

Why do students choose blended and online schools?

The “end of average” requires personalized learning environments

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THE FOUNDATION
FOR BLENDED AND
ONLINE LEARNING

About The Foundation for Blended and Online Learning

The Foundation for Blended and Online Learning was created to advance and improve the availability and quality of blended and online educational opportunities for students and teachers and to strengthen the outcomes of those programs through active academic, instructional, and technology support for personalized learning. The Foundation works toward these goals through its Student Scholarship and Innovative Educator Grant programs, the development and distribution of original research exploring emerging policy and practice, and ongoing collaboration with diverse leaders across the fields of education, business, policy, and philanthropy. Learn more at www.blendedandonlinelearning.org.



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About Evergreen Education Group

The Evergreen Education Group provides a range of education market advisory, research and analysis services to non-profit organizations, government agencies and companies that are leading educational innovation through digital learning. Our policy and market research has helped lay the groundwork for growth of digital learning and informs legislators and other policymakers about the latest developments in the industry.

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Foreword

Throughout the United States, schools are evolving, and beginning to recognize the value of adopting a student-centered approach to teaching and learning. Educators and administrators are starting to conceptualize education as a dynamic process that is most effective when personalized to meet learners where they are—rather than where they are expected to be—along their education journey. An important shift is occurring: away from an historical one-size-fits-all philosophy and toward one that recognizes the power of and potential for technology to be a catalyst for differentiating instruction in the classroom. This is all, of course, necessary to support the primary goal of helping students reach their highest academic and personal potential.

Education leaders and thinkers used to speculate on the future of education in terms of 20-years out. The question to be asked instead is, how will education change in the next one to three years? Innovation cycles are accelerating at unprecedented rates, allowing for—demanding, even—the rapid infusion of change in our schools.

Real-time data permitting tremendous insight into which tools and strategies are most effective in supporting individual academic achievement is available, yet with all of this potential for personalization, we rarely hear from students regarding their specific wants and needs when it comes to “school.” When offered a choice, why do they choose a learning environment different from the traditional district offering available to them? What type of instructor interaction best suits the manner in which they most effectively learn new content? How can “school” better adjust to the realities of their life and interests, rather than asking them to conform to systems already in place?

In gathering the data and conclusions contained within this report, we have gone directly to the source to discover which aspects of blended and online learning models are attractive to students and where gaps remain. In business terms, this report captures the analysis of a series of “customer-centric” interviews, surveys, focus groups, and other data. Our goal is to help education leaders, policymakers, learning designers, and educators understand more clearly the motivation behind one area of school choice our students and their parents make. Keeping student and parent voices central to the conversations that states, districts, and schools are having about the future of teaching and learning is essential to not only meeting the needs of a new generation of students, but to ensuring that “school” serves all students.

Amy Valentine

Executive Director

The Foundation for Blended And Online Learning

INTRODUCTION

The “end of average”: Why blended and online learning provide a necessary option for many students

HARVARD PROFESSOR TODD ROSE HAS GAINED A FOLLOWING

among educators for his work exploring what he calls “the end of average.” Rose explains that many institutions, including schools, base their activities on their expectations of what an “average” person is, and assume that each *individual* person is similar to the average.

In fact, this assumption is often wrong. If one person is six feet tall, and another is five feet tall, their average height is five and a half feet. If you design a work station to fit them based on their average height, you will have served neither of them well.

Consider also how traditional schools have in the past designed their instruction around the assumptions of an “average” student. Traditional schools understand that students are different from one another, yet in most cases they group students in relatively large classes of similar age, moving through the same assignments, assessments, and school year progression at a similar pace.

Much of Rose’s work highlights cognitive differences among individual students. For example, two students with similar IQs may in fact differ substantially on the various elements of those IQs, such as verbal comprehension or perceptual reasoning. Similarly, two students may achieve the same grade point average, but one may do so by excelling in reading and history, while the other student does especially well in math and science. The GPA is an average that masks real and important differences.

In addition, and less recognized, is that many significant differences exist among students that are not entirely about their cognitive abilities—and in some cases, may not relate to their intellectual tendencies at all. These differences correlate with students’ interests and life circumstances. These elements may be generally positive or negative, or a mix of both, but regardless they often have a huge impact on the student’s education. They include factors such as illness and health,

“There is no such thing as an average student.”

Todd Rose, *Director of the Mind, Brain, and Education Program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education*

family circumstances, the desire or need to hold a job, the pursuit of art or sports, and so forth. The combination of these dynamics is specific to the individual student, and no student is average. In fact, if one looks beyond GPA or credits accumulated to see one student who is passionate about creative writing, another who struggles with anxiety, another who spends dozens of hours per week pursuing dance, and another who needs to work to support her family—then the concept of reducing these students to averages seems absurd.

Each student’s education and extracurricular pursuits are influenced by these types of interests and circumstances. Until recently, most schools expected students to adapt their interests and needs to fit the traditional school schedule, which required being on campus for much of every school day. More recently, however, a set of blended and online schools are providing flexible scheduling opportunities for students and families, as well as offering new ways to learn. These schools may be entirely online, or more often they mix an online component with a physical campus that students attend for part of the school week, often on days and times that meet their academic and extracurricular needs.

