

CLEARINGHOUSE FOR MILITARY FAMILY READINESS

Guide to Virtual Learning Options for School Year (SY) 2020-2021

Clearinghouse Technical Assistance Team

As of July 30, 2020

This material is the result of partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with Penn State University



PennState

Table of Contents

Overview of Instructional Methods and School Models.....	3
Learning Instructional Methods.....	3
<i>In-Person Learning</i>	3
<i>Distance Learning</i>	3
<i>Online Learning</i>	3
<i>Blended Learning or Hybrid Models</i>	4
School Models	4
<i>Traditional Schools</i>	4
<i>Home Schools</i>	4
<i>Virtual Schools</i>	4
Considerations for Choosing A School Model.....	5
Resources on School Options	7
Guides and Papers	7
<i>Forum Guide to Elementary/Secondary Virtual Education Data</i>	7
<i>Opportunities and Challenges in Using Online Learning to Maintain Continuity of Instruction in K–12 Schools in Emergencies</i>	7
<i>Remote Learning Guidance from State Education Agencies During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A First Look</i>	7
<i>School Reopening Planning: Federal, Association, and State Considerations (Issue Brief)</i>	8
Websites: Tools and Resources	8
<i>The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Schools and Childcare Programs: Plan, Prepare, and Respond</i>	8
<i>DoDEA Virtual School</i>	9
<i>Homeschool Laws by State</i>	9
Additional Assistance.....	10
Suggested Citation.....	10
References.....	11

Overview of Instructional Methods and School Models

This section provides background information on various learning instructional methods and school models, including definitions for key terms. For more information on school reopening plans, decision making tools for parents, and further guidance on instructional methods, please see the *Resources on School Options* section.

Learning Instructional Methods

In-Person Learning

In-person learning, also known as *traditional learning*, requires students and teachers to meet in the classroom. In-person learning allows for real-time interactions between the teacher and student, as well as interactions amongst the students. Schools that are using in-person learning for the upcoming school year may organize students into *cohort groups*. Cohort groups, also known as *Pods*, is a new strategy that schools may use to limit contact between students and staff. This strategy divides students, and sometimes teachers, into distinct groups that stay together for a designated period of time (Centers for Disease Prevention and Control, 2020). To reduce the amount of physical contact with other students, students may be limited in their interaction with those outside of their cohort.

Distance Learning

Distance learning, also known as *distance education*, supports interactions between the students and teacher while they are physically separated from each other (McFarland et al., 2017). Distance education comes in many forms and can include online learning with or without face-to-face instruction, as well as offline learning activities such as the completion of worksheets or assignments in textbooks.

Online Learning

Online learning, a form of distance learning, occurs when course materials or classes are offered online. *Synchronous instruction* takes place when students and teachers meet in real-time. For example, students may attend a live Zoom meeting with a teacher providing instruction on multiplication, and after instruction, the teacher and class would complete a worksheet together. *Asynchronous instruction* takes place when teachers provide materials to students online, but students complete the activities or assignments on their own schedules. For example, a student might watch a pre-recorded video available on-demand of a teacher providing instruction on multiplication, and then the student would complete a worksheet independently based upon his or her schedule. To keep students on-task, asynchronous instruction may be accompanied by deadlines for completing

assignments (Penn State University, n.d.). Some schools offer students the ability to participate in a combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning. Both learning models may exist on a continuum with various combinations of each learning style.

Blended Learning or Hybrid Models

Blended learning or hybrid models allow students to participate in online and in-person classroom learning. Blended learning gives students the ability to participate in both large classroom discussions, as well as the flexibility to work at their own pace (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology, 2017). Some blended learning models occur fully in the classroom. Other blended learning models occur partially at home and partially in the classroom.

School Models

Traditional Schools

Traditional schools are brick and mortar schools that offer most, if not all, of the instruction in-person. Traditional schools generally offer teacher-centered delivery of instruction to classes of students who are the receivers of information.

