

## *Duke Gifted Letter*

### *Schoolhouse Options*

Virtual Schools—a Growing Reality

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Imagine public education back in 1910: a single teacher in a one-room schoolhouse lit with candles and students working on slate boards with chalk. Fast-forward to 2010, an age so dependent on advanced technology that students take some classes online, others in a traditional schoolroom, and still others, perhaps, at the local community college. Public education is becoming blended, drawing on the strengths of traditional classrooms and other educational venues.

*Virtual education is a trend growing at an astonishing rate.*

When the Florida Virtual School was founded in 1997, no one could have imagined that tens of thousands of Florida students would be logging into class only eight years later. Virtual education is a trend growing at an astonishing rate. According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, 36 percent of public school districts had students enrolled in distance education courses. During the 2004–5 school year some 550,000 students took online courses, and their numbers are expected to grow at an annual rate of 25 percent for many years to come.

At the state and national levels, policymakers are turning to virtual schools to address educational needs, economic-development challenges, and equity-of-access issues in ways that will help ensure that all students, wherever they attend school, have similar educational opportunities. Already 22 states have launched virtual schools, and each year more of them are created.

One reason that online programs are so attractive to today's students is that they make it possible to arrange classes beyond school-bell boundaries. With admission to colleges and universities becoming more competitive each year, students load up on Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate programs, honors credits, and college-level courses. Virtual schools offer them more options and the flexibility to fit the additional coursework into their schedules. Many online programs also allow students to complete classes at a pace suited to their own educational needs.

Ensuring a high-quality education for all students is a constant battle. Students in rural, remote, or even urban communities find themselves with fewer advanced educational options than their suburban counterparts. Diminishing school budgets and shortages of

highly qualified teachers leave many rural and urban schools unable to staff AP or elective classes. Virtual schools can help close economic and demographic gaps between student groups by delivering courses to students no matter where they live. In some school districts, students who do not have home access to a computer or the Internet can complete online courses in the school's computer lab during school hours.

Along with all of its benefits, virtual education entails certain commitments and requirements. Here are some key questions students should ask themselves prior to enrolling in an online program:

- Can I set a personal schedule and meet the deadlines for assigned work?
- Are my writing and communication skills average or better?
- Can I solve problems and work through difficulties independently?
- Can I read and follow detailed instructions on my own?
- Am I comfortable using the Internet as a means of communication and research?
- Do I have regular access to the Internet and e-mail?

Students who answer yes to all of these questions are likely to do well in an online program. Those who answer no to two or more questions may want to improve in those areas first.

Parents are responsible for ensuring that online learning is appropriate for their children. They should research the schools available online to confirm their accreditation by a reputable institution is in good standing. An easy way to do so is to visit the guidance counselor at your school. Parents should ask about the communications practices of the various online programs and learn how teachers in them interact with students as well as parents. One key to a successful educational experience, either online or in a traditional classroom, is frequent and open communication. Find out what level of communication to expect from the school and the teachers and what is expected of parents and students. An understanding of the school's policies and procedures will contribute to a positive learning experience.

Also consult the guidance counselor at your school to ensure that credits earned from a virtual school will count toward meeting elementary and secondary education requirements. Not all state, district, and school policies regard such credits equally. —

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