What are the circumstances that lead students and families to choose these blended and online schools? To answer this question, we reviewed data collected from schools, analyzed surveys given by schools to their own students, visited schools, and interviewed students, parents, teachers, and school administrators. We used a purposeful sampling approach to ensure that we reached a broad array of students.

Like Todd Rose, we found that “there is no such thing as an average student.” The key to understanding why students and families choose blended and online schools, and how these schools are meeting their needs, is first seeing students as individuals with unique requirements and desires.

Blended and Online Schools

This report focuses on why students are choosing blended and online schools, using the following characteristics and definitions:

- Online schools provide the students' entire education via the Internet, with very little or no in-person contact between teachers and students. Digital instructional materials are delivered online, physical instructional materials are delivered by mail, and communication happens through phone, video chat, text chat, email, discussion boards, and similar online methods.
- Blended schools combine online learning with a physical campus. In most cases, blended schools provide scheduling flexibility to students, allowing them to learn online in lieu of being on the school campus every day.
- Because this study examines the reasons that students have chosen these schools, it focuses on schools that students actively select, such as charter schools and alternative education programs. Schools that are attracting students mostly from within their designated geographical boundary were excluded from the study even if they are blended schools because students are attending these schools mostly by default instead of actively choosing them.
- This study does not include students who are taking a small number of online courses while attending a traditional school. Although this is an important subset of online learning, it is also a complicated category in that students may be taking such courses because they are required by the district or state, or they are the only option to recover credits, thus reducing or eliminating the element of student choice.
- For simplicity, this report often refers to the choices that "students" are making, especially when referring to high school students, even though we recognize that in many cases the decisions are made by students and their families.

Study students are from schools of choice, including:

Fully online schools

OR

Blended schools with a significant online component

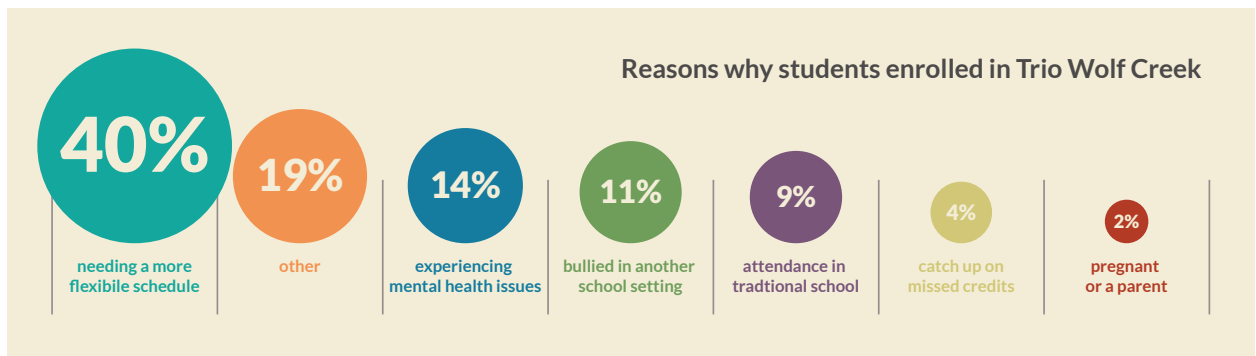
The total number of students in the United States attending online and blended schools is unknown. A reasonable estimate is between one and two million students, or roughly 2–4% of all students in the country. More than half of all states allow online schools that draw students across district boundaries; perhaps 350,000 students attend these schools. Other students in this study are attending online schools that serve students within a district or sub-state region, blended charter schools, and alternative education programs. Many of these schools are charter schools, and others are operated or authorized by school districts, intermediate units such as BOCES and County Offices of Education, and other organizations such as juvenile court schools.

This report focuses primarily on why students choose online or blended schools. We also provide brief profiles of five schools, from different regions of the country, that demonstrate different online and blended learning instructional models.

Why do students choose online and blended schools?

Students choose online and blended schools for many different reasons. Often these reasons are related and overlap, and sometimes the reasons that students give for choosing an online school (such as “I needed more flexibility”) mask the true underlying cause.

One school, TRIO Wolf Creek in Minnesota, asked a random subset of its students why they chose the blended school. The answers are shown in Figure 1.



Although this sample size was relatively small, the answers show a range of reasons that encompass much of what we heard from students in other schools. Throughout the entire study, many students and parents reported that they were seeking flexibility—as 40% of respondents to the TRIO survey did. But students can want or need flexibility for a wide range of reasons, ranging from health issues to academics to extracurricular activities. When we explored further, we found that most students fell into one or more of several common and overlapping categories.

The following pages explain and explore some of these categories, provide student quotes and examples, and explain how and why online and blended schools meet the needs of these students.

Academics

Many students who choose blended and online schools do so for academic reasons. These students typically are in one or more of three groups:

1

Students who are behind in school and need to catch up.

Some of these students have dropped out of school and been attracted back into the public school system by the blended school.

2

Students who are doing well in school but feel they are not challenged, and become bored and disengaged.

Some of these students are seeking courses not available in their traditional school.

3

Students who feel that traditional school is “a bad fit” for a variety of reasons, leading them to lose interest in performing well academically.

Many students are experiencing aspects of all three.

Some blended schools, such as the Charles Houston High School in Chicago, work almost exclusively with students who are behind in credit accumulation. Many other alternative schools that use blended learning have at least some students who are behind academically as well.

