

Would virtual school be a good fit for your family?

By SUZANNE KENNEDY

Lately, we've been hearing more and more about online schooling. Perhaps you have a child with special needs, or one whose sports schedule is so intense you need a school experience with flexibility. Some parents of children who've experience bullying or who have health issues also may decide that online schooling is the best option. Maybe you just want more family time. Whatever the reason, the decision of which program to use may be daunting.

Getting started

First, decide whether or not you are looking for a religious or secular program. Looking at your budget to determine what you can afford will help you choose between public and private.

Second, think about what you want your child's schooling to look like. Do you want him or her to do all of it on the computer, or just some of it? Maybe you feel comfortable teaching math, but would like to expose her to a foreign language. Do you travel a lot and need the lessons to be in the form of videos? Perhaps you'd rather your student converse with an actual teacher in real time. Some options even have your child as a student in an actual classroom, answering questions and participating in class discussions.

In Oregon, the homeschooling laws are pretty lenient, but you still will want to make sure that the online program you use is accredited, especially if your student is in high school. Check to see who does the grading, how report cards are issued, and ask about attendance requirements. They should let you speak with the instructors as well.

Here are a few of the more popular options:

- **Connections Academy:** This secular site offers K-12 tuition-free, fully accredited online public schooling in many states, as well as a private fully accredited college-preparatory K-12 private school, available to students everywhere. Visit connectionsacademy.com.
- **Baker Web Academy:** Secular, tuition-free program that offers online and textbook-based classes with teacher support through technology and face-to-face home visits. Visit bakercharters.org.
- **A Beka Academy:** K-12 and college prep program featuring high-quality video instruction; uses Christian character-building textbooks from A Beka Book. Includes the option to sit in on live classes, ask questions, and participate in discussions. Visit Abekaacademy.org.
- **Alpha Omega Academy:** An accredited online academy and Christian homeschool curriculum for grades pre-K-12. Visit Aoaacademy.com.
- **K12:** K-12 online education offers tuition-free public and tuition-based private schooling with multiple start dates throughout the year. Full- and part-time availability. Visit K12.com.

Coming soon

The InterMountain Education Service District, serving numer-



ous districts in Eastern Oregon, is spearheading an online schooling initiative in our area. The IMESD is committing financial, human and technological resources toward its success. One of the main goals is to keep tax dollars in-district while meeting the diverse needs of the students.

Each district is structuring its online experience in its own way. Most larger districts will have an online coordinator and all will have teachers to monitor the students, grade the papers, and answer questions. Chris Bettineski, the main online coordinator at the IMESD, says that they are providing the

platform (called Canvas) and the access to the learning management system, Acellus. Acellus delivers the curriculum in the form of canned videos and programs.

Because each district is running its own program, start dates will differ, as will the amount of flexibility of the programs. Some will be ready for all online, and some will offer a combination, so be sure to check with your local district.

If you are looking for an alternative to completely traditional school, online school may be just the thing for your family.

Suzanne Kennedy is a former middle school teacher who lives in Pendleton with her husband and three children.

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