

Checklist for families considering online school this fall



Chris Long
Willamette Connections Academy

Oregon families have endured much this past year and a half, such as natural disasters, social unrest and COVID-19.

This chaos caused brick-and-mortar schools to switch between temporary distance learning and in-person instruction, which was disruptive for many families across the state.

Now that pre-pandemic routines are returning, parents and students are weighing their options for the new school year.

We found that many families were newly interested in our established, tuition-free full-time online school, Willamette Connections Academy.

Now, some of these families who experienced online education during the COVID-19 crisis are keeping their kids in virtual schooling for other reasons, like flexible scheduling and customized learning. Stability was key for new Willamette Connections Academy students because they received a high-quality education with minimal interruptions.

Parents considering online learning for their students should remember not all virtual schools are alike. We are built specifically for online learning, meaning everything from our teacher training to the curriculum is created with the digital environment in mind.

Oregon has plenty of online learning options, but it can be daunting for families to locate one to meet their student's learning preferences. When selecting a virtual school parents should evaluate several areas:

Safe learning environment

Before the pandemic, students en-

rolled in virtual schools for physical and mental health safety concerns like bullying.

Online schools should offer a safe and welcoming virtual learning environment. The school's online learning portal, allowing students to access assignments, email and webinar systems, should be protected by security protocols.

Comprehensive curriculum

High-quality online schools offer a rigorous, complete curriculum, meeting or exceeding state standards, which keep students motivated and engaged in learning.

Ideally, students shouldn't be sitting in front of a screen or a Zoom session for several hours a day. Reading, writing and other offline learning is essential and encouraged for a well-rounded student.

Teacher training

Teachers at a full-time virtual school should be state-certified and specially trained in online instruction.

At Willamette Connections Academy, teachers bring their skills and personality to the virtual classroom, not only getting to know their students, but often providing learning support for the entire family.

Individual attention

Students can obtain more individualized attention in full-time online schools.

Parents should look for schools where teachers provide one-on-one attention for students, helping them accelerate learning in areas of strength or receive assistance in subjects that call for improvement.

See if teachers have virtual office hours, and are available by phone and email to support the specific needs of each child.

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Parental involvement

One silver lining of the pandemic is that some families for the first time had a ringside seat to their child's education during distance learning. Many enjoyed being more involved and understanding how their students preferred to learn.

Families looking at online education choices should inquire about the expectations for “learning coaches” at prospective virtual schools. At Willamette Connections Academy, learning coaches (parents or other trusted adults) often assist teachers by making sure attendance and student work is complete.

When parents take an active role in their child's education, students are more likely to succeed.

Socialization

Virtual schools that provide students with a solid social and emotional atmosphere should be at the top of your list. Learning online doesn't mean learning alone.

Students at our school connect with classmates during interactive live online classroom sessions, clubs and activities, plus face-to-face field

trips when it is safe to do so. Flexibility in virtual learning not only makes room in the schedule for school events, but also volunteering, extra-curricular activities and more.

Student support

Support services are critical to look for in an experienced virtual school, including mentoring, tutoring and technical support. It is also important to ask if the school has a dedicated staff to assist students with different learning needs and a counseling team to help support children from an emotional standpoint.

While students often thrive in full-time virtual school, it's not the best fit for every child. The pandemic changed the thinking of many parents and educators about technology in academics. I'm optimistic that the result will be a better future for our children.

Willamette Connections Academy is now enrolling for the 2021-22 academic year. To learn more about the school or to begin the enrollment process visit WillametteConnectionsAcademy.com or call 888-478-9474.

Chris Long is the principal at Willamette Connections Academy.

Amazon submits plans for logistics center in Woodburn

Bill Poehler

Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Amazon plans to build a five-story, 3.8 million-square-foot logistics center to store, prepare and distribute products on 82 acres in Woodburn.

The center will create 1,250 new jobs, according to plans filed with the city.

The online retailer has purchased 128 acres on Butteville Road next to the WinCo Foods Distribution Center along Interstate 5 for \$27 million.

Called “Project Basie” in planning documents submitted to Woodburn, the seven adjoining plots the online retail giant purchased are in the city's southwest industrial area, a location eyed for major developments since a 2001 city analysis.

Woodburn annexed the land into its urban growth boundary in 2016 after years of court battles.

In a statement, the city said Amazon has not applied for or indicated it will seek the city's enterprise zone tax breaks.

Businesses that qualify for the city's enterprise zone program can get property tax exemptions for up to five years, but they must meet qualifications such as paying workers more than \$67,134 annually, or about \$32 an hour on average.

According to documents submitted to the city, more than 1,250 jobs will be created at the Woodburn location at an average starting wage of \$17 per hour plus benefits.

Seattle-based Amazon opened a fulfillment center in Salem in 2017 and a second in Salem in 2019 among its six locations already in Oregon. The retailer has become the largest online marketplace and surpassed Walmart as the most valuable retailer in the United States in 2017.

According to the Marion County Tax Assessor's Office, Amazon purchased two pieces of the land for the Woodburn project for \$2.5 million from Darma Real Estate on April 23, then purchased the majority of the land from Specht Woodburn LLC for \$22.3 million and the rest from the Weisz Family for \$1.6 million June 23.

In its plans, Amazon asked to exceed the maximum building height, not extend Woodland Avenue, reduce the required number of loading spaces and allow accessory structures within six feet of the main building, along with right-of-way design exceptions.

Among the options laid out in the application submitted by planning group Mackenzie, a roundabout would be installed and a new intersection would be added at what would become New Butteville Road where it meets Highway 219.

Planning documents show the widening of Butteville Road to three lanes, adding extra lanes at some points from its current two-land configuration, adding bike lanes, sidewalks and a landscaping strip along the road.

Major improvements to the Interstate 5 interchange at Woodburn were completed in 2015, allowing for more traffic through the busy area.

But the company has proposed adding capacity to the southbound I-5 off-ramp.

Amazon has yet to submit a complete land use application. City spokesperson Tommy Moore said a public hearing with the city's planning commission has not been scheduled, but one is expected later this summer.

The site is already being cleared, which is allowed without a land-use permit. The company will have to apply to the city for building permits after that.



Land is cleared at the future site of an Amazon facility in Woodburn. BRIAN HAYES / STATESMAN JOURNAL



The Amazon logo is seen in Amazon, in Douai, northern France, Thursday April 16, 2020. Amazon has decided to suspend “temporarily” all activity in France, one day after a French court found it wasn't doing enough to protect its workers amid the virus crisis in the country. AP PHOTO/MICHEL SPINGLER

Amazon did not respond to the Statesman Journal's request for information about the proposed Woodburn center.

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