should check with the student’s school of record to make sure credits from the online program will be accepted and entered on the student’s transcript.

How else can I determine the quality and effectiveness of an online program?

Quality is a critical factor in choosing the right school for your child. But other than accreditation, what is the best way to find real evidence of a school’s effectiveness?

A good starting point is using the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) National Standards for Quality Online Programs, which suggest a set of quality parameters.² Another way to determine a school’s effectiveness is to use your state’s department of education website to check the annual “report cards” issued on each school and district’s performance. Most states issue these report cards based on a number of factors, including test scores, attendance and improvement over previous years’ performance (known under the federal No Child Left Behind Act as Adequate Yearly Progress, or AYP). Some states also post financial reports for charter schools, which can help you determine the stability of a program. Will it still be around next year, or will financial difficulties force a mid-year closing?

Another way to verify a school’s effectiveness is to see program evaluations and satisfaction surveys. Schools should have an evaluation plan, which may include both internal and external evaluations; staff members who are intimately involved in the school’s day-to-day operations conduct internal evaluations, while someone outside the staff conducts external evaluations. These evaluations, combined with test scores, course data and surveys of key players including students, parents, teachers, administrators and others, will give a clear picture of how well the school is carrying out its mission. Some online schools post all or part of this information on their websites, but other schools may require interested parents to contact them directly.

² iNACOL, the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, is a nonprofit organization that facilitates collaboration, advocacy and research to enhance quality K-12 online teaching and learning. iNACOL’s National Standards for Quality Online Programs are available at <http://www.inacol.org/resources/nationalstandards/index.php>

Many charter schools, state-led virtual school programs and national online providers also commission satisfaction surveys among participating parents and students, often on an annual basis. These survey results typically are posted on the school's website or are available upon request.

Online programs also track completion rates (the percentage of students who complete a supplemental course or a year of full-time virtual study once they enroll) and return or retention rates (how many students re-enroll the following year). Of course, graduation rates are critical no matter what kind of high school your student attends.

"The school should be open about sharing satisfaction scores with parents as well as testimonials and references," notes Celia Stokes of K12 Inc. "Parents should understand the kind of relationship they can expect from teachers as well as the quality of the curriculum provided. Parents should not make a decision in a vacuum."

Finally, it's a good idea to talk to parents of current and former students to get an inside view of the school and how it operates. For supplemental online courses, ask your school's counselor about the online options the school provides. Full-time programs often provide the names and contact information of families who are willing to share their experiences, and you may also be able to meet parents through online support groups for families who are educating their children at home.

In choosing a program for first-grader Buddy, the Robertsons are tapping into the experiences of other families who have gone the virtual school route for their children with ADD.

CHECKLIST: Effectiveness	
	What ranking has the school earned on its annual state report card? Search the school's website or your state's department of education website for annual results.
	How does this school's report card compare to report cards for other online and traditional schools in the state? Bear in mind that an online school serving at-risk and challenged students may have lower test scores, report card rankings and graduation rates because of the type of students enrolled.
	In what ways has the school shown improvement over the last few years? Check previous years' report cards to compare.
	How do students similar to your child score on state achievement tests? This information may be found in report cards, and some states allow website users to generate their own reports based on demographic information.
	Does the online program do a satisfaction survey of students, parents, teachers and other stakeholders? If so, is this information available to parents before enrollment decisions are made?
	For schools offering a full-time program, what is the school's retention rate? What percentage of its students leave during the year? What percentage re-enroll after completing their first semester? What percentage of students graduate?
	If the school is primarily a provider of supplemental courses, what is the school's course completion rate? What percentage of students who enroll in a course successfully finish it?
	What external evidence of success is available? For example, how well do students in online Advanced Placement (AP) courses perform on the AP tests?

Governance and accountability

Online programs are organized and governed in different ways, and it is important to learn who makes significant decisions and what their qualifications are in each school you are considering.

State virtual schools are sometimes independent state agencies or even separate nonprofit organizations, with a structure different than school districts. District-led programs may be part of the larger organizational structure of the whole district, with a local school board and administrators making decisions and reporting data to the state. Or, they may be organized as an independent program.

