Remote Learning in Oregon

Background

Remote learning programs have expanded across Oregon for well over a decade in the form of specialized courses available to students in rural communities, hybrid and virtual options for local schools, virtual public charter schools, and home-based options. Most recently, remote learning has become a familiar part of many students' education through the COVID-19 pandemic response. Even with a return to in-person learning for the significant majority of public schools, remote learning will continue to play a role in K-12 public education. This work serves as a response to the continued growth of remote and online programs as well as other factors including:

- The 2017 Secretary of State Audit of online and alternative education;
- Disparities in educational outcomes and access for students attending online schools and programs and those attending brick and mortar schools and programs, and
- Research focused on online learning and student outcomes at a national level. The remote learning work is the first step in directly addressing the findings and recommendations identified in the 2017 Secretary of State Audit.

Secretary of State Audit (2017)

This Secretary of State Audit conducted in 2017 highlighted educational disparities and outcomes for students in Oregon attending online schools and programs as well as alternative schools and programs. On the basis of this finding, the audit recommended increased accountability, oversight, and improved outcomes for students in online education.

Within the 2017 Secretary of State Audit, the following recommendations specific to online schools were highlighted[1]:

- Work with online schools and other stakeholders to strengthen attendance and funding standards for virtual schools.
- Improve public reporting of online school performance and student engagement. Options include reporting teacher-student loads, student turnover, and credit accumulation rates, and including virtual schools in new alternative school accountability systems when appropriate.
- Verify the quality and suitability of online credit recovery options used by Oregon schools.
- Develop standards for district reviews of online programs and charter agreements with online schools, and ensure districts are following them.

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[1] While there were several additional recommendations identified within the audit, many of the recommendations were in reference to alternative education. For the purposes of this report, only recommendations pertaining to online learning are included.

- Establish performance requirements that statewide and regional online schools must meet before they can grow.
- Increase standards for sponsors of statewide and regional virtual charter schools which includes, spelling out individual district responsibilities in detail, increasing ODE oversight of districts, and shifting sponsorship of the schools to a central body.

Growth in Virtual Schools in Oregon

This report focuses broadly on remote schools, schools where students and the teacher are not in the same physical location for more than half of the instructional time. Given current data reporting practices, analyzing data specific to distance status has been difficult; up until the 2020-21 school year, there was not a distance learning designation. While there are limitations in data reporting practices, which will be further addressed in the section of the report focused on *"Satellite Data" - A Quantitative Look at Remote Learning in Oregon*, understanding enrollment patterns based on a school's virtual status are an important step as all schools that self-designate as either full virtual or focus virtual operate in a remote fashion.

Over the past decade, enrollment in full/focus virtual schools operating in Oregon have continued to steadily increase. *Figure 1* highlights the substantial growth in student enrollment between 2016-17 and 2021-22[2] with data showing the highest student enrollment occurring during the

> **Virtual School Status Designations:**
>
> **Full Virtual:** The school has no physical building where students meet with each other or with teachers on a regularly scheduled basis; all instruction is virtual.
>
> **Focus Virtual:** The school focuses on a systematic program of virtual instruction but includes some regularly scheduled in-person meetings including students and teachers as part of the instructional program
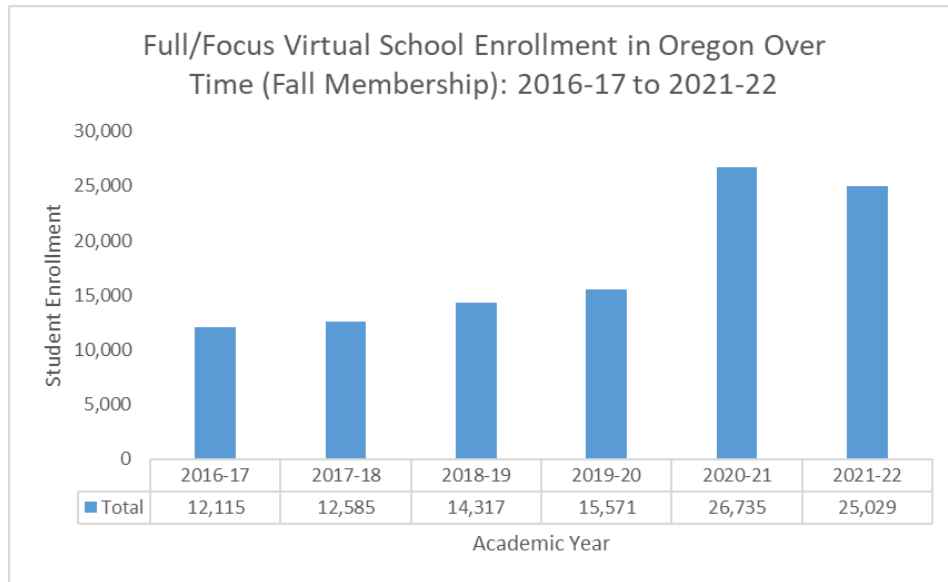>
> **Supplemental Virtual:** Students at this school have access to virtual courses, but virtual instruction is not the primary means of instruction.
>
> **Not Virtual:** The school does not offer any virtual instruction

