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Why online education can't replace brick-and-mortar K-12 schooling

Coronavirus has put the future of K-12 public education in question. School districts, teachers, and staff are mobilizing to provide students with online learning, emotional care, meals, and other support. Meanwhile, online education companies—with the ideological backing of right-wing think tanks—are aiming to further privatize public education and profit off of students.

It goes without saying that online education can't replace the in-person teaching, social interaction, and—for many students—calories that a brick-and-mortar public school provides. However, that isn't stopping some from arguing that much if not all of K-12 education should stay online after the crisis.

In the Public Interest has gathered the following research on online education, revealing a track record of **poor academic performance, lack of equity and access,** and **privacy concerns.**

Virtual Schools in the U.S. (2019)
A meta-analysis by the National Education Policy Center of 35 studies at both the national and state levels found that, on average, students perform worse academically in the online setting. In 2017-18, on average, 50.1 percent of virtual high school students graduated within four years, compared with 84 percent of high school students nationally.

Student Enrollment Patterns and Achievement in Ohio's Online Charter Schools (2017)
A study by researchers from New York University and the RAND Corporation of nearly 1.7 million Ohio students found that online course taking is less effective academically than brick-and-mortar schooling.

Online Learning, Offline Outcomes: Online Course Taking and High School Student Performance (2019)
A study by researchers at multiple U.S. universities of virtual course taking in Florida found that first-time course takers experienced decreases in the likelihood of taking and passing follow-on courses and in graduation readiness.

The Struggle to Pass Algebra: Online vs. Face-to-Face Credit Recovery for At-Risk Urban Students (2015)
An American Institutes for Research study of Chicago ninth graders found that credit-recovery success rates and algebra test scores were lower in the online setting.

Virtual Illusion: Comparing Student Achievement and Teacher and Classroom Characteristics in Online and Brick-and-Mortar Charter Schools (2020)
A study by researchers from the University of Notre Dame found that students who switched to virtual charter schools experienced large, negative effects on mathematics and

English/language arts achievement that persisted over time and that these effects could not be explained by observed teacher or classroom characteristics.

Associations Between Screen Use and Child Language Skills (2019)
A meta-analysis in the Journal of the American Medical Association found that while high-quality educational screen content is associated with better language skills in young children, more overall time on screens each day, regardless of its quality, is linked to lower language development.

Teacher Perceptions of Parent Engagement at a Cyber High School (2016)
A study by a researcher at George Mason University found that teachers at a Utah cyber charter school commonly found that parents lacked the knowledge and skills to provide students with the necessary instructional support, especially in math and science courses.

Virtual Public Education in California (2015)
A report by In the Public Interest found, among other performance issues, that the graduation rate at a California virtual high school managed by the for-profit company K12 Inc. has consistently been a fraction of the rate in the state overall.

The Digital Divide and Educational Equity (2018)
A study by ACT's Center for Equity in Learning found that 14 percent of students have access to only one device at home, and 85 percent of those students are classified as "underserved"—defined in the report as economically disadvantaged, first-generation college students, and/or people of color.

Spying on Students: School-Issued Devices and Student Privacy (2017)
A study by the Electronic Frontier Foundation found that educational technology services often collect far more information on kids than is necessary and store this information indefinitely.

State of Ed-Tech Privacy Report (2018)
A study by Common Sense found that only 10 percent of the more than 100 edtech applications and services evaluated by the organization met minimum criteria for transparency and quality in their privacy policies.