# How to Choose an Online School by Evaluating Your Child

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Millions of parents find themselves looking for an online – or different online– schooling option this year. If your current school isn't offering the type of online instruction that is best for your child or you are not ready to send your child back to in-person school, there are programs available. What you search for should depend in large part on what kind of student your child is and how they learn best, definitely the most important questions regardless of whether the child attends a brick and mortar or online school. Like most parents, you probably had never considered an online program until very recently, so here's how to tell what your child needs and whether a given school will work.

How did your child do online last semester?

You probably have some useful experience from last Spring's mad dash to online. How did it go? What went well for your child? What went poorly? What do you need to avoid and what went well enough to be built upon?

## THE SLAM DUNK

Your student does better online: you have won the Covid-19 Online School Lottery! This does happen, especially if the student has anxiety in school or sensory issues which make the hustle and bustle of hallways and cafeterias stressful and distracting. Your child is in a safe, familiar place and distractions are at a minimum. As a bonus, they don't have to change for gym.

The students who thrive online are not always the ones we expect. There are students, for example, who are very intense, and being online provides a buffer between them and other students, allowing more room for friendships and constructive discussions.

## THE TOUGH CALL

Your student did pretty well online, but not great and you would like them to do better this year than they did at the end of last year. For example, some students find it easier to focus online during discussions, yet then struggle to focus and work independently. They are fine with the synchronous (live classes via video conferencing) classes but are having difficulty learning independently, organizing their time, or remembering to do their work.

## MAKING THE BEST OF IT

Your student discovered that he or she is not well-suited to whatever version of online schooling they had last spring, even if they had done very well during in-person schooling. Perhaps now, as then, you have no choice: in-person schooling is either not available or not an option with which you are comfortable right now.

There are many ways to be ill-suited for some online instruction. Perhaps your child has an Autism Spectrum Disorder and seems to be fine with online schooling because they don't have to be involved in as many group situations that they find difficult to interpret, but who need that interaction to hone and keep social skills that do not come naturally. Your student is happy online but you are afraid that they will stagnate or regress in the social-emotional arena.

Another kind of student who struggles with online schooling is one who struggles with writing and was put in a program with asynchronous learning after schools closed for Covid-19. If all your child received were packets of work to do each week, and their grades were solely dependent on the worksheets and papers they produced, then those who struggle to write are at a significant disadvantage. These students do badly enough with asynchronous online that, without the proper support, they are likely to become disengaged and give up, sometimes even failing classes.

# KEY QUESTIONS

## Structure: Synchronous or Asynchronous?

As a gross generalization, the synchronous model for online school is much harder on teachers but generally much better for students--although there are some students for whom hours of live discussion is very difficult indeed. Interactive content (presentations, quizzes, games) and small group projects do help to break up work very well for some students.

Which model is best for your student? That depends on a few related questions:

Does your student do better with discussion-based school work? How many students are in each class? More than 15–20 students make natural interactive discussion more challenging and classes become more like lectures.

Does your student do better by asking questions in real-time?

Does your student do better in a "flipped classroom"? (In a traditional classroom, the teacher goes over the material and the student brings home homework. In a flipped classroom, the student goes over the material at home and the teacher provides clarification/enrichment in the classroom.)

Does your student favor working Independently or do they favor working with supervision and support?

Is your child frequently frustrated by the pacing in the classroom? Whether too fast or too slow, a pacing mismatch can make an online asynchronous program a good fit.

What are the on-camera pluses and minuses for your student?

Does your student benefit from opportunities for student collaboration and hands on remote classes?

## Student Support: Learning & Emotional Support

When considering how much and what kind of support is available, there is only one relevant question: will whatever they offer work for your student?

If your student needs support, and this program offers that support, is the support Integrated into classes and the school day? Or is it an entirely separate structure? Will your student avail themselves of the support if it isn't part of their day?

If your student needs Executive Functioning sup-

The synchronous model for online school is the one where there is a teacher teaching while students are learning. This is analogous to the business meeting that happens via video chat.

