



Choosing a Colorado Online School for Your Child



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Executive Summary

The use of the Internet as an education program delivery system has increased rapidly in Colorado in recent years. The first full-time Colorado public online program began in the Monte Vista School District in 1995. For the 2011-2012 school year, 22 full-time multi-district public online schools are certified to serve students statewide. Colorado students may choose from any of the statewide programs. Additionally, 24 full-time single-district online programs serve students who reside in a particular district.

Among the 46 programs are some similarities, but many have unique features. Several programs target at-risk students or students who have dropped out of school. Some school districts have developed their own curricula. However, most school districts and charter schools contract with outside vendors for curricula and some for school management services. Most online students learn from home. Some school districts offer computer labs for students. One statewide program serves its students daily at learning centers. An increased number of programs are creating “centers” where students can have face-to-face time with teachers for conferences and tutoring. Program learning materials vary from online-only to a mix of online and printed textbooks. Other common differences among schools include class size, the amount of contact required with a licensed teacher, availability of additional supplemental programs that support learning, graduation requirements, and rigor of curricula. Most programs offer extracurricular activities and the student can participate in school district athletics.

With so many available options, it is important that parents learn about the many facets of an online school. Parents should attend an open house in person if geographically possible. Included in this Issue Paper are questions selected from another important publication, [*A Parent's Guide to Choosing the Right Online Program*](#), published by the International Association for K-12 Online Learning ([iNACOL](#)).

This Issue Paper is designed to assist parents as they navigate Colorado's online education options, providing a basic understanding of full-time online education while also covering the following topics:

- [What is Full-Time Online Education?](#)
- [Brief History of Online Education in Colorado](#)
- [Definitions Related to Online Schooling](#)
- [Questions Every Parent Should Ask](#)
- [2011-2012 Multi-District, Full-Time Online Program Profiles](#)
- [2011-2012 Single-District, Full-Time Online School and Program Profiles](#)
- [What Does an Online School Look Like? \(With longer profiles of a few programs\)](#)

Introduction

An established leader in promoting public school choice, the state of Colorado also has become a leader in providing full-time online learning options. For the 2011-12 school year, Colorado will have at least 22 multi-district programs open to students statewide, and 24 single-district online programs available to students residing in that school district.

What is Full-Time Online Education?

Full-time online education uses the Internet and computer technology to deliver instruction to a student. Some programs enable students to access courses entirely from home, while others provide a physical location for students to access courses and receive help. Courses typically combine some amount of online and offline work that varies based on grade level and the curriculum. Colorado's public online schools are tuition-free and open to students who are Colorado residents. Just like other public school students, online students are required to take state achievement tests.¹



*A mentor works with a Hope Online student.
(Photo courtesy of Hope Online Learning Academy Co-Op)*

Colorado's online education programs vary in their approaches, enabling different schools to accommodate a wide range of student academic needs and family support. However, online education may not be a good fit for every child and family. Full-time online education requires a significant amount of parental involvement and student motivation. For example, most K-8 programs require a parent to be home with the student and to provide guidance to the student. A parent is a student's learning coach, and though a public school teacher is assigned to the student, the amount of communication with the teacher(s) varies among the online schools.

Cyberschools serve students with various needs. Originally, students who schooled online were high school students who needed to work during the day, were pregnant or needed to take care of a child, or were serving time in a detention center. Today, students enroll in an online school for a broad range of reasons such as the need for a flexible schedule, the opportunity to accelerate learning or slow down the pace to absorb the material, and more. In addition, some families desire to school their children at home and like the connection to a public online school where they receive free curricula, guidance from a licensed teacher, and a social network.

With so many different options available to Colorado students and their parents, it can be difficult to determine which program is the best fit for a particular student and family. Parents should become

informed consumers before they choose a full-time online program for their child. Some differences among schools include class size, the amount of contact required with a licensed teacher, the availability of additional online programs that support learning, graduation requirements, and rigor of curricula.

Brief History of Online Education in Colorado

The first Colorado public online education program was started by the Monte Vista School District in 1995 as a pilot program. It “was removed from pilot status in 1998,” the same year that House Bill 1227 was passed. That legislation enabled other school districts “to offer their own online programs.”² Since then, the number of public online education programs in Colorado has expanded greatly.