2020-21 school year. Student enrollment in full/focus virtual schools has remained steady during the 2021-22 school year, post-statewide school closures, with an increase of 107% between the 2016-17 school year and the 2021-22 school year. It is important to note that the enrollment data included on *Figure 1* does not include students engaging in distance learning through CDL, students enrolled in a school that is designated as supplement virtual, or students enrolled in a virtual program.[3]

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[2] Enrollment data are drawn from the fall membership report and thus represents enrollment during fall of the academic year.

[3] See Section I for descriptions of virtual status and an additional discussion related to the limitations of the data in this report, including the designation between school and program.

Figure 1. Full/Focus Virtual School Enrollment in Oregon Over Time (Fall Membership): 2017-18 to 2021-22.

Full/Focus Virtual School Enrollment in Oregon Over Time (Fall Membership): 2016-17 to 2021-22

	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Total	12,115	12,585	14,317	15,571	26,735	25,029

Online Schools and Programs Research

The schools and programs operating in Oregon are unique with regard to the remote nature of their program model, which does not necessarily equate with their virtual status. Given the unique nature of these models, the research that most closely aligns is that which focuses on online or virtual schools. While this research does not capture all of the program models operating in Oregon, it does capture the majority of schools in operation, schools that as seen in *Figure 1* served just over 25,000 students during the 2021-2022 school year.

Working to better understand the scope of online learning and support high-quality learning within online schools and programs has been a focus of researchers and policymakers for decades. Several key findings highlighted within the research point to the need for continued work in this area.

1) There is an overrepresentation of white students enrolled in online schools and programs[4][5].
2) Students in online schools continually underperform when compared to their peers in brick and mortar schools, with graduation rates of 55% in virtual schools compared to the national average of 85%[6] as well as weaker academic growth in both reading and math[7]. It is, however, important to note that there has been an improvement in graduation rates for online schools nationally[8].

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[4] Credo. (2015). Online Charter School Study
[5] Molnar, A. (2021). Virtual Schools in the US 2021. University of Colorado, Boulder.
[6] Molnar, A. (2021). Virtual Schools in the US 2021. University of Colorado, Boulder.
[7] Credo. (2015). Online Charter School Study
[8] Molnar, A. (2021). Virtual Schools in the US 2021. University of Colorado, Boulder

COVID-19 and the Future of Distance Learning in K-12

During the spring of the 2019-2020 school year, when schools shifted to comprehensive distance learning (CDL) given the health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, students and families across the nation were catapulted into what for many were unfamiliar learning environments. Oregon, like other states across the nation, quickly shifted to a model of distance learning with teachers providing instruction to students through technologies that were new to many. While remote schools have been in operation across Oregon far before the COVID-19 pandemic, brick and mortar schools were forced to reimagine new ways of teaching and learning.

Although schools in Oregon have since been able to move back to an in-person model of learning, there have been consistent increases in enrollment in online schools both in Oregon and nationally[9] for a variety of reasons. Some of these reasons include families wanting to continue to experience the flexibility that they had during distance learning, student success and well-being during distance learning, and health reasons. Given the increase in enrollment, focusing on the future of distance learning in K-12 classrooms is an important consideration as we continue to develop deeper understandings of the opportunities and challenges inherent in various learning models and school environments.

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[9]Molnar, A. (2021). Virtual Schools in the US 2021. University of Colorado, Boulder.