

Should Public Schools Be Required to Offer Online K–12 Education?

Yes

In 1892 a group of scholars set a plan for high school education that is essentially still with us today. For most of the following century, schools provided an education that looked pretty much the same everywhere, symbolized by the screws that locked the desks to the floor in neat rows. True to Jefferson's ideals, the public paid taxes to support these monolithic schools. Students who did not fit into those neat rows had to leave to find work that did not require an education, or they sought a more fitting education elsewhere.

That thinking has changed, though, and today we do not force students into a rigid educational path

and drive away those who do not fit. Today we differentiate instruction so that no child is left behind. Individual teachers identify the learning needs of each student and make adjustments so that each may learn. School districts look beyond the classroom to provide the programs to meet the needs of all students.



John Adsit

No

I'm all for giving parents and students the option of a full-time virtual school. We want every student to have the opportunity to choose between five foreign languages and 15 Advanced Placement classes, not just the students in wealthy urban districts.

But I don't think it should be a law. States passing laws requiring districts to create virtual schools sounds to me like one of those "fleecing of America" deals. I suspect that this would be an unfunded mandate—you know, where the government demands some expensive change with one hand and reduces your operating budget with the other. I doubt that there is any public school district

in the nation that can afford to spend the millions of dollars it takes to create a K–12 online school. And the idea that districts would cooperate with each other in a joint effort to accomplish the task is out of the question. School districts simply do not work and play well with others. So, if the state legislatures do



Tom Layton

Online education is such a program. Students seek out online classes that meet the educational needs that cannot be met in their local school's classrooms. Students in small, rural communities take Advanced Placement and foreign language courses that are not offered at their schools. Migrant workers find continuity of instruction wherever they go. Students mix work and school without struggling with conflicts of time. Sick and injured students work from hospital rooms and their homes. Athletes and musicians stay with their studies despite their travels. Homeschooled students have options that were not possible before. The disaffected have another opportunity to find success.

In the past, these options were unavailable. Students had to fit into the traditional program or leave because it was simply impossible to deliver quality instruction under those circumstances.

not intend to fund an online school in each district, and the districts don't have millions of dollars in the bank that they don't already need, what is the point of the legislation?

What if states contracted with outside providers to operate the online education programs instead of expecting the public schools to foot the bill and shoulder the workload?

What contractors have already spent millions of dollars during the last decade to create K-12 online schools? It's the for-profit corporations like K12.com, Insight Schools, and Connections Academy. These companies are already operating in about 15 states and receive state tax dollars that would normally go to the local school district. Mom and dad can still have a free education for their children (including a complimentary computer) and keep their kids safe from the perceived dangers of face-to-face education. Of course, most

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Today there is no such excuse, and schools can offer high-quality instruction to any student in any place at any time. Online education opens doors to educational possibilities never before dreamed possible.

Unfortunately, although many students are taking advantage of those options, many cannot. Some state laws severely limit the number of online classes students can take. In other states, schools impose those same limits, or they refuse to provide online programs at all, even though it would be easy for them to do so. Consequently, students who need online services must leave their local schools and seek some other source, either in an expensive private school or another school district beyond their normal boundaries.

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parents would prefer the traditional school. But for every child who signs up for the online commercial version, the local school loses the tax dollars for that student. If schools lose even 10% of their student bodies, they may be forced into severe cutbacks or even face closure.

In the decade-long battle between for-profit online education companies and public school districts for the tax dollars that come with every student, corporations have had one weapon that local schools, by law, cannot wield. Corporations can, and regularly do, make campaign contributions to their favorite state legislators.

I don't know everything about the relationships between corporations and state senators, but I do know that for-profit online schools are starting

That must change.

Public education has the moral and legal obligation to meet the educational needs of the public it serves, and today that means public education must include online options for its students. It is sad that some school districts do not feel that moral obligation, but when they don't, legislatures have an obligation to step in and require it. Taxpaying citizens have the right to demand that the schools their taxes support meet the needs of their children.

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to make a lot of (taxpayer) return on their multimillion-dollar investments. According to the *Washington Business Journal* (November 2007), K12, Inc., went public with 6 million shares after generating revenue of nearly \$60 million in 3Q 2007, which was an increase of 57% from 2006. That can buy dinners for a lot of state legislators.

—In 1995, former high school teacher Tom Layton founded CyberSchool, the first public school program to offer Web-based high school credit courses. Today he is working on Russian language courses for U.S. high school students taught by Russian teachers in Siberia.

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