

Frequently asked questions about online charter schools

Based on public testimony by Dr. Gordon Lafer to the Oregon Legislative Assembly
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What is the academic track record of online charter schools?

- Researchers have long found that the [single lowest-performing category](#) of schools are charter schools operated by for-profit companies, such as K12 Inc. and Connections Academy.
- In one study, online charter students lost an average of [180 days of learning](#) in math compared to similar students attending traditional public schools, leading one analyst to conclude that [“it is literally as if the kid did not go to school for an entire year.”](#)

Do online charter schools perform poorly because they educate different students?

- No. The above studies compared demographically similar types of students.

What happens when students transfer from traditional public schools to online charter schools?

- A peer-reviewed [study](#) published in March 2020 found that, for students who transferred to online charter schools, “the impact of attending a virtual charter on student achievement [in reading and math] is uniformly and profoundly negative.”

How do online charter schools compare with online programs run by school districts?

- District programs are much more effective. In 2017-18, [56 percent](#) of online schools operated by public school districts achieved acceptable state performance ratings, versus only 29 percent of for-profit online charter schools.
- District programs are also cheaper. A 2018 [survey](#) of school administrators found that school districts were able to offer a “fully-functioning cyber school option for their students” for \$5,000 per student less than what was being paid to online charter schools.

Do online charter schools serve all students equally?

- Online charter schools typically enroll a smaller percentage of students with special needs than do traditional public schools—and even within this group, enrollment is tilted away from students with serious needs towards those with more mild needs, such as ADHD or dyslexia. When the most expensive-to-serve students are concentrated in district-run schools, this creates added fiscal shortfalls for public school districts.

What is appropriate per-pupil funding for an online charter?

- Per-pupil funding for traditional public schools is based roughly on what it costs to operate a brick-and-mortar school. But funding for online charter schools is also based on the rough cost of operating a brick-and-mortar school, even though the schools’ expenses are dramatically lower. Per-pupil funding should reflect the actual cost of operating an online charter school.

Are there privacy issues with online charter schools?

- Edtech companies often [collect far more information on kids](#) than is necessary and store this information indefinitely.
- A 2018 study found that [only 10 percent](#) of more than 100 edtech applications and services met minimum criteria for transparency and quality in their privacy policies.

I've heard about scandals in the online charter school industry, what's that about?

- The industry has a track record of poor performance and even fraud.
- In May 2019, 11 people were indicted in California in connection with a virtual charter school scam that defrauded the state of [more than \\$50 million](#) in education funds.
- A 2019 NPR investigation found that if students at a Washington K12 Inc. online charter school were counted in the surrounding school district, the district's graduation rate would drop by about [40 percentage points](#).
- In 2018, Ohio regulators fined the Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow (ECOT) after they discovered the online charter school could show that just [6,300 of their supposed 15,300-strong student body](#) were actively learning and attending school.
- In 2016, K12 Inc. settled a [\\$168.5 million](#) lawsuit with the state of California related to false claims, false advertising, and breaking unfair business practices laws.
- In 2012, the Florida Center for Investigative Reporting found that K12 Inc. teachers may be charged with instructing [as many as 275 pupils](#) concurrently.
- According to a 2012 NPR investigation, K12 Inc. was taking an estimated [77 cents of every taxpayer dollar](#) the Colorado Virtual School was receiving.