Though Colorado law continued to be amended to reflect the growing acceptance of online education, it was nearly another decade before significant changes were made. In 2007, Senate Bill 215 replaced the previous statute authorizing online education. The new law established criteria for the creation and administration of online programs, while also distinguishing between single-district and multi-district status. Some policy makers expressed concerns that a very small school district might not have the capacity to supervise an online school serving hundreds or even thousands of students residing outside its boundaries. So, among other accountability requirements, the 2007 legislation required multi-district online programs to be certified by the [Colorado Department of Education \(CDE\)’s newly-created Division of Online Learning](#), also established by SB 215. Additionally, the bill opened public online schools to students who had been enrolled in private school or homeschooled the year before, who were previously excluded.³



Lori Cooney, President of the Colorado Coalition of Cyberschool Families, speaks at Cyberschool Day at the Capitol, February 2011.

In the 2010-11 school year 15,249 students enrolled in Colorado full-time public online schools, comprising nearly 2 percent of the state’s public school enrollment and representing a single year’s growth of 15 percent. For 2011-12 the number of single district programs has doubled, as school districts compete to win back students they have lost to multi-district statewide programs.

Definitions

The following definitions will help Colorado parents understand common terms they will see while learning about online schools:

Advanced Placement (AP): Standardized college-level classes taken by students in high school. Most four-year colleges grant college credit and/or advanced placement based on a student's AP exam score.

Asynchronous instruction: Instruction that is not delivered in real time, such as through e-mail or discussion boards.⁴



*Branson Online students participate in a science fair.
(Photo courtesy of Branson Online)*

Blended learning: According to a recent paper by the Innosight Institute, “blended learning is any time a student learns at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home *and* at least in part through online delivery with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace.”⁵

Brick-and-mortar: A traditional educational environment, such as a school with a physical building.

Center: “Drop-in center,” “enrichment center,” and “tutoring center” are among the names used to describe a location where students can meet face-to-face with a teacher for conferences,

extracurricular activities, or occasional tutoring. These locations are not the same as a “Learning Center” which is defined below.

Charter School Institute: The Charter School Institute is an independent agency in the Colorado Department of Education established in 2004 as an alternative to school district authorization of charter schools, including online charter schools.⁶

Concurrent Enrollment: Concurrent enrollment indicates that “a student is simultaneously enrolled in a local education provider and in an institute of higher education or career and technical courses.”⁷ The Concurrent Enrollment Programs Acts passed in 2009 (House Bill 09-1319 and Senate Bill 09-285) aim to increase the quality of and access to concurrent enrollment programs, to “improve coordination between institutions of secondary education and institutions of higher education,” and to “ensure financial transparency and accountability.”⁸

Credit Recovery: Classes designed for students who have lost high school credit because they were habitually absent, failed a class, or dropped out of school. Successful completion of credit recovery classes provides the opportunity for students to advance to the next grade level or graduate from high school.

GED: The General Educational Development (GED) Tests measure the academic skills and knowledge similar to a four-year high school education and provide a means for those who have not graduated

from high school to earn a high school equivalency diploma. The GED Tests measure competency in five subject areas: Language Arts-Reading, Language Arts-Writing, Social Studies, Science, and Mathematics.

Learning Center: A learning center is defined in statute as “a facility in which a consistent group of students meets more often than once per week under the supervision of a teacher or mentor for a significant portion of a school day for the purpose of participating in an on-line program.”⁹

Learning Coach: A learning coach is typically a parent or guardian who “works closely with the teacher to ensure assignments are completed, schedules are met, and students are engaged and motivated.”¹⁰ A learning coach typically plays a more significant role in the elementary grades than in secondary grades.

Mentor: A mentor provides supervision at a learning center, though is not required to be a licensed teacher. A mentor is required to meet the requirements for paraprofessionals.¹¹

Multi-District Online Program: A multi-district online program “serves a student population drawn from two or more school districts.”¹² Each multi-district program must be certified by the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) to serve students statewide.

Online Program: A full-time online program or school “delivers a sequential program of synchronous or asynchronous instruction from a teacher to a student primarily through the use of technology via the internet in a virtual or remote setting.”¹³

Single-District Online Program: A single-district online program serves students who reside within the school district. If the program is authorized by one or more districts or by a board of cooperative services the students must reside in one of the authorizing districts or within the member school districts of the authorizing board of cooperative services.¹⁴ The program can allow enrollment for up to 10 non-resident students.¹⁵ These programs are not required to be certified by CDE.

