

THINKING OUTSIDE THE BUILDING: ONLINE EDUCATION

RESPONSIBLE CITIZEN SUMMARY

Background

- Online schools are an increasingly popular choice for parents in Utah and nationwide who are seeking an education that is personalized for their child.
- Public education in Utah is at a crossroads. Those administering the system can either choose to adopt innovations like online education, or get left behind by them.

What's at stake?

- The ability of Utah parents to have greater influence over the education of their children.
- The potential benefits to children, parents, and teachers from the expansion of online learning.
- The ability of the public school system to provide a quality, personalized education to children in Utah.

What's next?

- The Utah State Legislature should require school districts to inform parents about all the online learning options available to them, including online public charter schools.
- Lawmakers and public education officials should enact other policies that encourage the growth of online learning.

Responsible *Citizenship*[™]

Online learning is an innovative way to personalize education for children. There are a number of potential benefits for children, parents, and teachers alike.

PERSONALIZING PUBLIC EDUCATION

Ben Cleverly, a Washington County second grader with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), struggled academically.¹ While attending a traditional public school, his hyperactivity and frustrations created problems with his teachers. They punished Ben by holding him in for recess and recommended that he go to resource classes. Ben's grades suffered, he was bullied by other children, he was often in trouble, and he "started to think of himself as a bad boy."

Then Ben's parents enrolled him in Washington Online, an online public elementary school.

Since entering this virtual school, Ben has been engaged in learning in ways never before possible and is literally "speeding through his reading and math lessons." Ben excels with the dynamic content, hands-on activities, and games for learning used by Washington Online. And he no longer worries about bullies. Ben is happy and academically successful. "It makes for a good school day," Ben says. His circumstances required a customized approach and, for Ben, online learning was a "perfect fit."

Yet children in Ben's situation are not the only students who benefit from the personalized experience of online education.

Hannah James is a student taking online classes in the sixth grade.² Her typical school day is structured, but flexible and self-driven. She begins school at 9 a.m., and shortly thereafter she is hard at work on math. At 10:45 a.m., she moves on to literature, taking the time she needs to understand the material, which is not the same every day. Sometimes she takes 45 minutes to read a book, sometimes she takes a whole day.

Hannah enjoys moving at her own pace and is engaged in learning. "I don't have to wait for other kids in my courses. I can work ahead and work a lot faster, so I have more free time to do other stuff." Hannah spends her free time competing on two swim teams, playing the flute for an hour each day, and participating in the Center for Talented Youth program run by Johns Hopkins University.

Her online school uses a range of content – with some textbooks as well as many interactive lessons for subjects like science. The online school also keeps records of all her work, gives deadlines for turning in assignments, and requires her to include a written summary reflecting on what she has done. Hannah is working with a teacher who is available to her when she has questions.

For Hannah, like Ben, online education is more flexible, personalized, and meets her needs perfectly.

THE DECISION TO INNOVATE

In a world with such innovative, personalized ways of educating children using technology, the public education system in Utah is at a crossroads. Those administering the system could choose to keep trying to force students to fit into the mold of a centralized, often in-

flexible, one-size-fits-all government bureaucracy. Alternatively, they could encourage innovative methods like online learning so that public education in Utah creates new opportunities that adapt to the needs of parents and children.

This decision is a momentous one with significant consequences. To see this, one need only examine Utah's recent public school enrollment trends. Most parents of new students in Utah are seeking options and choosing to send their children to public charter schools, which have an increased ability to innovate to meet children's needs.

The growth in charter school enrollment is significant. For instance, between 2008 and 2009, the number of new students opting for one of Utah's 73 public charter schools was 24 percent greater than the number of new students choosing to enroll in the over 900 district-run public schools *combined*.³ That difference is projected to skyrocket to 168 percent between 2009 and 2010.⁴

Is it just a coincidence that a growing number of Utah parents are choosing to send their children to schools that can customize their approach? It is possible, but not likely.