Less well known is that many students who enter alternative schools are feeling disengaged from their traditional school, often because they do not feel challenged.¹ These students are frustrated that their traditional teachers must move at the pace of the class, which is slower than these students would like. Even when an individual teacher recognizes the issue and provides enrichment opportunities to the student, these options are often limited and inconsistent between classes.

Other students who are not performing well academically feel that traditional school is “a bad fit” for them. Often the reasons for the bad fit have to do with the school’s social environment. For example, these students may be interested in academics and feel that the school culture is largely focused on sports and social events. Or they may feel that they are “lost” within a large school and would be more comfortable, and perform better, in a smaller school environment.

Perhaps most interesting is that a subset of students demonstrates a combination of these factors, and sometimes all three. For example, the student who is particularly interested in creative and analytical writing may find that she has outpaced her school’s writing courses, leading her to lose interest in school generally and struggle with other subjects. When she moves to a school where she can pursue her interest in writing, she recognizes that she must also do well in math and science to get into college, and improves her performance in all areas.

Some students seeking a new school environment for academic reasons have done well in their previous school, but want to progress more quickly, focus on specific subjects and go farther with courses in these areas than is possible in

I liked the academic opportunity it provided me to get training in my career as a diesel mechanic as well as the credits I received for college. I also liked the opportunity to work at my own pace and graduate earlier than my peers with just a little hard work.

their traditional school, or perhaps graduate early and move on to college. These students are often particularly attracted by the opportunities to enroll in classes that grant college credit while still in high school.

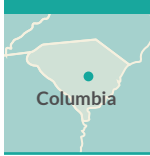
Blended and online schools meet the needs of these students because:

- They allow students to make up ground if they have fallen behind in courses or credit accumulation. Students can work through courses more quickly than in a traditional school while still meeting course requirements, and gain more credits in a year than they would at a traditional school. In addition, students are often able to start recovering a course as soon as they have fallen behind, sometimes in mid-year or even mid-semester, so they don't have to wait until the following school year to get back on track.
- They often provide specific supports that address the reasons that students fell behind or dropped out of school. For example, schools that have a substantial number of students who are pregnant or parenting may provide day care and associated resources to support young parents.
- Online curriculum allows students to move through material at their own pace and especially to go more slowly through, or repeat, lessons that the student does not initially understand.
- Some schools actively seek students who have dropped out and are open to re-enrolling in a different school to complete their high school diploma.
- Students can choose areas of interest in which to focus, perhaps including an internship or job, creating greater engagement in school and a drive to succeed in all academic areas to further their area of interest. Some schools focus on career education for students who prefer to focus on career opportunities instead of a four-year college.
- Students who are ahead in their academic progression can take a nearly limitless range of online courses that expand their interests and knowledge in a specific topic area.
- Blended programs often have fewer students than traditional schools, and the smaller school environment is more comfortable for many students than larger schools.
- Although some of these schools have arrangements with the local school district that allows students to participate in sports or other extracurricular activities, students often report that they prefer the extent to which sports are de-emphasized in the alternative schools. They feel that the focus should be on their academic pursuits and they are more comfortable showing their academic interest in the alternative school.

I didn't just want more homework; I wanted to actually excel. Math is my favorite subject, but even in other subjects I still wanted to learn the material faster.

I knew I was meant for a higher level of academics. [In my previous school] I was getting Cs, and I had a D at one point, and now I'm in pre-calculus. [My current school] makes you move so much faster.

The online classes allowed me to repeat lessons that I was not understanding until I mastered the concepts. It took me longer at first, but then math started making sense to me.



South Carolina Connections Academy

SOUTH CAROLINA

South Carolina Connections Academy (SCCA) was the first online charter school in South Carolina, and offers a fully online education for students from across the state. All students are full-time, as is required by state law. Students are not required to visit a traditional campus, nor does the school offer a physical location for students. Instead, a student's entire education is built around interacting with teachers and other students using online communications, as well as working with both online and physical instructional materials. SCCA operates in partnership with Connections Academy, the national organization that is part of Pearson Education and provides the technology platforms for both real-time and asynchronous instruction, online content, teachers, and professional development. SCCA serves about 3,700 students in grades K–12, 50% of whom are in high school, 30% in middle school, and 20% in elementary school. All parts of the state are represented, but most students tend to be from the major population centers of Columbia, Charleston, and Greenville. At least one student from every county in South Carolina attends the school.

SCCA is authorized by the South Carolina Public Charter School District, which is the state-level authorizing entity that has been designed in part to authorize online schools. The school opened with 500 students in the fall of 2008 after the state legislature passed the law allowing online charter schools for the first time. Since then the school enrollment has grown by a factor of seven.

About 43% of SCCA students report that they qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. This percentage is lower than the state as a whole, but SCCA (and other online schools) believe that the real number may be higher, because students in online schools have no incentive to report income status given that the school does not serve lunch. Although 15% of students have an Individualized Education Plan or a 504 plan, and about 10% are gifted, the school believes that both numbers are increasing because parents increasingly recognize that the school's personalized learning approach helps these types of students in particular —although it benefits all students.

SCCA has a particular focus on socialization and the school community. The school coordinates field trips that may be educational (e.g. to a museum) or entirely for fun (like picnics). It has both a career club and a college planning club, and arranges visits to businesses and colleges. It also offers three Talent Networks designed for its middle and high school students who are actively involved in competitive sports, visual and performing arts, or advanced STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) coursework.