Supplemental Online Program: A supplemental online program “offers one or more on-line courses to students to augment an educational program provided by a school district, charter school, or board of cooperative services.”¹⁶

Synchronous instruction: Instruction in real time, such as through videoconferencing and chat.¹⁷



Students work with an instructor at Longmont's GOAL Academy drop-in center. (Photo courtesy of GOAL Academy)

Questions Every Parent Should Ask

Even after parents have determined if an online school will work for their family and their child's academic needs, it can be difficult to find the best option. It is strongly recommended that before enrolling a child into a full-time online program parents read [*A Parent's Guide to Choosing the Right Online Program*](#), published by the International Association for K-12 Online Learning ([iNACOL](#)).¹⁸ The publication lists important questions that parents should ask before choosing a full-time online program. Some of the questions are listed below:

iNACOL Questions for Choosing an Online Program

- Does the school offer the grade levels needed for my child(ren), and does this program offer the range of courses my child needs, such as general studies, credit recovery, Advanced Placement or postsecondary programs with college credit?
- Are there any costs associated with the program, such as fees for materials?
- Does the school provide the use of a computer, printer, monitor, microphone, keyboard, modem, etc., while the student is enrolled?
- If computers are provided, does each student enrolled get his or her own computer, or do multiple students in the household share a computer?
- Who pays for Internet access – the school or the family?
- Does the school have student and parent handbooks, and can I access the handbooks before making a decision about enrolling in the school?
- Does the school provide “day in the life” information so that I can understand what a typical school day should include?
- When I have questions about school policy or my child's needs, is it possible to speak to a live person (phone or live chat) who is knowledgeable about the program and support options?
- Is coursework fully online or is there a face-to-face component? If there is a face-to-face component, is it required?
- Does the school follow a traditional nine-month schedule or enroll students year-round? Can my child start at any point during the school year if necessary?
- What is the school's policy for dropping individual courses?
- Do I have to take my child to a specific site for state achievement tests? How often is this required?
- How far away is the closest testing site?
- Can my child work at his/her own pace, accelerating when possible and slowing down when needed? Are there any limits to how quickly he/she can work through one course and move onto the next?
- Does the school have any real-time (synchronous) components such as live chat, video conferencing, etc.? If so, is my child required to attend these events? Are these events archived to be accessed at a later time or for review?

iNACOL Questions for Choosing an Online Program - Continued

- How many credits are required for graduation? What are other requirements for graduation (e.g., community service, senior project, etc.)?
- Will this online school's credits be accepted by the college, trade school or university my child is planning to attend?
- If my child is planning to enter the military, will the online school's diploma have the same credibility and acceptance as a traditional diploma?

Colorado full-time online schools vary in the services they provide, structure, and governance. Parents should also ask the following questions:

Additional Questions for Choosing an Online Program

- Does the school have a particular mission or focus?
- Is the program geared toward a certain type of learner (e.g., gifted, at-risk)?
- Is the school a charter school or a district school?
- Is the school run by a management company, charter school staff, or by school district staff?
- What curricula does the school use? Does it include textbooks, or is it all online?
- What elective courses does the school offer?
- Does the school require individual parent/student conferences via telephone or video conferencing? If so, how often?
- How often will the licensed teacher grade my child's work? In what subjects? How will my child receive feedback from the teacher?
- How many students will be assigned to my child's teacher(s)?
- How much time will my child be expected to spend online vs. offline?
- What type of assistance does the school offer if my student is struggling?
- What opportunities for social and extracurricular activities are available?

In order to answer these questions, parents should begin by studying the websites for the online schools that meet their criteria, as well as applicable national websites for the school or curriculum. It is also advisable for parents to personally contact the school for further information and attend a public open house meeting.

Though not every online program will work for every student, the large number and different types of public online schools in Colorado can accommodate many of the academic and family needs of Colorado students.



Hope Online students read together.
(Photo courtesy of Hope Online Learning Academy Co-Op)

2011-12 Multi-District, Full-Time Online Programs

Multi-district programs serve students statewide. Some programs may provide computer equipment and Internet reimbursement. Many online programs provide social opportunities such as field trips, dances, workshops, clubs, and extracurricular activities. Many programs also offer the option of concurrent enrollment, earning simultaneous college credit in high

school. For the most current list of online programs in Colorado, please go to the [Colorado Department of Education's Online Programs page](#).

