COVID-19 Fuels Big Enrollment Increases in Virtual Schools

A Los Angeles Unified School District student works on solving a math problem while taking an online class. During COVID-19, school districts across the country are facing increasing competition for students from virtual schools.

—Jae C. Hong/AP

By Mark Lieberman

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The numbers are striking and consistent: Online learning providers are seeing a boom in enrollment as parents seek an alternative to chaotic remote school experiences this spring.

Florida Virtual School's enrollment is up 54 percent year over year for its individual online course offerings and 64 percent for full-time programs. Public schools' online programs managed by the for-profit provider K12 Inc. have grown from 122,000 enrollments in fall 2019 to 170,000 a year later. Applications to Connections Academy, a virtual school provider owned by Pearson, are up 61 percent.

The Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School **filled up** months before it usually starts receiving the bulk of new applicants. An Oklahoma virtual charter school earlier this summer was enrolling **1,000 students a day**. Enrollment in virtual schools is also up in **Connecticut**, **Ohio**, and **Wisconsin**.

While comprehensive data likely won't be available until the fall, early indications suggest families are flocking in greater numbers than ever before to virtual schools.

Their advantage is partly one of longevity: Florida Virtual School, the nation's first statewide online public school, was established in 1997, and Connections Academy and K12 Inc., among other providers, have been offering full-time online instruction for much of the last two decades.

"A longstanding virtual provider that can describe with clarity and consistency what that experience is going to be may be able to make a stronger pitch than a district who says, 'We're still figuring this out,'" said Bree Dusseault, a practitioner-in-residence researching online learning as well as charter schools for the University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education.

Virtual providers anticipated an onslaught of new enrollments this fall, and planned accordingly. Florida Virtual School hired 320 new instructors this summer and upgraded its servers to expand capacity. The school also extended its July enrollment deadline by one week to give families more time to decide where students will learn this school year.

As a state-run public institution that also licenses content and expertise to districts nationwide, Florida Virtual School (FLVS) is bolstering districts' online efforts as much as serving as an alternative to them. "We do feel a responsibility as the online leader in education to be able to help other districts that may

not have had the same experience," said Courtney Calfee, senior director of partner services for the **FLVS Global School**, which serves students worldwide.

Other public programs have grown significantly after slow starts prior to the pandemic. Gaston County Schools in North Carolina opened a virtual school in 2017 and had enrolled 100 students within two years. In the last month, the school has increased its enrollment to 5,300 students—more than 1 in 6 of the district's total number of students, the **Gaston Gazette reported**.

Enrollment in the private schools run by K12 Inc., as well as districts' interest in contracting with the company, have also increased in recent months, according to Jeanna Pignatiello, the company's senior vice president and chief academic officer.

Pearson has also ramped up its efforts to partner with districts on providing its online expertise. Nik Osborne, an executive at the company since 2016, in June entered a new role as general manager of district partnerships.

Some of the company's partner districts are focusing on short-term solutions to the immediate need for online instruction, while others—mostly small or medium-sized districts—are essentially hiring Pearson's online teachers for students who will be learning remotely for the foreseeable future.

Weighing Benefits and Shortcomings

Established virtual school providers point to their comprehensive learning management systems, experienced teachers, and emphasis on live teaching as examples of the groundwork they've laid for years to keep students engaged long-term without being in a physical school building. Osborne said Pearson's programs also have a track record of providing club and extracurricular opportunities for students that might not be priorities for schools still refining the basics of remote instruction.

But while their robust online offerings may have enticed some public school families, virtual charters in particular have long been criticized for a track record of subpar academic outcomes, according to research published by **Education Week**, **Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes**, and **Mathematica**.

Caution may be in order when choosing an alternative school option for students. "There are parents saying to themselves, 'What is better for me? Do I go virtual with a school that has no experience with online learning, or do I go virtual with a school that has built an infrastructure and does have some experience?'" said Debbie Veney, senior vice president of communications and marketing at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

Though they've dealt with the same laptop delays and internet connectivity issues that have plagued public schools' remote learning efforts since March, leaders of these schools say the virtual school year is off to a strong start.