SCCA reports that students choose to attend the school for a variety of different reasons. Many students, particularly at the high school, need a schedule that is more flexible than a traditional school because they are pursuing jobs, sports, arts, or other extracurricular activities. Students at all grades may enroll because health issues keep them from regularly attending a physical school. Other students may have fallen behind academically and seek a flexible pacing opportunity to regain credits quickly, or they may be seeking greater academic challenges and opportunities through online courses in subjects that are not available in their traditional school. In addition, a substantial number of students report that they were bullied and sought a different learning environment. ■

Social-Emotional Health and Safety

Students often choose blended and online schools for health or safety reasons. Students in this category may have one or more of the following:

1

Physical health issues that interfere with the student's ability to perform well at a school on a traditional schedule.

These may be:

A debilitating injury.

A serious illness.

Short-term, long-term, or permanent.

2

Students who have experienced bullying.

3

Mental health issues that interfere with the student's ability to perform well at a school in a traditional social setting.

A common example is anxiety.

4

Students whose traditional school is physically dangerous for them, for example because of gang violence.

Students in blended and online schools may have health or social issues that make a flexible or new environment a better fit for them. These students may have a debilitating injury or a serious, long-term illness that makes attending a traditional school difficult. Some students are experiencing mental health issues such as anxiety or depression. These students' situations range from diagnosed conditions for which they are under a physician's care, to vague and/or undiagnosed symptoms that are recognized primarily by the student and her family, and nevertheless require a different school environment to allow for academic success.

A subset of these students has been bullied, which can rapidly lead to depression or anxiety and may cause students to seek a new school. A recent study found that just over a quarter (27%) of parents with children in online schools served by the country's largest online school provider reported that they chose an online school because their child was bullied at his/her previous school. Of that group, 94% said that attending the online school has helped their child deal with the issue.

Bullying is an extreme example of a condition in which students feel that the traditional school social environment is not a good fit. Some students explain that they sought a different school with a different social and academic climate, without explicitly stating that they were being bullied.

Students who have experienced mental or physical illness or injury often have fallen behind academically. They may need a blended or online school to gain credits more quickly than would be possible in a traditional school, and need a new physical environment and flexible schedule.

Health issues are easier to address here because I can back off on work. To catch up when feeling better I came to school all day twice per week. I'm planning to stay here even if my health issues get better, because I like the independent approach.

By joining the blended courses, it became easier for me to deal with the migraines and keep a steady attendance increasing my grade point average.

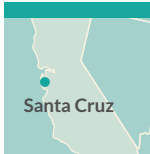
Although it is not unusual for students who move into a blended school for health reasons to remain there even after their health condition has improved, some students—particularly those dealing with an injury—may seek to be in a blended or online school temporarily. District-run blended and online schools are often the best option for these students because the students can easily move between the online school and the traditional school. Some districts have begun aligning course progressions in both traditional and online courses to allow students to switch between the two without experiencing a major disruption to their studies, although many districts have yet to determine the best policies and practices for allowing students to move between schools.

Blended and online schools meet the needs of these students in these ways:

- Accessing online courses from home or hospital allows students to stay on track, whether they are undergoing medical treatment, working through anxiety issues, or facing other challenges.
- Flexible course pacing allows students to rest when necessary to focus on their injury or illness, and work on their courses when they are feeling well. The student's recognition of this flexibility helps with healing because it reduces stress. Imagine an ill student who thinks she must be up at 7am to attend her first period algebra class or risk not understanding a key concept and falling behind. If that same student knows that she can get the sleep required by her illness, and work with a teacher in the early afternoon, she is more likely to recover.
- Students who are struggling with health issues may be more easily able to focus on just one or two courses at a time, instead of five or so. Some blended and online schools allow students to follow a schedule in which they focus on one course until they complete it, before moving on to the next course. In this way, they may complete a standard course load in a school year, but on a different schedule than usual.
- Students often feel emotionally and socially supported by the greater individual attention that they receive from teachers and other adults in blended and online schools. Some of these students have felt "lost" in larger physical schools with larger traditional classrooms.

Being here has revolutionized school for me. At first I couldn't sit for the hour with a teacher because of anxiety and now I'm taking lots of credits. I don't know what I would be doing if it wasn't for [my school]. The teachers here are incredible—I love it here and am planning to finish here.

Socially, I flourished in my new school. I noticed that like me, a lot of my fellow students were also shy. That gave me confidence and showed me that I had nothing to be afraid of, as they were just as afraid as I was.



Oasis High School

CALIFORNIA

Oasis High School is a hybrid independent study school for high school students run by the Santa Cruz County Office of Education (SCCOE), with about 175 students enrolled in SY 2015–16. It is located on the campus of Cabrillo Community College, and is designed to meet the needs of students in grades 9–12 who benefit from a personalized learning program. Students work with their parent or guardian, teacher, and counselor to design a personalized learning plan that includes the following elements:

- The school has a physical building that students are required to attend at least once per week to meet with a teacher. Some students attend the physical school much more often to have a place to work and interact with teachers and other students, particularly if they feel that working online from home too often is socially isolating.
- Students access course materials online and communicate online with teachers. Students who have chosen Oasis for physical or mental health reasons are likely to work from home more often relative to students who have chosen Oasis for other reasons.
- Oasis provides a highly personalized focus on students. Teachers work one on one with students on both courses and counseling, for example helping students with college and career exploration and choices. In addition, the school offers tutoring with subject-specific teachers.
- About 60% of students take advantage of current enrollment opportunities in local community college courses, which may be online or on the campus. These students take college courses so that they have accumulated college credits before they graduate from high school, getting ahead and saving money that would have gone to college course tuition. Oasis students may fulfill the requirements for admission to a University of California or California State University school through a combination of Oasis and Cabrillo coursework. Tuition for dual-enrolled students is waived for up to 11 credits.
- Oasis offers students extensive opportunities to explore careers via a Regional Occupational Program with career technical education courses, and service, academic, or vocational internships. The school's flexible schedule helps students to take advantage of a job or internship that would not be possible if they were held to a traditional school schedule.