Home Schools

Home schools are traditionally taught by a parent or other adult living in the household. The individual responsible for homeschooling creates the curriculum and decides upon an appropriate delivery method. While homeschool students may use some online instruction, this is different than attending a full-time virtual school.

Virtual Schools

Virtual schools, also known as *cyber schools*, offer exclusive online learning. They develop and deliver curriculum, communication, and instruction online, usually with both students and teachers at remote locations (Molnar et al., 2019). Virtual schools come in many different forms. Clark (2001) provides the following examples of different types of virtual schools:

- State-sanctioned, such as South Dakota’s Virtual School;
- University-based;
- Consortium or regionally based;
- Local education agency based, such as a local school agency employing certified K-12 teachers to fulfill alternative education needs in their school district.
- Virtual charter schools or online public charter schools operated via state-chartered entities, such as public-school districts, nonprofit and for-profit organizations;

- Private virtual schools; and
- For-profit providers of curricula, content, and infrastructure, such as a company who not only creates content to sell to other virtual schools but also offers its own online classes (pp. i-iii).

Considerations for Choosing A School Model

There are many things to consider when deciding what school model is best for a child. Below is an alphabetized list of some items to consider when discussing what school setting would be best for the individual child.

- **Continuity of teaching method.** If parents decide to homeschool or send their children to virtual school in the fall, they have some control over the continuity of the learning instruction method employed. However, if parents decide to send their children to traditional school in the fall, the learning instruction method may change from in-person to distance learning over the course of the year. For traditional schools, the choice to move from in-person to remote instruction will be highly dependent on the number of positive COVID -19 cases in an area.
- **Cost.** Many different types of virtual schools exist. (See examples listed in the previous section.) Some virtual schools may be free or low-cost; others may be expensive in comparison to traditional schools. In addition to tuition costs, other expenses may be incurred from both traditional and virtual learning. For example, if a traditional school is far away, would there be a cost savings from the amount of gas spent driving to school each day, if a parent enrolled the child in virtual school? On the other hand, if enrolling in a virtual school, would that require purchasing a new computer or a new data plan with an increase in the speed of internet access? Different scenarios could make virtual or traditional schools more cost effective.
- **Curriculum.** Some virtual schools use curriculum that is approved by the state department of education, while other schools use their own curriculum. If the switch from traditional to virtual school is intended to be temporary, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, then parents may want to choose a virtual school that uses a state approved curriculum. Additionally, many virtual schools promote online curriculum as being tailored to individual students more effectively than curriculum offered in traditional classrooms, giving virtual schools the potential to promote greater student achievement. However, according to Molnar et al. (2019) these

claims have not been supported by the research evidence. Among full-time K-12 virtual schools across the United States in 2017-2018, only 56.7% of district-operated virtual schools and 40.8% of charter-operated virtual schools achieved acceptable state school performance ratings (Molnar et al., 2019). Further study is recommended to understand the variations in achievement and outcomes among differing models of instruction in online schooling.

- **Desired parental involvement.** One of the touted benefits to virtual school is scheduling flexibility. However, depending on the age and motivation of the child, this may require parents to structure their child's routine, lesson plans, and days. Online educators suggest parents should, at a minimum, be involved in students' organization and time management, encouragement, and praise (Werrell, 2019). This differs from the traditional school model, where parental involvement may be limited to helping with homework, chaperoning trips, or joining Parent Teacher Associations.

According to Molnar et al. (2019), in 2016-2017, a disproportionate number of students enrolled in virtual schools were high school students. This contrasts the national landscape where the number of students enrolled in all public schools is relatively stable from grades K through 12. The authors note that this intuitively makes sense as high school students may be more mature, better able to self-regulate and work independently, as well as more technologically savvy than younger students (Molnar et al., 2019).