Though the descriptions below are not meant to be comprehensive, a brief summary of each program's key features follows:

Academy Online High School (AOHS) serves students in grades 9-12 and is run by Academy School District 20 in Colorado Springs. Courses use only electronic resources, and students have access to the AOHS Lab for tutoring and advising. The curriculum is designed by the district, and is not intended for credit recovery or self-paced work. The school offers full-time and part-time options. AOHS partners with Colorado Technical University to offer dual-credit courses.¹⁹

ACHIEVEk12 serves students in grades K-12 and is run by Colorado Springs School District 11. Courses primarily use electronic resources, though some textbooks, printed materials and hands-on manipulatives and other materials may be required, all of which are provided by the program. The school has a tutoring center located at District 11's Irving Educational Center, which offers students face-to-face access to their teachers for communication and assistance, parent training seminars and student mentoring sessions. The school uses Odyssey by Compass Learning for elementary students and Aventa Learning for middle and high school students. Additionally, music, art, and physical education courses are offered with activities available both at the Irving Educational Center and at home.²⁰

Boulder Universal, run by Boulder Valley School District, serves students in grades 6-12 and offers a year-round program. The school uses the Aventa Learning curriculum. The school offers full- and part-time enrollment for in-district students, and a full-time option for out-of-district students. To be considered part-time, an in-district student must take at least two courses and be enrolled by October 1. In addition, in-district students enrolled full-time in a brick-and-mortar school can take one course

online but must pay \$350 per course per semester. The school offers Advanced Placement (AP) and credit recovery courses.²¹

Branson School Online: Please see the longer profile below.

College Pathways is a program associated with The Classical Academy (TCA) charter school authorized by Academy District 20 in Colorado Springs that serves students in grades 7-12. Designed as a college-prep program, College Pathways represents a partnership between TCA and Pikes Peak Community College (PPCC) to provide qualified students with access to college courses. High school courses use a curriculum designed by TCA. Co-located on the PPCC campus, the program uses a hybrid online model combining both classroom and online instruction for pre-collegiate courses. Uniforms are required. Students may attend the events and dances at TCA.²²

Colorado Calvert Academy is a Fort Collins-based charter school authorized by the Charter School Institute that serves students in grades K-8. The school uses the Calvert School curriculum, which is a traditional and rigorous program that has been used world-wide for over a century. It includes textbooks, online learning, and lesson manuals for the learning coaches. The school also uses Verticy Learning for students who have language-based learning differences. Each Calvert Academy student has an individualized “Navigator map” (learning plan), as well as auto-graded daily checkpoint assignments. Each student will also have at least two 45-60 minute live sessions a week. Enrollment is limited to 270 students, and acceptance is determined by lottery. The program offers field trips and P.E.²³



A Branson Online student shows her project at the school science fair. (Photo courtesy of Branson School Online)

Colorado Connections Academy: Please see the longer profile below.

Colorado Virtual Academy (COVA): Please see the longer profile below.

DPS Online High School, run by Denver Public Schools, serves students in grades 9-12. DPS Online High School offers full-time, part-time and credit recovery options. Students can have a flexible schedule and graduate quickly. AP courses and tuition-free college courses are available. DPS online also offers supplemental courses for \$100 each. Students who home school may purchase online courses. The program uses the DPS high school curriculum. Foreign language classes use a hybrid form of online learning and face-to-face instruction. In addition to online, telephone and in-person tutoring opportunities, the program provides educational centers for students who cannot afford home Internet access.²⁴

Colorado Cyberschool (eDCSD) serves students in grades K-12 and is run by the Douglas County School District. Besides serving students statewide, the district resident students in grades 3-12 who are enrolled in a brick-and-mortar Douglas County school may enroll in up to two online courses. Douglas County homeschooled students may also enroll in two classes. Students who are enrolled full-time in another school district may pay \$300 per course. The program also offers mentored,



Hope Online students participate in PE activities. (Photo courtesy of Hope Online Learning Academy Co-Op)

independent and self-paced learning options depending on an individual student's needs. The program uses the Lincoln Interactive curriculum except in middle school, where Aventa Learning is used. The school has field trips and other social events, as well as P.E. courses.²⁵

Edison Academy serves students in grades 6-12 and is run by Edison School District 54JT in rural Yoder, east of Colorado Springs. The program uses the Plato curriculum and Colorado Online classes (a provider of supplemental online coursework for Colorado school districts). All materials are web-based. For students enrolled in 11th and 12th grades, vocational or colleges classes are also available.²⁶

Falcon Virtual Academy (FVA) is run by Falcon School District 49 near Colorado Springs, and serves students in grades K-12. This program uses the K¹² Inc. and Aventa Learning curricula. A Connection Center allows students to connect with the staff and other students. The program offers full-time, part-time, supplemental options, and credit recovery. The school also offers a limited number of blended learning classes for students to physically come to school twice a week to take classes. The program offers AP and honors courses.²⁷

Guided Online Academic Learning (GOAL): Please see the longer profile below.