Charter schools, while still public schools, are organized differently than traditional public schools in order to encourage innovation. Charters are less restricted to traditional methods, and this may be reflected in their management structure. Like other public schools, they usually have a school board, often referred to as a governing board, although members are typically appointed and not elected, as they are in local public districts. Parents and even students may be able to participate on the governing board or advisory committees and play an important role in decisionmaking. Charter schools are accountable not only to their own governing boards but to their authorizers — the state or other entity that approved their charter in the first place — and can be closed for nonperformance. Private schools have the least oversight from the state. They may be run by religious or philanthropic entities; they may not be required to participate in state testing or reporting; and they may hire leaders and staff based on their qualifications as well as how well they fit with the school's culture and mission.

Before enrolling your child, it is important to understand who is responsible for governing the school, how decisions are made and how problems are resolved.

The Robertsons plan to attend the next governing board meeting of a K-8 charter school they are considering for Jane and Buddy to get a better sense of how the school is run. Like them, you can use the chart below to keep notes on the school(s) your family is considering.

CHECKLIST: Governance	
	Does the school have a governing board or board of trustees? If so, how often do they meet, and how are board members chosen?
	Are parents allowed to participate in board meetings? Are any parents on the board?
	What are the administrative positions in the school? Are the administrators available to talk with parents and answer questions?
	What are the qualifications of key administrators? What educational background and work experience have prepared them for their current positions?
	What are the steps in resolving parent concerns or complaints?

Curriculum

The lessons and activities that guide student learning, and how they are presented, are very important in virtual schooling. Because the teacher and student may not be able to communicate

as immediately as in a traditional classroom, the course content must be more self-explanatory and complete. Students spend a lot of time with the curriculum, and its level of engagement directly affects the learner's motivation. Just like students in traditional classroom environments, students in virtual schools need to know what is expected of them in order to successfully complete a course, a school year and ultimately their education.

How are courses created?

While individual teachers who wish to present their content online can create courses, a team approach also serves students by combining the specialized skills of several professions, including instructional designers and graphic artists as well as teachers. This comprehensive approach allows a course to better meet a variety of learning styles. It also builds in options for students to personalize their approach to mastering the material. The team may be part of the school or district creating the online school, or courses may be created by and licensed from one of several organizations that offer courses to schools across the country.

What are standards, and why are they important?

Academic standards are guidelines that define the knowledge and skills students should gain at each grade level. While there are voluntary standards-setting bodies operating nationally, such as the Academies of Science and the National Council of Teachers of English, each state has developed its own set of binding guidelines for schools in each subject area and grade level.³ State standards are important because they guide the development of annual state achievement tests and determine if students are achieving at acceptable levels. Families should be aware of these standards and ask their potential virtual schools how they meet these standards.

Families should also be aware of the National Standards of Quality for Online Courses⁴ developed by iNACOL. These focus on how courses are designed and presented, instead of on the specific subject area information conveyed. The standards cover online course content, instructional design, technology, student assessment and course management, all of which are important to student success.

What is the right curriculum mix for your child's way of learning?

Although they all involve technology and the Internet, online courses can be quite varied in how they present material and even how much time the student spends on the computer. Some courses are media rich, involving lots of video, animation and interactivity. Others involve more text, with significant amounts of reading and writing required of each student. Some courses are purely asynchronous — students work according to their own schedule and interact with their teacher and classmates via email and message boards. Other courses are heavily or even exclusively synchronous, requiring students to log in at a particular time for live presentation of each lesson. Finally, some online programs provide a substantial amount of offline material — print textbooks, novels, workbooks, hands-on kits — while others are purely online, integrating electronic versions of textbooks, if textbooks are used at all.

³ Many states recognize the need for consistency and in May 2009, 46 states, led by the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers, launched a major effort to develop national standards for math and English. If adopted, these standards will make it much easier for families to choose from national online learning providers whose standards are as stringent as those in the student's home state.

⁴ Available at <http://www.inacol.org/resources/nationalstandards/index.php>

Because their three children have very different learning styles — Jake learns best by doing; Jane likes to read; and Buddy need lots of variety — the Robertsons are asking each virtual school a series of pointed questions, including those on the following checklist.