To underscore this point, even organizations that fiercely oppose changes to the public education system, like the teachers' unions, are recognizing the need to create personalized options. The National Education Association (NEA) offers a full range of professional development programs for online learning, which provide flexibility to meet teachers' individual needs. In the words of a former staff member of the NEA, "I think education is going to have to flex and re-

spond to the world that [children live] in versus the educational experience of a 50-year-old policy maker.”⁵

The implication is that if Utah’s system of public education does not get on board the innovation train, they risk getting left behind (or run over) by it. As the former NEA staffer put it, “we will have to incorporate online learning into our general approach to education or today’s students will find schooling irrelevant with the realities of the rest of their lives.” Both Hannah James and Ben Cleverly would probably agree.

UTAH’S ONLINE PUBLIC EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

Utah currently has a number of innovative online public schools. For example, there are public charter schools using online learning to expand options, such as Utah Virtual Academy (K-12) and Open High School of Utah (9-12). With the growth in student demand for online learning, two other schools will soon open – Aspire Online Charter School and Utah Connections Academy. Other online learning programs are managed by school districts, including Washington Online (K-8), Davis Online-Oasis (K-12), Alpine Online (K-8), and Uintah Online Navigators (K-8). To help serve high school students who want to take supplemental online courses, the Utah State Office of Education operates the Utah Electronic High School (9-12).

From these examples, it is clear that some online public schools are full-time only, while others are part-time. Full-time schools include public charter schools, which by law cannot enroll a student that is enrolled in another public school.⁶ Students in district-run online programs are not subject to this law and can, with approval, dual enroll at a brick-and-mortar public school.⁷

Students at Utah Electronic High School (UEHS), on the other hand, are primarily part-time students trying to accelerate graduation or seeking to retake failed classes online, and UEHS offers a diploma only in limited circumstances.⁸

In 2009, nearly 3,000 children attended Utah’s full-time online schools.⁹ Additionally, UEHS serves nearly one third of all high school-aged children in Utah.¹⁰ If current trends hold, however, the number of students in online schools will increase significantly in coming years. At Utah Virtual Academy, for example, enrollment nearly tripled in a single year, from 441 students in 2008 to 1,297 students in 2009.¹¹ Expansion of online schools in Utah mirrors national trends toward significant growth in online schools.

Nationally, there are more than 1,000,000 students enrolled in K-12 online education.¹² The market for K-12 online learning programs is growing at a rate of 30 percent per year.¹³ Given the growing popularity of online learning, it is imperative that education officials and policymakers gain an understanding of the virtual approach to public education.

WHAT IS ONLINE EDUCATION?

“Any time, any place, any path, any pace.”

– *Florida Virtual School motto*¹⁴

To understand what online education is, it must first be clear what it is not. It is NOT simply putting books, assignments, and tests online and then wishing students and parents the best of luck. Online education certainly involves a host of online materials, but online public schools still have teachers and administrators who dedicate themselves to helping children learn,

though often without the requirement of a brick-and-mortar classroom.

Quality online education requires people – highly effective teachers and administrators – and new pedagogical approaches that enable customization and personalization of learning that better fits the student’s individual needs. Online learning uses technology to help with the personalization of learning. It increases student access to high-quality content and increases interactions between students and teachers.

Online learning involves regular teacher-parent-child interaction and communication, typically via email, instant messaging, video conferencing, or telephone. School policy generally dictates the actual frequency of contact. Both Washington Online and Davis Online-Oasis, for instance, require weekly contact between teachers and parents.¹⁵

Online learning can happen with a teacher instructing students online in real time (synchronous learning). An example of this would be an online video conference with a teacher giving a lesson to his or her students. Online learning can also occur without a teacher present (asynchronous learning). Examples of this latter method include using a previously-recorded lesson or other online activities. Even with an asynchronous approach, online schools have teachers that are regularly available to help answer students’ questions and assist children in mastering the material.

The pacing of online learning can also vary. It can be completely self-paced like independent study, or it can rely upon a more rigid schedule similar to a traditional public school. And though online learning tends to be focused in the home, it can also be presented in con-

junction with a physical classroom component (blended or hybrid learning). For example, in a blended online learning model, a student could take math, reading, and science at home online and P.E., orchestra, and art in a physical classroom. Whatever the system of delivery, the goal of the diversity of methods in online education is to provide the “flexibility students need to succeed.”¹⁶

Online learning often includes many of the same activities that occur in brick-and-mortar schools, such as collaborative student-group work, hands-on experiments or projects, in-person field trips with other students, and extracurricular activities. Utah Virtual Academy, for instance, hosts field trips and social gatherings for online-school families and staff in a given geographical area.¹⁷ Open High School organizes school-wide “service learning” activities where students get together and give service to their local communities.¹⁸ There is an increase in student-student interaction in most online-education settings.