The asynchronous model for online school is the one where there is content online that the students can access. The teachers can put up the content almost whenever they like. The students can access the material almost whenever they like. This is analogous to the business presentation that you can access after a conference that you missed.

What characteristics/life situation does my child have that influenced the success or failure of online learning?

•Extroversion vs Introversion: Is your child content with alone time? Do you live in a community of close friends or will there be few opportunities for social interaction? Extroverts may need discussion-based classes if they don't have siblings.

•Do you have the time and the temperament to manage your child's online schooling? How much support is there for the students through the school or are you tech and emotional support, chief nag, and math tutor?

•Is your child addicted to screens and unable to stop looking at Youtube when they are supposed to be in class? All students slip away into a video game or pretend to have technical difficulties periodically, but if your child will avoid school consistently, then you will have to be much more involved if

port (planning, organization, and follow-through, for example), is that support integrated into the curriculum or separate (perhaps as a pull-out)? Does separate support work for your student?

If your student might require it, is scheduled time with a social worker or learning specialist available?

Is there an always-staffed support room in case your child needs a safe place to go to talk to someone without waiting for an appointment?

## Faculty and Staff Online Experience: Pre- or Post-COVID?

Ask if this online school program was born online or if it was forced online by the pandemic. This matters because there is a difference between educators with years of online experience, who were interested in online before it became mandatory, and those who are online because there is no alternative.

Switching to online instruction is neither easy nor smooth. There is a steep learning curve for most teachers and staff. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that in most cases, younger students are more comfortable with the technology, so their learning curve is much less steep. This can create real tension between teachers and students, making a difficult transition that much harder.

Teaching online is not the same as teaching in-person. Teachers who are magnetic and masterful in-person are not guaranteed to be even good online. Over time we are optimistic that most teachers will adapt, but ideally, find an online program that was born online and has a track record and relevant

## Community: Supported Peer Interactions?

There is a social context to school that we often take for granted. Your student still needs that interaction even if COVID-19 is keeping them out of in-person school. So does the program you are considering provide social opportunities for students? If so, does that social context match your student's particular needs?

Our experience gives us concrete examples of social context in online school:

- Advisors
- Online servers for fellow students only, so students are integrated despite time zones
- Real-time clubs
- Experiential and real-world experiences

Whatever your student needs or wants in the way of a community of their peers, make sure that your online school option offers it.

## Conclusion

There are many online options available: in your school district, from local private schools, from schools experienced in online education, and from online schools with asynchronous courses. The task of choosing a new kind of school for a new kind of school year can feel very daunting. Choices you never thought you would have to make are hard, but not impossible.

Assess your child and your options and ask questions. Ask if your child can shadow several classes, which also gives you the chance to watch the class out of view of the camera. Talk to your child and other relevant family members, then sleep on it. If your decision still feels good in the morning, go ahead and enroll – online programs are getting better and better rapidly!

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the program is asynchronous because it is more difficult to maintain focus without a teacher and classmates to talk to.

•Is your child an athlete or performer? Working full time to help support the family? If so, the schedule for live online classes may or may not work in an already busy schedule.

Once you have thought about the child you have and the experience you have already had, it is time to consider a framework for evaluating your online schooling options. Tip: school is not a numbers game: you need the best choice for your child, not objectively the most praised or popular choice.

So what are the key questions to ask yourself when trying to evaluate an online school option?

Structure: Synchronous or Asynchronous?

Student Support: Learning & Emotional Support?

Faculty and Staff Online Experience: Pre- or Post-COVID?

Community: Supported Peer Interactions or Unmanaged?

To some degree, any online school option has elements that are very like homeschooling. Most children can't be left totally unsupervised to interact with any online program. Even children old enough to be largely trusted probably require some check-in for the best results. Full-on homeschooling is the choice for a growing number of Americans, and many families look to online schools to provide part-time courses in advanced subjects.