CHECKLIST: Curriculum	
	Is there an age-appropriate sample lesson my child can try before enrolling? Does it show how to navigate the online course, how to submit assignments, ask questions, receive messages from the teacher, etc.?
	Does the curriculum contain a wide variety of media and learning technologies, such as video clips, animation and live web conferencing with the teacher? How are they used in the lessons my child will complete?
	How often are courses reviewed for quality and updated?
	Are all of the courses delivered in the same online environment, so my child will not have to log in to multiple systems to complete his/her work?
	What academic standards are used to develop the courses, such as INACOL's National Standards of Quality for Online Courses? Are they grade-level specific?
	What percentage of my child's work is done online vs. offline? For the offline work, are print and hands-on materials provided?
	How are the courses tested and proven to be effective?
	For younger learners, how does the school teach early literacy skills (reading and writing)? How is handwriting taught to my child?
	Does the curriculum offer multiple ways to learn the same material, including visual, auditory and hands-on learning activities?
	If my child has special needs, are the courses compatible with adaptive technologies?
	Does my child have the opportunity for courses such as music, PE and art? How are these courses taught?
	Will my child have the opportunity to take Advanced Placement (AP) courses? What conditions will my child have to meet before enrolling in an AP course? Are AP courses approved through the College Board?
	Are all tests and assignments computer graded? How much feedback will my child get from the teacher on his or her work?
	How are tests/assessments given? Are they proctored? Are assessments given only at a designated location, or may tests be supervised by a parent at home?
	Are there placement tests that my child will need to take to determine grade level in the online program? May placement tests be taken before the enrollment process to see where a child would be placed? Are there placement tests for all subjects, or just math and language arts?
	How far above or below my child's "regular" grade may he/she take courses? Is it possible for my child to take a mix of courses based on her ability? For example, can a fifth-grader take sixth-grade math, fourth-grade language arts, and fifth-grade science?
	Can my child take dual enrollment courses that will allow her to earn high school and college credit at the same time? If so, how does the program work?
	What happens if my child finishes a course before the end of the year or is not finished by the end of the year? Can students work during the summer if they need additional time?

Instruction

Research⁵ has shown that teaching is at least as important in the online environment as it is in the physical classroom. Online teachers often remark upon how intimately they get to know their students as learners, even if they never meet face-to-face, and support and encouragement from the teacher are crucial factors in student success. Even excellent classroom teachers don't become great online teachers without support and training, and a school's approach to professional development for teachers ultimately reveals how much it values its relationships with students.

Teachers are expected to communicate with students, encourage participation, answer questions and give feedback on submitted work, among other tasks. In full-time online schools, teachers also make all grading, completion and promotion decisions (which typically are made by the brick-and-mortar school staff for a student taking a single online course). These efforts serve the dual purpose of providing instruction and building relationships.

iNACOL has developed National Standards for Quality Online Teaching,⁶ which are being used by leading online schools and programs.

Student support

Student support is another critical factor in the success of online students. Support services can include academic support, counseling and mentoring, tutoring and technical help. In some programs teachers handle many of these tasks; others have dedicated staff for some or all of them. In other programs, students are referred to a support website, and still others use support built into the course content and software. Most programs use some combination of all of the above.

With Jake aiming for college within a few years, the Robertsons want an online program that takes its guidance counseling responsibilities very seriously.

Both students and parents need help with computers and software, so it is important that schools provide robust tech support to relieve the frustration of technology-based interruptions to learning. Tech support can be more efficient with automated system checks, tutorials and service ticket systems for tracking requests and results.

⁵ Smith, Rosina, Clark, Tom, and Blomeyer, Robert, A Synthesis of New Research in K-12 Online Learning, Learning Point Associates/ North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, Naperville, IL, 2005

⁶ National Standards for Quality Online Teaching, iNACOL, retrieved December 22, 2009, <http://www.inacol.org/resources/nationalstandards/index.php>

"The reporting and monitoring tools help me be a more effective principal. I am able to log in and show a parent how his or her child is doing. The reports enable us to do a behavioral intervention when needed and give that student a chance to succeed."