As in a traditional brick-and-mortar school, the teacher’s role in a virtual school or online learning program is to ensure that the student receives the instruction they need and assess the child’s learning. But the form this role takes in an online school can vary from that of a traditional school teacher.

For example, in some of Utah’s K-8 online public charter schools and district-run programs, a child learns at home and the teacher advises the child’s “learning coach” (a parent or a responsible adult) who facilitates and monitors the child’s education.¹⁹ In such virtual schools, teachers are contacted by the student directly when needed and provide direct interventions. At UEHS, teachers mentor students as they move through the material.²⁰

Further, teachers are not the sole source of content in online schools as they are in many brick-and-mortar schools. Students have access to more learning resources and support to help them individualize instruction. They also receive one-on-one help as they need additional instruction. However, there are times when an online teacher may also give lessons online in real time to a whole “virtual classroom” of students, much as they would in a brick-and-mortar school.

Although the models of teaching and delivery that virtual schools adopt are diverse, they are student-centered and strive to provide a quality, personalized learning experience for every child. Often this means that the curriculum is tailored to meet children’s unique needs.²¹ If a child struggles with a particular subject, then the teacher or learning coach is able to respond by altering the presentation of the curriculum or the child’s schedule to help the child with that subject. Similarly, a learning coach can alter a child’s education when he or she excels or finds great interest in a given subject, so that the child can delve deeper into subjects of interest than they would otherwise.

The flexibility of online education allows adaptations that better meet the needs of children in unique circumstances. Children who must remain at home due to serious illness or injury, teenage mothers who work to support a child, dropouts, elite athletes, performing artists, and even incarcerated students can receive a quality educational experience via online education.

This is not to say that full-time online learning will work for everyone. Some children will need or prefer to learn primarily in a physical classroom through face-to-face interaction with a teacher. In other words, just as the state should not force children into a centralized, imper-

sonal, bureaucratic system, it should not force children into an online system not well-suited to their needs.

Still, the benefits of offering a personalized education through online learning merit the attention of education officials and policymakers. A wide variety of benefits exist, but a dozen of them are particularly noteworthy.

BENEFITS OF ONLINE EDUCATION

1. Empowering Parents

“Decades of research show that when parents are involved students have: higher grades, test scores, and graduation rates, better school attendance, increased motivation...” and the list goes on and on.²² Online education stimulates parental involvement using a time-tested method that home schooling has shown to be successful: empowering parents.

Online education empowers parents by giving them real responsibility for and influence upon the academic experience of their children. In most of Utah’s virtual schools, parents are charged with ensuring that their children are doing their school work and making adequate progress. In the Utah Virtual Academy, parents’ responsibilities extend to working with a teacher to “modify the pace and schedule” of their children’s education.²³

Further, “the most effective forms of parent involvement are those ... which engage parents working with their children on learning activities at home.”²⁴ Engaging parents in learning activities in the home is exactly what online learning does. It does so by working with parents on their own terms, bringing educational activities to their homes and usually on their schedule. In

contrast, traditional public schools often struggle to increase parental involvement by asking parents to fulfill the needs of the school, on the schedule of the school.

2. Spurring Innovation

The head of a national online school organization recently wrote that “we are seeing how important online learning is as an innovation...as a strategy that is challenging funding models and policies in government structures to better support students.”²⁵ This capacity of online schools to serve as incubators of innovation and spur further improvements is one of the greatest benefits of online education.

Innovations originating in online schools stand to benefit not only online schools but the entire system of public education. For instance, Open High School of Utah is aspiring to create an “open-curriculum” that any other school in the state can modify and use free of charge.²⁶ As noted previously, many of Utah’s online public schools are finding innovative ways to promote parental involvement in their children’s education. A few online schools in Wisconsin have put forward an innovative model of administration by creating virtual schools that actually share the same principal, lowering the cost of administration to each school.²⁷

If these or other innovations in online schools prove successful, brick-and-mortar public schools will have the opportunity to adapt them to their own circumstances. As education officials follow these paths of change, they will improve both the quality and the efficiency of the rest of the public school system, to the benefit of every child in Utah.