Oasis is one of 19 Alternative Education options offered through the SCCOE. School leaders report that students often arrive in Alternative Education credit-deficient because of failed courses at their prior schools. Oasis students also often seek advanced courses that are not available at their comprehensive school. Many students are affected by one or more significant life challenges, including academic failure, drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness, criminal activity, truancy, expulsion, poverty, lack of fluency in English, and various other traumas. In addition to ensuring that all students have access to courses required for graduation, Alternative Education provides a variety of programs to meet student needs including counseling, special education services, work-based learning, and employment counseling. ■

Interests and life circumstances

Students often choose blended and online schools for a variety of reasons related to pursuing extracurricular interests, jobs, travel, or other circumstances. Students in this category may have one or more of these interests and circumstances:

1

Moving/switching schools.

Making up credits when the new school or state has different graduation requirements.

2

Jobs, internships, and college courses.

Internships are often related to pursuing a career interest.

Students often take jobs because they need to financially support themselves or their families.

3

Some online students were formerly homeschooled, and the families have chosen an online public school option that allows the students to work primarily from home.

4

Travel or moving.

Some students' families decide that they would like to try a new location temporarily, or take a long trip, and students choose an online school to remain in a single school.

Students whose families move mid-year may switch to an online school in order to remain in the same school district.

5

Non-academic activities (sports, dance, music, theater).

6

Death of a family member or another life-altering event.

No student is average in all ways; in fact, most students are distinct in many respects. All students have interests and circumstances that make them unique. Some of these students are better served by blended and online schools than by traditional schools.

A major component of this group is made up of students who are pursuing an activity that requires more time than is available if they are attending a traditional school. Athletes practice for long hours and may want to compress their study time. They may have to travel long distances for competitions, making physical school attendance impossible. They may be following an outdoor pursuit such as skiing or surfing, which requires taking advantage of conditions at optimal times. No aspiring Olympic skier, for example, wants to wait until after school at 2pm to ski every week day. Similarly, students in dance, music, or theater often adhere to demanding practice and performance schedules that do not align with school schedules.

Students who are making time for internships or jobs are a major second category. Some students have found a career interest and wish to pursue it before leaving high school; these students may want to spend substantial time at an internship or job that does not fit well with after-school and weekend hours.

Entering an online school also allowed me to continue to train for Tae Kwon Do with my rigorous schedule of 2 or 3 times a day.

A student who wants to work with an accountant or financial advisor, for example, is well served by being at the work office during some school hours. Other students must spend a substantial amount of time working because they are financially supporting themselves or their families.

Beyond these two common categories are countless additional circumstances that are unique to each student. Some students are traveling for enough of the school year that they need to enroll in an online school to continue their studies. Others move during the school year, and instead of switching physical schools will remain in an online school for the entire year. Some students who move between states discover that the new state has different graduation requirements, such that they must accumulate more than the usual number of credits in their remaining years—which may be more easily accomplished in an online school.

A significant proportion of students in online elementary and middle schools were formerly homeschooled. Although the total number of children being homeschooled appears to be growing², parents sometimes switch from homeschooling to online public schools so that their children can learn from home while receiving instructional materials and support from teachers. A common progression is that parents feel fully capable of teaching their children when they are young, but as they move into upper grades with more challenging math and science classes the parents wish to have the support that an online public school can provide.

The scheduling flexibility has allowed me to pursue my passion of riding horses. I have also been able to help and care for foster animals with local shelters. And finally, the blended learning schedule has allowed me to earn money by working 10 hours per week as a stable hand.

The main reason for enrolling in online coursework was for the flexibility that it provided; primarily being able to travel for music-related activities that I participated in.

[My son] could not do what he's doing in theater without this opportunity.



Bend-La Pine Schools Online

OREGON

Bend-La Pine is the 6th largest school district in Oregon, with 28 schools and about 17,100 students in grades K–12. The district also has a comprehensive online program, Bend-La Pine Schools Online, which serves about 3,000 students per year with full-time and part-time online course options. Unlike most other states, Oregon in the past had allowed students to choose to take some online courses while enrolled in a traditional school. This policy framework has contributed to a statewide educational environment in which students choose to combine online courses with traditional school at higher rates than in many other states. It has also led to the creation of online and blended programs that districts have developed primarily for their own students.

