

Parents, get these questions answered before enrolling your child in an online charter school

In these uncertain times, parents are struggling with how to approach the next school year. Some parents are considering privately operated online or virtual charter schools. Because there is often contradictory information about the strengths and weaknesses of online charter schools, here are questions that parents can ask and get answered to help them make informed decisions about their child's future.

General questions:

- How does online learning operate? Does my child sit in front of a screen all day? Are they watching mass-produced lectures?
- What is the equivalent of discussion, play, or human interaction?
- How do we know if the student is actually in class or just logged in and engaged on a different screen?

Questions about teachers:

- For elementary school students: Will my child have a single teacher for all subjects who has enough contact so they can get to know my child as an individual?
- Will the teacher be local, someone who might know my child or their environment and who has the ability to maintain an ongoing relationship after the crisis is over?
- Will the teacher be fully certified, including certification in the specific subject matter they'll be teaching?
- What is the average years of experience of the teachers my child is likely to be taught by?
- Have teachers and paraprofessionals been provided professional development in how to provide remote instruction, including best practices for students with disabilities or other learning challenges?
- Are teachers and paraprofessionals equipped to provide trauma-informed instruction appropriate for students whose families have experienced medical or financial hardship?
- Do teachers represent the demographics of the students they teach?
- Do teachers have sufficient job protections so that they can advocate for students without fear of penalty from administrators?

Questions about classes:

- Will my child be in a class with other children from their neighborhood, who will likely be in their local school when the crisis is over and they return to a regular school?
- How many hours per week will my child have direct personal, real-time communication with their teacher? During that period, how many other children will also be in the "class" with access to the same teacher?
- What is the average class size, i.e., the number of students that my child's teacher will be responsible for?

Questions about digital tools:

- What if the application or curricular product the school is using turns out to not be suited for my child—can I work with the teacher or principal to identify alternative programs or materials?
- If I do not have the hardware, software, or internet connectivity needed to access this program, what is the plan to overcome that deficit?
- What guarantees are there that my family and child are adequately protected so that data cannot be stolen and/or sold by any of the vendors?

Questions about special education:

- How does the school intend to provide services and accommodations required by my child's individualized education program (IEP) or Section 504 plan?

Questions about parental involvement:

- How much work do I have to do to ensure my child's success? Is this like regular school (except online), where I may simply ask my child about homework or what they learned but am not otherwise expected to facilitate their learning? Or do I need to serve as a "coach" or "tutor" in order for my child to successfully complete these courses?
- Is there an elected school board?
- Is there a PTO, and if so, what power do parents have? If a large group of parents believe a teacher or principal is failing to serve their children, what can they do about this?