3. Putting Students in the Driver’s Seat

Online education provides the opportunity for students to guide their own education. “That’s the beauty of virtual education,” says an online student in Payson, “I get to decide when and where I want to do my school work.”²⁸

Students whose lessons and assignments are accessible online can do their work whenever is best for them. A child living on a farm can do his or her school work in the afternoon after a morning full of farm chores. A single mother who has an afternoon job to provide for her infant can do her school work in the mornings and evenings.

A child is also not tied down to one physical location in an online school, which means school is accessible wherever an Internet connection is available. Elite athletes or artists who travel extensively can “attend” school wherever they are. A child that splits time between divorced parents can “attend” school at either his or her mother’s or father’s home via the Internet.

Last but not least, online learning allows the child to determine the pace and depth of his or her learning. If a child excels in a given subject, he or she can move through the material at an accelerated pace without 20 other children holding him or her back. If a child wants to go deeper into a particular subject of interest, he or she can change his or her school schedule to do so, rather than trying to fit in the extra study time after the regular business hours of a traditional school.

4. Turning Good Teachers into Excellent Teachers

An online teacher will obviously face a different set of circumstances and challenges than a teacher in a physical classroom. Nevertheless, teachers have found that the online experience boosts their pedagogical skills, even improving their teaching abilities in a traditional setting.

A 2005 survey of over 450 teachers involved in online and face-to-face teaching found that 75 percent of those responding reported that their online-teaching experience improved their face-to-face teaching ability.²⁹ Commonly-reported improvements in teaching practice included an increase in student participation, more emphasis on independent learning, and improvement in the ability of the teacher to ask the right questions of their students.

Teachers in an online setting can also focus more on what they do best: teaching children. In an online setting, for example, it is mainly a parent or another responsible adult that is in charge of student discipline. Rather than requiring a teacher to spend a significant amount of time learning how to babysit more than 20 children at once, an online school allows teachers to spend more time helping students learn and improving their skills through professional development.

Online schools also allow for innovative new methods of professional development and teacher evaluation. Concerning evaluation, one online-school consultant put it this way:

Online programs often evaluate their teachers on more dimensions than most physical schools. This is possible in part because of the...

technology, which captures teacher-student interactions, class discussions, and course content in a way that is not possible in a traditional classroom.³⁰

With an electronic record of each aspect of teaching – every lesson and every teacher-student and teacher-parent interaction – teacher evaluations can rise to new levels of depth and breadth. Further, good examples of teaching, when recorded electronically, can be observed by and distributed to other teachers to help them improve. The potential of online education to improve both professional development and teacher evaluation, and the subsequent effect on teacher quality, is immense.

5. Building Social Skills, Avoiding Social Problems

Children in online schools tend to excel socially. This perhaps surprising statement is supported by a recent study of the social skills and problem behaviors of public school students enrolled in full-time online schools. The researchers concluded that online students “are either superior to or not significantly different than students enrolled in traditional public schools with respect to their socialization.”³¹ They attribute these results to the high level of participation in social activities outside of school, including Boy/Girl Scouts, church groups, team sports, and playing with friends at their friends’ homes.

Further, online schools avoid some of the traditional social problems created by brick-and-mortar public schools, such as bullying because of a child’s physical size and appearance or because a child learns at a slower pace than others do. This social problem is significant, as surveys show that “as many as half of all children

are bullied at some time during their school years, and at least 10% are bullied on a regular basis.”³²

With online education, physical size and appearance do not matter and are often unknown. Further, the individualized nature of online learning means that children will not become socially stigmatized or marginalized if they struggle with certain material because the only people that will know are the child, the parents, and the child’s teacher.

6. Strengthening Interaction Between Teachers, Parents, and Children

“Interaction is the heart of online learning.”³³ It is cited as “one of the most important aspects of the online setting” and the “primary difference” between face-to-face and virtual instruction. For this reason, online schools have striven to improve interaction between teachers, parents, and children. Research has shown that they are having success.