Shortly before the pandemic, several states and cities were cracking down on virtual charter providers. Chicago had **shut down** the city's only virtual charter school, and Pennsylvania's governor in October ordered the **closure of a low-performing virtual school** and vowed to strengthen accountability for virtual charters.

But the pandemic has given some virtual charters a new lease on life.

Nevada's charter school board voted in March to **close the Connections Academy's virtual middle and high schools** there after they received low performance ratings, but in May partially reversed that decision and allowed the high school to stay open for three more years. Rebecca Feiden, executive director of the state's charter school authority, said the importance of consistency for students during the pandemic factored into the reversal, the Nevada Current **reported**.

However, some virtual school expansion plans have not succeeded. For instance, several state school board members and the lieutenant governor of North Carolina this summer **pushed to increase** the enrollment cap for the state's two virtual school programs by 3,800 students. But a majority of the board voted against the proposal, arguing that it would lead to money lost for public school districts and place thousands more students in a program that had received a "D" grade from the state.

Disputes Over Funding for Virtual Charters

As state and local budgets have tightened due to the ongoing economic downturn, disputes over funding for virtual charters have broken out in several states. A Pennsylvania state lawmaker **in July announced a planned bill** that would allocate this school year's funding for virtual charter schools based on their enrollment on July 1.

"Cyber charter schools do not face the same financial needs that Public-School Districts face to commence in-person learning in an area of the novel coronavirus," wrote State Representative Stephen McCarter.

Virtual schools have also petitioned lawmakers in Oregon to overturn a law that currently allows districts to deny new enrollments in virtual schools if more than 3 percent of the student population in that district enrolls in an out-of-district virtual charter school option. At least 10 districts in the state meet that threshold, the **Statesman Journal reported**.

Charter advocates argue that funding should follow students wherever they choose to attend school. But the mechanisms to allocate per-pupil funding for districts weren't designed for the current emergency context of families scrambling to find the best among a sea of imperfect options, said Bryan Mann, an assistant professor of education at the University of Kansas.

Mann believes public school districts should be reimbursed for students who migrate elsewhere in search of better remote learning experiences in the short term. Pennsylvania previously **reimbursed school districts** for funding lost when students opted for charter schools.

"If these funding mechanisms designed with a school year in mind, or for kids permanently leaving the district, are now what we're using for this temporary situation, it could really hurt districts in ways that could inhibit their recovery efforts on the back end," Mann said.

'Totally Unprecedented Setting'

Dusseault from the University of Washington says she's seen a handful of districts posting on their websites that enrollment remains open as numbers appear to be down. But she doesn't want to definitively declare that virtual schools have captured an onslaught of public school departures. "It's really possible that the districts that are really being proactive are more effective at staving off virtual charter competition and retaining students," she said.

Most public school districts are offering students a full-time virtual option of some kind, whether managed in-house or by an outside provider, according to **research from Dusseault's organization**. While few traditional school districts have offered online learning to the extent that's currently necessary, many have previously offered online options for credit recovery, student athletes, and independent study, Mann said. Some have online offerings that resemble or even replicate what students would experience in virtual charters.

The demographics of new cyber charter students aren't yet known, but Mann's academic research in Pennsylvania offers some clues. Districts that saw the largest number of students leaving for cyber charters tended to be ones at a financial disadvantage and with a large population of adults with low levels of educational attainment, he said.

"Those students you would expect would need the most support, the most in-person interaction, when they would leave, they're the ones who struggle the most in an online setting," Mann said.

It's still too early to identify trends among families opting for virtual schools, or whether parents are factoring in virtual charters' troubling track record around academic achievement when making those decisions.

Parents are no longer deciding between a district's traditional offerings and a virtual school alternative, Dusseault said: "They are comparing it to a district in a totally unprecedented setting."