Bend-La Pine Schools Online began ten years ago by offering online courses to high school students across the district. While this option was accessed by some students who were recovering credits, it was mostly used by students supplementing their in-school options. The program has grown and is now in its fifth year of providing a far wider range of full-time and part-time online courses for students who may access the courses from a district school, or from home. The options are in four categories, all of which serve students at all grade levels:

- Online courses for students who are enrolled full-time in district schools (in Oregon, full-time is four or more classes). This is the largest single category, with about 2,000 students taking both online courses and between five and seven courses at a physical school. Most of these students are in high school and about three quarters of them enroll in online courses that are core, standard, honors or AP original credit courses. About 25% of the students take online credit recovery courses. The district allows students to take as many online courses as they would like, at the district's expense, even though each student's funding is capped at 1 FTE.
- Full-time online school for students who take courses from home. The full-time online school has about 400 students, about half of whom are high school students. The number of elementary students in the full-time online school is growing rapidly—likely because of the addition of a local, district-employed K–5 teacher who provides significant enrichment.
- Part-time online enrollment combined with part-time homeschool. This is a smaller category, but one that the district expects to grow.
- Part-time online enrollment combined with part-time on-site schooling for K–12. This is the smallest category, but is also growing.

Bend-La Pine Schools Online is a program of the district, not a school. Students are officially considered to be enrolled in one of the physical schools, and may take part in extracurricular activities in that school. ■

Innovative approaches are found in blended and online schools

Along with the students' circumstances described above, several additional key findings further illuminate reasons that students choose blended and online schools, and the important ways in which these schools serve their students.

Teachers and other adults are critical in instruction, counseling, and support

A common misconception is that students take online courses and attend online schools because they can “learn from a computer.” In fact, students rarely, if ever, learn from a computer. They learn using online instructional materials, adaptive software, and—most importantly—one or more adults involved in their education.

Students enrolled in online schools learn best from a combination of online teachers and face-to-face interactions with other adults. For students in online elementary schools, their parents usually act as learning coaches and play a central role in their education. In fact, playing a significant role in their children's education is among the common reasons that parents cite for enrolling in an online school. Parents tend to be less involved at the middle and high school level, but other adults in addition to the online teacher also work with students. These adults are usually mentors or counselors who work with students in a variety of roles.

Many blended schools that combine online and onsite instruction use teachers, counselors, and other professionals in innovative and effective ways. These schools often re-organize the time and responsibilities of teachers, such that teachers spend little or no time lecturing to large groups of students, and instead focus their time working with students individually or in small groups. This individual focus often extends well beyond academic topics and the practices that one would expect of a teacher or administrator in a specific role. For example, individual high school teachers and principals—not people in a formal counseling role—help students navigate college applications and financial aid forms, and work with them to find internships and jobs. Although teachers in physical schools often take on these roles as well, in a traditional school the teacher must spend so much time lecturing and grading that he is challenged to dedicate much time to other activities. Schools that use blended learning to change the role of the teacher help to free teachers' time to engage in these activities with students. Students in these schools recognize the ways in which these teachers are supporting them, and often cite the quality and caring of teachers as a main reason that they value their schools.

[The school] has really opened my eyes to being the best I can be, and has allowed me to work on things that I may need more help or encouragement on, by providing me with a customized learning experience. I have been very grateful to be in a school setting that makes me feel at home and pushes me to be the best I can be along with learning things that I am interested in but are also beneficial.

I told [my teacher] that I like super structured things, tracks that I know are going to lead to something. She said we're going to do that for you. When I saw her commit to me like that, I knew I was going to stay here.



TRIO Wolf Creek Distance Learning Charter School

MINNESOTA

TRIO Wolf Creek is a hybrid charter school in Minnesota that has the capacity to serve 200 students in grades 9–12. Because of its high rate of student mobility, during the school year it serves a total of about 300 students. It accepts students up to age 21, and about one-third of its students are between 19 and 21 years old. The school is authorized by the Chisago Lakes School District #2144, and pays the district for a variety of financial, technological, transportation, nursing, and special education services. Students can take part in extracurricular activities through the school district, giving them an easily available option for sports and other pursuits.

Students may work entirely online or visit the school’s campus, but the school recommends that students work at the campus for at least five hours per week. TRIO estimates that about 75% of students visit the school regularly for 3–5 hours each week. Although most students live in the district or nearby towns, some reside several hours away, so an even higher percentage of nearby students are reported to be using the physical campus. TRIO is finding that it has more demand for part-time students than it can fill, as the school believes its primary mission is to serve full-time students.

In addition to the students who are over age 18, a significant percentage of students arrive at the school behind in credit accumulation. The school is focused on working with students who require extra assistance, and even the students who arrive while in the earlier high school grades are often considered at risk due to a variety of social, emotional, or life reasons. The school therefore has mental health counselors available, and finds that students tend to spend their time on campus working with their counselors. The school stresses that all academic requirements (except for some testing) can occur entirely online.

TRIO assigns each student a lead Learning Manager, who works with the student to create an Individual Graduation Plan. Learning Managers are certified teachers with expertise in specific subject areas, so that the school has teachers for major subject areas and special education. Perhaps more importantly, the Learning Manager creates a long-term relationship with the student around the student’s academic plans and goals.

Like other high schools in Minnesota, Wolf Creek offers dual-enrollment courses with area colleges to allow high-achieving high school students to earn college credit through the Post Secondary Enrollment Option statute. ■

Blended and online schools use time creatively

In addition to the ways that schools and teachers use time creatively to work individually with students, some schools allow, or even suggest, that students focus on one or two courses at a time instead of taking a standard course load of four to six courses. This approach, which mimics the block scheduling used by a few pioneering colleges, is useful for some students who feel that they prefer to focus intensely and narrowly. They might take one math and one science course, working on each course for several hours each day—perhaps along with an internship or job. Once they successfully complete those two courses in a month or so, they move on to two new courses, and so forth. In this way students advance through courses at the same overall pace across the school year, but with a very different daily schedule than is usual.