Teacher surveys show that teacher interactions with parents and students in an online setting are “more often focused on teaching and learning” than in a traditional classroom.³⁴ Online teachers also report that they had more “flexibility to communicate individually with students,” which researchers note “facilitates the development of closer relationships between an instructor and those students” and helps improve a child’s academic experience.³⁵ Additionally, one study found that “computer-mediated communication had a positive effect on the achievement and attitudes of online learners.”³⁶

One reason for this success is the convenience of communication in an online school. As one online teacher

in Utah recently put it, “if a kid is having a hard time they just give me a call and I jump online. It works great.”³⁷ If a real-time interaction is not possible for some reason, a student with a question can quickly shoot off an email. Teachers can likewise email or call a parent at their own convenience and in the comfort of their own home, rather than having to hassle with scheduling an in-person meeting at a school building with a parent who is as busy as they are, or busier.

Online-school policies ensure that this convenience enhances communication between teachers, parents, and students. As noted previously, several virtual schools in Utah require weekly contact between teachers and parents. Further, Utah’s online school teachers often must make themselves available for one-on-one tutoring time with students when needed.³⁸

In short, regular, individualized interaction between teachers, parents, and children is a trademark of online education.

7. Complementing Other Utah Policy Initiatives

Online education is complementary in many respects with other innovative policy initiatives in public education, such as adaptive testing and performance-based pay for teachers. Adaptive testing, which is a form of testing that adapts to a student’s academic ability, is a form of assessment that requires significant technological investment – exactly the kind of investment that Utah’s online schools are making.

Further, with the new tools for teacher evaluation that it can provide, online education can help improve Utah’s pilot program for performance-based pay for teachers. For example, electronic records of teacher

interaction with children and parents can supplement traditional measures like test scores to gauge and reward teacher performance.

With these added sources of information, a performance-based pay policy should identify and reward excellent teachers more effectively.

8. Collaborating to Help Children Learn

Collaboration between parents and teachers and collaborative environments in schools are hallmarks of high-performing schools.³⁹ One education-policy expert recently remarked that the “digital tools and concepts” of online education have the capacity to “take teaching from an isolated pursuit into one in which there is more collaboration and team support.”⁴⁰ Further, the innovations in online schools focus these collaborative efforts on student learning.

For instance, Utah Virtual Academy’s innovative “learning coach” model creates this kind of focused, collaborative environment. A “learning coach,” often a parent, communicates regularly with a teacher to collaborate on how to help a child progress through and master material. By giving parents influence over the form and direction of their child’s education, and by keeping them in regular contact with the child’s teacher, the efforts of both the teacher and the parent are coordinated and focused on the child’s academic success in a way that is difficult to replicate in a traditional classroom setting.

Similar models exist in Utah’s other online public schools.⁴¹ These virtual institutions are creating collaborative environments that can best tap into parents’ and teachers’ shared desires for a child’s success and focus them in ways that lead to high academic achievement.

9. Making the Teaching Career Better

Online schools can offer teachers benefits and working conditions that simply are not available in brick-and-mortar schools. For instance, research shows that people who work from home, which many online school teachers can do, are often more satisfied with their work and are more resistant to burnout.⁴² Working from home could also be a valuable benefit to teachers with children of their own.

Further, teachers in online schools have a great amount of freedom in their work. For instance, at Open High School of Utah, the school creates only the basis of the curriculum, “which the teachers then enhance... to specifically tailor the entire curriculum to meet our students’ unique needs.”⁴³ Since the curriculum at Open High School is “open-source,” the teachers have the liberty to tweak it and adapt it completely free of copyright or licensing concerns.

At many online schools, teachers are not bound by the rigid schedule of face-to-face presentations that exists in traditional schools. In the online setting, teachers can have greater influence over how they spend their time. If students seem to be struggling with material, the teacher can devote more time to working with struggling students one-on-one. If students in the class are progressing well and do not require as much tutoring, a teacher can focus more time working with parents, improving curriculum, or in professional development.

In short, online schools have the potential to be a win-win not only for children and parents but for teachers as well.

10. Raising the Bar of Quality

Online education has great potential to improve educational quality, especially in rural school districts. The example of a rural high school in Idaho that has established a significant online component is instructive.