- **Motivation and learning styles of the child.** Children have different learning styles. Some may benefit from the daily interaction that a traditional school offers; others may thrive in a virtual school. Motivation also plays a role in how successful a student is. If a child is strongly motivated to learn, they may thrive in any school model. Others may need to physically be at school to be successful, and some may do well in virtual school with a high level of parental involvement. Researchers note that aside from anecdotal evidence, there is very little known about how virtual schools deliver special education services online (Molnar et al., 2019). This contrasts with what is known for traditional schools, which should be a consideration for parents of students with special needs.
- **Resources.** Resources include tangible things that a child needs to participate in the learning process. For example, to participate in virtual learning, a student would need reliable internet access, dedicated space to learn, a computer, and software. Resources may also include intangible things like access to school counselors and

the ability to meet with a teacher one-on-one, amongst many other supports. Parents should identify which resources a child has used to be successful in the past and ensure these resources are available in whichever school is chosen.

- **Transferability of Credits and Documentation.** Parents should check with their local school administration to understand what types of virtual learning credits can be transferred from a virtual school to a traditional school. Additionally, parents should request information on what types of documentation a school district would need, should a decision to move from traditional to virtual learning is made.

Resources on School Options

Guides and Papers

Forum Guide to Elementary/Secondary Virtual Education Data

This guide was developed through the National Cooperative Education Statistics System and funded by the National Center for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education in 2015. This guide provides an overview of virtual education, common data elements, and policy questions with their practical applications.

- <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/NFES2016095.pdf>

Opportunities and Challenges in Using Online Learning to Maintain Continuity of Instruction in K–12 Schools in Emergencies

This working paper, which has not been approved for publication yet, was developed by RAND corporation and provides lessons learned in using online instruction for prolonged school closures. The authors conducted focus groups and interviews with school personnel in 2017-2018 to identify promising practices, barriers, and facilitators for distance learning in emergencies. The authors conclude that while there are barriers to offering online learning in emergencies, schools that already had the infrastructure in place and were offering some form of online learning before the emergency were best equipped to continue instruction for some types of emergencies.

- https://www.rand.org/pubs/working_papers/WRA235-1.html

Remote Learning Guidance from State Education Agencies During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A First Look

This pre-print report, which has not been accepted for publication yet, was developed by researchers at Teaching Systems Lab. The report examines state education agency policy guidance, published before the end of March 2020, from all 50 states concerning

remote learning. The authors recommend that states continue to emphasize equity considerations, look at the challenges of home-based learning, and produce concise communications for multiple target audiences.

- <https://tsl.mit.edu/research/remote-learning-guidance-from-state-education-agencies-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

School Reopening Planning: Federal, Association, and State Considerations (Issue Brief)

This issue brief was developed by the Association of State and Territory Health Officials (ASTHO). It provides links to guidance and recommendations from national associations, state action plans, and other resources that show what communities across the country and world are doing to reopen schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some models include hybrid and alternative mechanisms of traditional instruction.

- https://www.astho.org/COVID-19/School-Reopening-Planning/?utm_source=Informz&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Informz

Websites: Tools and Resources

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Schools and Childcare Programs: Plan, Prepare, and Respond

The CDC has created a list of web-based resources to help guide schools, childcare centers, and families as they plan for school year (SY) 2020-2021. The CDC's resources specific to parents and guardians include information on COVID-19 and why safely reopening schools is so critical. The CDC also offers tools to assist families to assess their child's and family's risk of COVID-19; make a choice between different instructional methods, if offered; and prepare for the school year, regardless of instructional method. Please see below for more information on each resource tool.