Hope Online Learning Academy Co-Op: Please see the longer profile below.

Insight School of Colorado serves students in grades 9-12 and contracts with Julesburg School District RE-1 near the Nebraska border. The school is managed by K¹² Inc. The program is open on a full-time basis to all eligible students statewide, and is also available part-time to students who reside in the Julesburg School District. The program uses the Aventa curriculum. Most textbooks are electronic, and all required texts are provided to students. Insight has virtual labs, as well as P.E. and nutrition courses. The program offers AP, honors and college prep courses, as well as an option to earn college credit. Students may also participate in Insight-sponsored field trips and dances, including prom.²⁸

Jefferson County Public Schools' (Jeffco) 21st Century Virtual Academy: Please see the longer profile below.

Karval Online Education serves students in grades K-12 and is run by Karval School District Re-23 on the rural Eastern Plains. The program uses a combination of courses from various vendors. The courseware includes Discover Intensive Phonics, Odysseyware, A+, and CustomGuide. A virtual driver's ed course is available for a fee. The school offers the opportunity for juniors and seniors to take college classes.²⁹

Monte Vista Online Academy, the first online school in Colorado, serves students in grades 6-12 and is run by Monte Vista School District C-8 in southern Colorado's San Luis Valley. The program is not affiliated with a commercial curriculum. The program offers a tuition-based summer school program and an online GED program.³⁰

Provost Academy is a charter school with offices in the Pikes Peak region's Green Mountain Falls, serving students in grades 9-12. Authorized by the Charter School Institute, the program is full-time only and uses the Edison Learning curriculum with a focus on science and mathematics. Students are required to take courses related to Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). Courses typically use electronic textbooks. The program uses daily assessments and weekly check-ins with advisors to monitor student progress, and offers AP courses, events and field trips.³¹

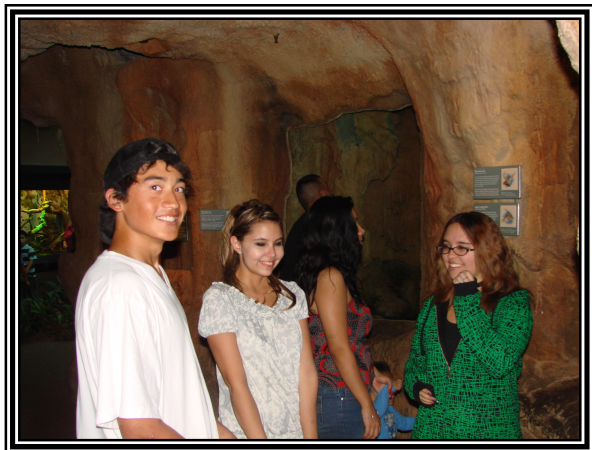


*Branson Online students learn about anatomy.
(Photo courtesy of Branson School Online)*

PSD Global Academy serves students in grades K-12 and is run by Poudre School District RE-1 in Fort Collins. The school uses the K¹² Inc. curriculum for grades K-8 and the Aventa Learning curriculum for grades 9-12. The program offers AP courses. The school operates an enrichment center in Poudre School District which offers regular on-site Parent/Teacher Conferences, student advisory meetings, counselor meetings, social events, club meetings, and several other extracurricular and enrichment activities, including art, music and P.E. Students may use the supervised computer lab during office hours.³²

Thompson Online is run by Thompson School District in Loveland and serves students in grades K-12. The program uses K¹² Inc. and Compass Learning curricula for elementary level courses, and the Aventa Learning curriculum for secondary level courses. The program offers part-time options for district students attending a brick-and-mortar school and to students who homeschool.³³

Vilas Online serves students in grades K-12 and is run by Vilas RE-5 School District in rural southeastern Colorado. The school uses the Compass Learning curriculum delivered through the Angel Learning Management System and Rosetta Stone. Required textbooks are provided. Students are required to contact teachers at least twice per week.³⁴