“My kids are so limited in terms of where they live, I thought it was unfair that their courses should be limited,” reports the principal of the school.⁴⁴ “Now they get to have the same quality of education because of online learning.” This rural high school offers online courses that it could not afford in the past, such as French, Spanish and even college-level courses. Utah’s many rural schools can expect similar quality gains from online education.

Schools in districts with a financial disadvantage due to lower property values, and hence less property-tax revenue, should also be able to improve educational quality through online learning. For instance, if two schools each have only a handful of students interested in a new course, then they could team up to split personnel costs by offering one online course for both schools. Such innovative methods of expanding educational quality are difficult to achieve at traditional brick-and-mortar schools.

11. Increasing Diversity for Students

Though racial discrimination is illegal, brick-and-mortar public schools are often segregated because their surrounding neighborhoods are segregated. In the United States, as recently as the year 2000, “more than 70 percent of African American students were still attending schools that had nonwhite majorities. Nearly 40 percent were attending schools with student bod-

ies whose composition was 90 percent or more non-white.”⁴⁵ These figures represent an *increase* in segregation since 1980.

Online schools, on the other hand, do not have to be geographically based. In a virtual school, a Hispanic student in Ogden can work on a collaborative research project with an African-American student in Salt Lake City and a white student in Provo.

Certainly, many students in online schools in Utah will likely be white because of the demographic makeup of the state. But without the physical and geographic constraints of brick-and-mortar schools, online schools have an added potential to allow children of all races, ethnicities, and backgrounds to interact with and learn from each other.

12. The Great Equalizer

Davis Online-Oasis often serves “chemo kids” and other home-bound children with serious illnesses that prevent them from attending a traditional school. In the words of the school’s principal, “the online program makes it possible for them to get a quality, public education.”⁴⁶ In a recent education forum, several education experts described how online schools are providing similar opportunities to students learning English as a second language, autistic students, and Native American students.⁴⁷

One participant in the forum went so far as to proclaim that the innovations of online education, with some planning and investment, “could make fabulous, top-quality education available to everybody in the U.S.”⁴⁸ While such grand predictions may be premature at this point, they highlight the capacity of online education

to equalize academic opportunities for children in ways that would otherwise be very difficult.

Students from rural areas can take the same courses with the same teachers as students from urban areas. Students living in the geographical boundaries of a “hard-to-staff” school can access the same high-quality teachers in an online school that a student living in a wealthy neighborhood can.

Some of Utah’s online schools are going to great lengths to bring equal educational opportunities to every student. For instance, Utah Virtual Academy loans a computer system (including a printer and software) to each elementary school student that enrolls in their program.⁴⁹ This ensures that low-income students at Utah Virtual Academy will have access to the same technology in their school work as students in higher-income families.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The potential upside of online learning for Utah children and the state’s public education system is significant. Several public policy tools can help these benefits to materialize and are worth lawmakers’ consideration. The following list of recommendations is not exhaustive but provides some good first steps that will encourage the growth of this innovative and personalized way of educating children in Utah.

- Require school districts to inform parents about the online-school options available to them, including district-run online programs and online public charter schools
- Follow the example of Michigan and require that every public school student in Utah complete at

least one “online experience” to be eligible to graduate from high school⁵⁰

- Allow students to dual enroll in a public online charter school and a brick-and-mortar public school, subject to the general dual-enrollment requirements
- Ensure that growth at online public charter schools gets prioritized and funded
- Require that the appropriate proportion of state funding follow a student to an online public charter school if the student dual enrolls in a brick-and-mortar public school
- Exempt online public schools from rules and regulations that do not make sense in an online setting, like rules dictating when the school year must start and end

CONCLUSION

Because of the many benefits of online learning, Sutherland Institute recommends that education policy makers in the state consider ways to encourage this innovative educational approach. The growing popularity of online learning is an important trend that expands educational options for all students. Online learning deserves the support of policy makers who want children to have the best education possible: one that is tailored to individual learning needs.

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Why Utah's New Transparency Law Facilitates Good Government and The Myth of the Silver Bullet: A Comprehensive Approach to Teacher Incentive Pay.

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