

CONCLUSION

Online education is reconfiguring the delivery of schooling and the activities that students experience on a daily basis. However, our analyses show (in line with other recent reports, such as CREDO's) that Ohio's e-school students are not achieving at the same level as their peers in brick-and-mortar district schools.⁴³ The analyses also support what charter advocates have long suspected: that e-schools drag down the impact of the state's charter sector. Our findings reveal some important considerations for Ohio policy makers as they consider the future place of online learning within K-12 education. They also highlight key questions and challenges that policy makers, advocates, and educators ought to bear in mind, and properly address, as the adoption of technology in education increases in the coming years.

1 E-schools serve challenging student populations, by their own design and by the choice of those who attend them. Many of these students may not be well suited or well supported to succeed in online learning environments that require independent learning and self-direction. E-schools must figure out how to do better by this population.

Students in Ohio appear to self-select into different education options. Compared to students in brick-and-mortar district schools, e-school students are lower-achieving, more likely to participate in the federal free and reduced price lunch program, more likely to be designated as special education, more likely to have repeated the prior grade, and less likely to participate in gifted education.

These differences are not particularly surprising if we consider that students who choose fully online schools may already be failing out of the brick-and-mortar K-12 system, or (especially in the case of special education students) students for whom a traditional classroom and school just isn't a good fit. These students may be best poised to *benefit* from the advantages offered by a virtual school—flexible hours and pacing, a safe and comfortable learning environment, a way for students with social or behavioral problems to focus on academics, increased engagement since students can choose from a vast array of elective courses based on their own interests, and the chance to develop advanced virtual communication skills. On the other hand, some e-school students may actually be *least suited to thrive* in an online learning environment. If they failed in brick-and-mortar schools because they lack self-motivation, independent learning skills, parental support, and/or a quiet, stable place to do schoolwork, they are even less likely to do well in a virtual school.

The bottom line is that online providers need not use their unique student population as an excuse for their performance. Instead, they must tailor the way they deliver content and provide academic supports to maximize student success.

2 **If e-schools can't effectively educate the students who choose to enroll, consider utilizing them more strategically—specifically, by targeting students who are well suited to benefit most from online delivery.**

While charter schools in Ohio cannot, under current law, practice selective admission, other public schools can. District-run magnet schools have specialized academic focuses or themes. They also use a competitive enrollment process, often involving entrance exams, interviews, or auditions, to select students most suited to their programs (and most likely to benefit from them). Policy makers might consider allowing e-schools to do the same, enabling them to target their unique delivery system to students who would get the most out of them. Some might worry that selectivity violates the principle of self-selection that guides school choice, but the choice process also requires that students have enough information to determine whether they fit in a particular program. In the case of e-schools, this information is not about a special program or curriculum, but rather about the specific demands of the virtual instructional configuration. At the very least, e-schools should actively recruit students most likely to succeed in a fully online learning environment (or students who the schools believe they can sufficiently orient and support).

3 **Rethink the “all-or-nothing” nature of enrolling in e-schools. Instead, allow students to combine high-quality fully online and face-to-face classes (without making them jump through hoops to earn credit, or pay tuition).**

One positive aspect of online courses in general is that they can supplement what is offered at a student's local school. This could be especially impactful for gifted and advanced students who wish to take Advanced Placement or other college-level coursework; students interested in “niche” electives (such as less popular world languages, advanced music or art, or specialized career and technical education); those who attend small schools with limited course offerings; and those living in rural areas whose district only has one high school. Yet in order for an Ohio student to take *one* online course at an e-school, he must take *all* of his courses there (and withdraw from his brick-and-mortar school). So in practice, e-schools do not supplement brick-and-mortars, but rather supplant them.

In theory, there is another option. Students can take independent study—or one-off—courses online while remaining enrolled at their current brick-and-mortar school. In the past, this option was partially facilitated by a system called iLearnOhio, which catalogued independent study courses offered by a number of external providers. It was also tasked with determining whether each course met Ohio's educational standards—a necessary step since these courses are not administered by the state's own e-schools.⁴⁴ Further, the courses are fee-based, and it is the responsibility of a student's family to pay.⁴⁵ Currently, while students can still take single, fee-based independent study courses from external providers, there is not a central clearinghouse for courses, a requirement that they be aligned to Ohio's standards, or a mandate that course providers be reviewed and approved.

If e-schools were allowed to partially enroll students so that they could take single online courses, they might greatly expand students' access to quality coursework aligned to state standards. Florida is one example: The state-run Florida Virtual School offers online courses that are available to students enrolled in brick-and-mortar public schools. Florida students can also take fully online courses offered by any district in the state, or by a handful of approved external providers (who must demonstrate prior success with online courses), as long as they remain enrolled in their home brick-and-mortar school and district. There is no fee for students and no limitation on the types of courses they can take (as long as they are academically qualified), and districts are not allowed to restrict students from enrolling. In other words, the system functions as one giant online school. The Course Choice program in Louisiana is another example, although it only allows students to take courses that are not offered at their current brick-and-mortar school (unless they attend a low-achieving school). Ohio policy makers should consider adjusting the structure and rules of its virtual education system so that all public school students can take high-quality, credit-bearing, free online courses.

4

Harness the potential of e-schools to better understand how students learn online.

We know so little about the practices and resources that are most effective to teach K–12 students in virtual schools. For starters, if students with lower prior achievement scores are enrolling in e-schools, what types of academic support do they need to succeed there? How much should they interact with teachers, and how many students can one teacher effectively serve? How much support do students need from parents or other family members, and how do we prepare families for that role? At an even more basic level, how do students and teachers really spend their time? These are questions that are largely unexplored in the research literature.

E-schools can act as labs to answer these questions, and the answers would have an enormous benefit not only to them, but to the entire field of education. We already know that merely sitting students in front of a computer with an online curriculum isn't the best way for them—or anyone else—to learn. Research on distance learning in higher education has found that more is needed besides access to a computer in a distant room; even adults are seldom motivated and disciplined enough to succeed that way. E-schools can facilitate an understanding of how to leverage online curricula—along with richer and deeper learning environments—for the neediest and most underserved high school (and younger) learners. From this potential evidence base, providers then need to be held to high standards of practice relative to the populations they serve.

Though the age of online *learning* has dawned, it's evident that there is much room for improvement as far as online *schooling* goes—especially in Ohio. There is great opportunity in the state, and others, to provide a high-quality education to students via fully online schools (and online courses, and blended learning), especially for students who don't have what they need in the school building closest to home. This is good news for advocates of online learning, and educational choice more generally. But to take advantage of that opportunity, policy makers and educators would be wise to determine how virtual schools are similar to and different from brick-and-mortar ones, and then treat each accordingly. Supporting high-quality online learning requires a dedication to adopting and continuously improving promising practices. It also calls for a willingness to completely overhaul those that are consistently demonstrated to be ineffective.