Not only was I able to work at my own rapid pace, but I received one on one attention from my teachers. I was able to choose courses that I was interested in and knew might be helpful someday for a career.

Students may plan to enroll temporarily, or for the long term

Some students enter a blended or online school for reasons that they expect to be temporary, while other students enroll in these schools with the expectation that the new school will be their home until they graduate. Temporary issues are often related to health, moving, or related reasons. After entering the new school, some of these students find that they prefer the new mode of instruction, and the move which was intended to be temporary becomes permanent. Other students will stay for only a short time, ranging from several months to a couple of years.

I find it hard to focus on lots of things at once, but I'm good at being focused on one or a few things at once, which is easier to do [here] because I make my own schedule.

Some students leave blended and online schools because they find that the instructional model is not a good fit for them. This is particularly true of online schools, including cases where students and families did not anticipate some of the challenges of working from home and communicating with teachers entirely online.

The student mobility rate at blended and online schools is usually higher than the rate at most traditional schools. Although student persistence in these schools correlates with academic success, mobility metrics mask the distinction between planned, successful moves (e.g. a discrete event that caused the student to arrive and then leave) and moves that demonstrate that the new school was not a good fit for the student.³

Jacob had been struggling [in the traditional school]. He is not wired to sit down and listen and learn. He's very, very bright, but he learns differently.

Differences exist between students in blended schools compared to fully online schools, and between students in different grade levels

Although most of the findings in this report relate to both blended and online schools, some findings are unique to the schools that are entirely online. In some cases, students choose online schools for health reasons that preclude

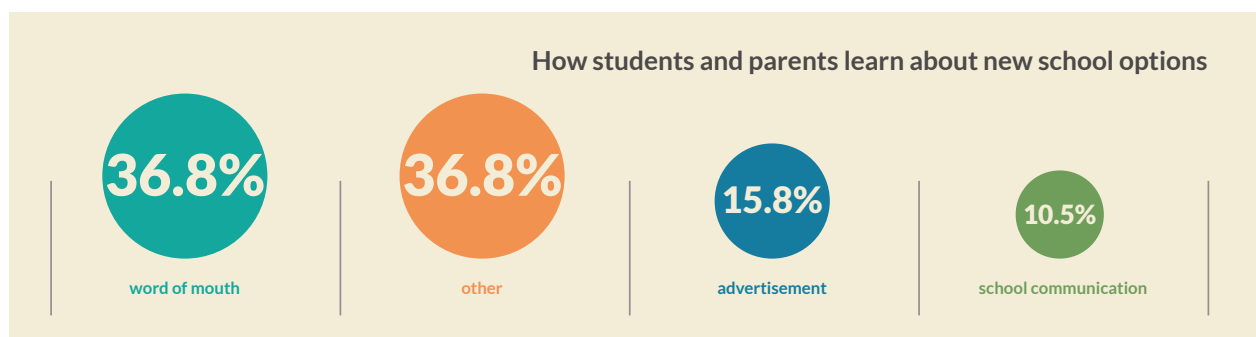
their ability to attend a physical school regularly, including a blended school. In other cases, parents are choosing online schools because they want greater involvement in their children's education. Conversely, some students choose a blended school because they need a structured learning environment, or they value the greater opportunities for social interaction in a shared physical setting.

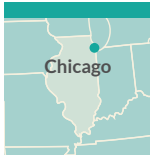
Some differences also exist by the age of the student. The parents of elementary school-age students are relatively more likely to be seeking a higher performing school than high school students (or their parents). Lower-performing elementary students often report that they need a quieter work space to remain focused (some middle and high school students report this as well). Elementary school age students may not be ready to sit still for as many hours each day as some schools require, and learning in an online school from a home or similar environment allows them to mix learning with physical activity.

High school students are more likely to have fallen behind on credit accumulation, to be seeking courses that are not available at their school or early graduation opportunities, or pursuing jobs or internships.

Students and parents find out about new school options through non-traditional communications

Some of the schools in the study are charter schools or other types of schools that operate outside of traditional school districts. Others have a closer connection with the school district, either as an alternative district school or a district-chartered school. Regardless of the connections between the new school and the traditional school district, most students learn about the new school through non-traditional communication channels. Many students describe finding the blended or online school because of personal networks and connections. Some had a sibling who enrolled in the school previously, while others (or their parents) knew a teacher or administrator at the school. Although a few students said that they heard of their new school from a counselor in their previous (traditional) school, the students' answers do not suggest that students learn about these options primarily through standard school district networks. A small survey conducted by the Foundation for Blended and Online Learning, for example, found that about one in three students heard about the new school through "word of mouth" and another third learned of the school via unspecified "other" reasons unrelated to a school communication. Student interviews suggest that the "other" category includes hearing about the school through people associated with a job, internship, or extracurricular activity, friends, and family members; this matches findings in related studies.⁴





Charles Houston Alternative High School

ILLINOIS

The Charles Hamilton Houston Alternative High School is a campus of the Youth Connections Charter School (YCCS), which focuses on educating students who have dropped out or are behind in credit accumulation. YCCS currently has 20 campuses serving over 4,000 students across Chicago. Most YCCS students enroll after months and sometimes years of being out of school. They often have chronic truancy problems, low basic skill levels, minimal credits, learning disabilities, and social challenges, including parenthood, homelessness, previous incarceration, or gang membership.