– School principal
using Apex Learning
curriculum

CHECKLIST: Instruction	
	What standards are used to gauge the quality of instruction, and how were they developed? Does the school use iNACOL's standards for online teaching?
	What basic qualifications are required for teachers to be employed by the school?
	What percentage of teachers are state-certified in the content area they teach?
	What training/orientation is required before teachers can instruct online?
	What kind of continuing professional development is provided for teachers?
	Are teachers taught how to adapt online course content for special-needs students, and what assistance do they receive from special-education staff at the school?
	What do teachers do to establish relationships with students in the online environment? How will students connect with teachers other than submitting assignments?
	How often will students communicate with teachers? Does the program require specific contact points such as a weekly or monthly phone call? Does the school have an expected response time for teachers to respond to student and parent calls or emails?
	Will my child have one teacher for all courses, or a different teacher for each course?
	What is the availability of teachers if I have a question? Do we ask questions via phone, email, chat, etc.? What is the procedure for getting help if the teacher is unavailable, or if there is a problem with the teacher?
	How many students is each teacher responsible for at the elementary, middle school or high school levels?
	How does the school take attendance?
	Is it a problem if my child wants to work on weekends or holidays instead of a Monday through Friday schedule? Do I need to notify the school if this should be necessary?
	What is the school's policy if my family wants to take a vacation during the school year?
	How does the school handle sick days?

Special-needs students can thrive in the online environment, because there are fewer distractions, multiple ways to learn material and more time to focus. Gifted students often flourish in virtual school programs that let them go deeper, move faster and reach higher than they might in a traditional school. However, it is important to be aware of your child's specific needs, how these should be assessed and documented, and the school's responsibility for meeting them. Even though the student is learning at home, it is still the school's job to accommodate his or her needs. Additional support is needed, both for the student and his or her parents, so the school should have services in place to help.

In seeking the best virtual school to meet both Buddy's and Jane's unique learning needs, the availability of special programs is obviously a top priority for the Robertsons.

CHECKLIST: Support Services	
	Does the school offer a self-evaluation quiz before enrollment to determine my child's level of readiness for online learning?
	Are students informed of necessary technology skills before enrolling? If students need to improve their skills, does the school provide courses, tutorials or other opportunities to learn?
	Does the school provide student orientation before the first academic course so that students know what is expected of them, how to use the online course software (the learning management system) and how to address any technical support issues?
	Who do I contact for tech support? Is tech support available by phone or live chat? When is tech support available?
	Does the school have guidance counselors for elementary, middle school and high school? If so, exactly what services do they provide? Are there counseling services available if my child needs someone to talk to about personal issues?
	Is there a clear process in place for reporting problems in my child's class with other students or the teacher(s)?
	Is career or college counseling available for my child? Is tutoring available if my child needs extra help?
	Is there a library available for my child to use? How will my child access the materials available? Is it completely online, or is there a physical location to visit?
	At what point does the school intervene if there are problems with my child's participation, such as failure to log in or complete work on time? How is the parent notified?
	Does the school have an orientation program for parents? Does the school provide parent support groups?
	Will I have access to my child's work and academic progress?
	Does the school post requirements for any technology to be provided by the family (i.e. Internet access, bandwidth, hard-drive space, camera, speakers, etc.)?
	What if I have a child with identified special needs (already on an IEP)? Does the school give clear instructions on how and to whom I should indicate my child's need?
	What if I suspect my child may need special services but he or she is not yet on an IEP? What is the process for identifying special needs?
	How are special-education services, including services such as speech therapy or occupational therapy, provided for my child? Do students with special needs receive actual services, or are they simply assigned to a lower grade?
	Are there speech and language specialists available?
	Is there a gifted program my child can participate in, and how is my child's eligibility for the gifted program determined? Who runs it? Is it a full-time position? Is the person specially trained in gifted education?
	What happens if my child exhausts the curriculum for the school? For example, if a gifted freshman completes all the high school courses in two years, how would the school handle this?

Though the Robertsons consider themselves quite tech savvy, they want to be sure they won't waste precious learning hours on hold for tech support if something goes wrong with the course software or the computer.

“I was less self-conscious about sharing my work with my classmates since I didn’t see them every day at school. It was easier to give and receive constructive criticism.”

– VHS Global Consortium student

Socialization

Many parents who consider online schooling are concerned about socialization for their children. Because most full-time virtual schooling takes place in the home, socialization must be approached differently than in traditional schools, and both schools and parents must make an extra effort to provide social opportunities for students.