- ***School Decision-Making Tool for Parents, Caregivers, and Guardians***
An easy-to-use checklist designed to help families weigh the risks and benefits of different learning instructional methods, such as in-person or online, for the upcoming school year. The tool helps parents think through selecting the best educational setting for their family's needs and brings attention to some less prominent but important considerations, such as the impact of extra-curricular activities, social-emotional support from peers and educators, and school transportation needs.
- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/decision-tool.html>

- ***Checklist for Planning for In-Person Learning***

A simple but detailed checklist created to help families of students returning to in-person learning think through how to prepare for SY 2020-2021. Please note that if a school uses a combination of in-person and online learning, often referred to as blended learning or a hybrid model, families may want to review both the *in-person* and *virtual or at-home learning checklists*. (See the resource below for the *Checklist for Planning for Virtual or At-Home Learning*).

- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/pdf/Back-to-School-Planning-for-In-Person-Classes.pdf>

- ***Checklist for Planning for Virtual or At-Home Learning***

A checklist created for those families looking to prepare for virtual or at-home learning. The checklist covers planning for and setting-up a virtual learning space and considerations for children's social and emotional wellbeing.

- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/pdf/Back-to-School-Planning-for-Virtual-or-At-Home-Learning.pdf>

DoDEA Virtual School

Beginning in the first semester of SY 2020-2021, the previously available DoDEA Virtual High School has been expanded to include elementary (K-5) and middle school (6-8) grades. DoDEA Virtual School has the same eligibility requirements as any DoDEA school. The DoDEA website guides users through a decision making process to determine which school placement would be best for each child. Please note that the deadline to complete a request form for enrollment in the virtual school has been extended from **July 28, 2020 to July 30, 2020** (1800 hrs. EDT) to allow parents additional time to make an informed decision about choosing a virtual option.

- <https://www.dodea.edu/returntoschool.cfm#tabs-3>

Homeschool Laws by State

This website is provided by the Home School Legal Defense Association. It includes an interactive map of the United States with the ability to click on each state, which includes a separate site for each state's homeschool laws. In some states, non-traditional schools, including virtual schools, may be subject to homeschool laws. The website includes the following disclaimer: *The information on this page has been reviewed by an attorney, but it should not be taken as legal advice specific to your individual situation.*

- <https://hsllda.org/legal>

Additional Assistance

The TA specialists at the Clearinghouse are happy to assist you. We provide support to professionals as they examine and make informed decisions about which programs fit specific situations and are worth the investment. Whether it is connecting you with the resources and tools to conduct a needs assessment in your community, suggesting the best evidence-based program or practice for your situation, or developing an evaluation plan, our team of experts is a call or email away.

Please visit our website at www.militaryfamilies.psu.edu or call 1-877-382-9185 to speak with a TA specialist.

Suggested Citation

Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness. (2020). Guide to virtual learning options for school year (SY) 2020-2021. [Resource Review]. University Park, PA: Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness.

References

- Centers for Disease Prevention and Control. (2020, July 23). *Preparing for a safe return to school*. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/prepare-safe-return.html>
- Clark, T. (2001). *Virtual schools: Trends and issues*. Distance Learning Resource Network and WestED. https://www.wested.org/online_pubs/virtualschools.pdf
- McFarland, J., Hussar, B., de Brey, C., Snyder, T., Wang, X., Wilkinson-Flicker, S., Gebrekristos, S., Zhang, J., Rathbun, A., Barmer, A., Bullock Mann, F., & Hinz, S. (2017). *The condition of education 2017* (NCES 2017-144). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2017144>
- Molnar, A., Miron, G., Elgeberi, N., Barbour, M., Huerta, L., Shafer, S., & Rice, J. (2019). *Virtual schools in the U.S. 2019*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/virtual-schools-annual-2019>
- Penn State University. (n.d.). *Flexible instructional modes*. <https://keepteaching.psu.edu/fall-2020/flexible-instructional-modes/>
- U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology. (2017). *Reimagining the role of technology in education: 2017 national education technology plan update*. Washington, D.C. <https://tech.ed.gov/files/2017/01/NETP17.pdf>
- Werrell, B. (2019, September 3). *Online vs. traditional school: Which is the better choice?* Connections Academy. <https://www.connectionsacademy.com/support/resources/article/online-school-vs-traditional-school>