Although some YCCS campuses have also become the school of choice for some higher-performing students seeking a small school environment with a lower adult to student ratio, Charles Houston fits firmly into the original YCCS mold. Houston, however, only recently joined YCCS after a recent transformation into its current version through both inspired leadership and the widespread use of blended learning.

The transformation of Houston has been driven by Principal Dionne Kirksey, who recently moved to the school from a high school on the city's west side. Kirksey emphasizes two major elements as key to the schools' success. First, she has developed the school to function as a place of both learning and refuge from the stresses that the students face in their neighborhoods. This means, in part, that the school provides the type of learning environment that other, more affluent students may take for granted, such as a homecoming day, prom, and renewed school spirit. Second, Kirksey has focused on enhancing technology. With the acquisition of laptops added to existing desktop computers, the school now has close to a one-to-one computer environment.

Houston adheres to a conventional school schedule, with students on campus from 8:30am to 3pm from Monday to Thursday, and 8:30 am to noon on Friday. But the way time is used within this schedule is unconventional and innovative. The school has four core subject teachers, in Math, English Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies. Students attend these classes in a traditional daily schedule. In class, students are divided into groups with some working on the online curriculum, and others working directly with the teacher. This arrangement provides several key benefits. Teachers use the online platform to follow the status of each student in the course by following student progress through lessons and on assessments. Because many students who enroll in Houston are behind on credits or perhaps re-taking a course that they failed the first time, they benefit from being able to move through the online content at their own pace, especially if they can demonstrate mastery in a certain area. In addition, having some students working online in each class allows the teacher to focus her time and attention more closely on a subset of students, tailoring instruction to students individually or in small groups.

Houston is also unusual in that on average students spend about 30% of their time outside of the school. They may be at a work-study job or internship, taking a college course, or conducting independent study. These students may use the computers at the school to work on their college courses or independent study throughout the school day. Many of these students are supported by a teacher who conducts a senior seminar that provides structure for the internships and ensures that the students are gaining valuable knowledge and experience. Others are coached by an academic advisor who helps students with independent study and college courses. ■

Trends and conclusion

The reasons that students are choosing blended and online schools appear not to have changed much over time. Since the appearance of the first public online schools and courses about twenty years ago, students have been choosing these options for reasons related to academic performance, health and safety issues, and life interests and circumstances.

Change is occurring in two areas, however.

First, more students than ever are choosing to attend blended and online schools. Although little state and federal reporting of blended and online schools exists, the data and anecdotal evidence that are available suggest that the number is growing.

Second, more districts are adding blended and online schools. Although most of the earliest blended and online schools were charter schools, today an increasing number of these schools are being created by, or are working with, traditional districts. In addition, the use of computers and online instructional materials in traditional schools is growing.

Blended and online learning are increasingly recognized as a means to an end, not the end in themselves. For many of the students described in this study, blended and online schools provide the flexibility, support, and opportunities that they seek. In many other schools, blending the use of online curriculum with face-to-face instruction allows teachers to personalize learning and differentiate instruction for each student. “Personalized” and “student-centered” learning are among the trending terms in education today, particularly for the foundations, disruptors, and reformers who are seeking to transform education. For many schools, blended and online learning are key strategies for reaching personalized learning goals. In fact, some of the best examples of personalized learning are within the blended and online schools that enroll the students interviewed for this report.

Whether the focus is on blended, online, or personalized learning, students and families tend to be highly satisfied with their blended and online schools. This outcome does not mean that every school is appropriate for every student. However, when students are given a choice of schools and instructional modalities, scheduling flexibility, and a voice in their learning, they tend to be engaged and working towards success. Students in blended and online schools feel they are taking control of their education—and by extension their lives—and are experiencing new levels of satisfaction and success.

[My] school is much more like life because you have a lot of choice. You can do the bare minimum and proceed slowly. Or if there's something you want to be, or something you want to do, you can focus on that, and take [college] courses, for a lower price than if you were a [college] student. This is a great place to find out what you want to do and start moving towards that.

I also had a structured education that was in my own hands, I had control over what I wanted to learn. I was no longer a fail or a pass; I was a succeeding individual that my teachers cared about and wanted to see succeed.

(Endnotes)

1 *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*. Civic Enterprises in association with Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. March 2006.

2 National Center for Education Statistics. Digest of Education Statistics. Table 206.10. *Number and percentage of homeschooled students ages 5 through 17 with a grade equivalent of kindergarten through 12th grade, by selected child, parent, and household characteristics: 2003, 2007, and 2012*.

3 *Measuring Quality From Inputs to Outcomes: Creating Student Learning Performance Metrics and Quality Assurance for Online Schools*. Susan Patrick, David Edwards, Matthew Wicks, iNACOL, and John Watson, Evergreen Education Group. International Association for K-12 Online Learning. October 2012.

4 *Interim Report for GreatSchools–Stanford Study: Findings from YouGov Surveys on How Americans Assess School Quality*. Center for Education Policy Analysis at Stanford University. August 11, 2013.