Before evaluating how a school provides socialization, it is important to define the term. Is it the chance to learn social skills; to socialize with other students; to learn in a community with others? All of these are elements of socialization, and in fact, online learning actually provides broader socialization than traditional school, which has substantial blocks of time in which students are either silent or unsupervised, neither of which are conducive to the development of social skills. Where face-to-face classrooms must enforce quiet obedience so that each student in the room can hear and concentrate, online learning has no such restrictions because each student is in a “classroom of one.” Where face-to-face schools have noisy, chaotic playgrounds with little supervision of social interaction, online schools have monitored discussions, chats and online clubs that are supervised for students who are accountable for their words and actions. In fact, direct instruction of online manners and etiquette is often part of the student orientation course, which is generally required before beginning classes.⁷

Recent research indicates that the social skills of students enrolled in full-time, online public schools are superior to or not significantly different than the social skills of students enrolled in traditional public schools.⁸ Dr. Jay Sivin-Kachala, an author of the study, notes, “Preliminary evidence also suggests that students enrolled in full-time, online public schools might have an advantage in their social skills development if they are highly engaged in activities outside the school day — including both activities involving peer interaction and activities not involving peer interaction.”

Online learning also fosters cooperation and interaction among diverse and geographically dispersed students. It helps build collaborative learning skills that are highly valued in the workforce. Clubs and groups based on student interests or achievements, such as National Honor Society, yearbook, newspaper, science, sports and so on are very common. Many schools even include gatherings and outings as part of their school culture, allowing students the chance to practice their interpersonal skills in group situations. One online school even conducts a Shakespeare festival that combines online and physical activities.

⁷ iNACOL Promising Practices: Socialization in Online Programs, retrieved from http://www.inacol.org/resources/promisingpractices/NACOL_PP_Socialization.pdf

⁸ *Social Skills of Mainstream Students in Full-Time, Online Public Schools: How They Compare to Traditional Public School Students*, May 2009, Interactive Educational Systems Design, Inc.

For shy learners like Jane Robertson, the chance to work with other students online rather than face-to-face is very appealing.

All of these are ways that online schools provide socialization opportunities. However, parents should distinguish between the development of social skills and the activity of personal socializing. The first allows students to learn how to act in public, while the second is the chance for students just to be kids playing with other kids. This, too, is an important part of learning, but it is a parent responsibility, not a school responsibility (although field trips sponsored by the virtual school certainly help). Parents should anticipate this and find ways to meet their child's social needs by allowing him or her to be available for play when neighborhood friends are home from school, by driving to see online friends and by joining community groups such as Scouts or sports teams.

Although the Robertsons feel that both Jake and Buddy have plenty of personal socializing time with other kids — Jake through his hockey team and Buddy through his wide network of friends and Cub scouting — they are looking into a young writers group for Jane through their local public library.

CHECKLIST: Socialization	
	What social activities does the school provide?
	Which activities will allow my child to learn social skills?
	How does the school instruct students in social skills, online etiquette and cyber safety?
	How much of the coursework allows my child to interact and collaborate with other students?
	Are there any schoolwide activities or celebrations my child can participate in, such as field trips, clubs, senior proms, graduation ceremonies?
	Do school activities, such as field trips, take place virtually or face-to-face or both?
	Are there online clubs, communities and chat rooms for students of different ages as part of the program? Who supervises them?
	Does the school use social networks for students, and if so, is it a private and monitored environment?
	Are there socializing opportunities for parents?
	What opportunities can I provide for my child simply to play with other kids?

Conclusion

As the Robertson family has discovered, it can be overwhelming to choose from the many online learning options available, but parents can greatly increase the odds of choosing the right online program for their child by first evaluating their child's learning needs and the type of program best suited for the entire family. Asking questions, comparing programs and making sure you understand what is expected of your child and your family will help you make the best decision possible.



TOLL-FREE 888.95.NACOL (888.956.2265) DIRECT 703.752.6216 FAX 703.752.6201
EMAIL info@inacol.org WEB www.inacol.org
MAIL 1934 Old Gallows Road, Suite 350 Vienna, VA 22182-4040