Jeffco Virtual students explore the Denver Zoo. (Photo courtesy of Jeffco's 21st Century Virtual Academy)

2011-12 Single-District, Full-Time Online Programs

A single-district online program serves students who reside within the school district. The program can allow enrollment for up to 10 non-resident students. If the program is authorized by one or more districts or by a board of cooperative services the students must reside in one of the authorizing districts or within the member school districts of the authorizing board of cooperative services. Many single-district online programs provide access to social opportunities such as field trips, dances, workshops, clubs, and extracurricular activities at a local district school. Some programs also offer the option of

concurrent enrollment, earning simultaneous college credit in high school. For the most current list of online programs in Colorado, please go to the [Colorado Department of Education's Online Programs page](#).

In the 2010-11 school year, there were 11 single-district online programs in Colorado. As of the beginning of the 2011-12 school year the number increased to 24 programs, as described below:

70 Online is a new program for 2011-12. It is run by Pueblo County School District 70 and serves students in grades K-12. The school uses the K¹² Inc. and Aventa curricula.³⁵

APS Online is run by Aurora Public Schools in Aurora and serves district students in grades 9-12. The program uses the Education 2020 curriculum, and provides most assignments online. Students are required to attend two three-hour face-to-face sessions a week at one of the two online lab locations. Students may participate in sports and clubs at their local APS high school.³⁶

Buena Vista Online Academy is a new program for 2011-12. It is run by the Buena Vista School District and serves students in grades 3-12. The school uses a combination of teacher-created curriculum and the Odysseyware program. The school uses a blended learning approach, mixing online and brick-and-mortar options depending on student needs. The school also offers field trips, tutoring, and electives.³⁷

Cañon Online Academy is a new program for 2011-12. The school is run by Fremont RE-1 and serves students in grades 6-12. The school uses the Aventa curriculum and provides students with personalized academic plans. The school contacts families weekly about grades and progress. The school provides a Learning Center for academic support, and students may participate in district sports and activities.³⁸

Center Virtual Academy is a new program for 2011-12. The school is run by Center Consolidated School District and serves students in grades 9-12. The school uses the K¹² Inc. curriculum and

provides opportunities for homebound, at-risk, expelled and gifted students. The school also offers credit recovery courses.

D3 My Way is run by Widefield School District in Colorado Springs and serves students in grades K-12. The program uses the Odyssey curriculum from Compass Learning, and has begun to use the Florida Virtual School curriculum for secondary students as of 2011-12. Students may take electives as well as participate in extracurricular activities and clubs at their home school. The program provides support through a tutoring center. The center provides a place for students to arrange one-on-one tutoring, and to access non-academic support, such as parenting classes and anger management.³⁹

Delta Virtual Academy is a new high school program for 2011-12. It is run by Delta School District 50J and uses the Aventa curriculum. The computer lab at the Delta Opportunity School is available for Delta Virtual Academy students. The school offers supplementary classes for a fee.⁴⁰

Eng@ge Online Academy is a new program for 2011-12. It is run by Weld County School District 6 in Greeley and currently serves students in grades 9-10, though the district plans to expand to other grade levels in the future. The school uses the Blackboard Learning Management System.⁴¹

FOCUS Academy is run by Fremont RE-2 School District in Florence and serves students in grades 6-12. This program uses the Aventa Learning curriculum. A learning lab is available for student use. All students must spend a minimum of two hours a week at the learning lab. The program provides students the opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities, social events, clubs, and athletics.⁴²

Futures Digital Academy is run by Pueblo County School District 70 and serves students in grades 6-12. The program was created in 1997 as an alternative school for expelled and at-risk students. Currently, 60 percent of the school's students are at risk of dropping out due to a lack of credits. The program uses NovaNET software for curriculum delivery. Students are enrolled in one class at a time for three weeks. Enrollment is based on a referral from the student's high school counselor or the office of Student Services.⁴³

Grande River Virtual Academy is run by Mesa County Valley School District 51 in Grand Junction and serves students in grades K-12. The program uses the K¹² Inc. curriculum for elementary students and Aventa for middle and high school students. The program offers one-on-one tutoring with local teachers. The program also provides students with opportunities for extracurricular activities and clubs. Students have the option to take courses and play sports at their neighborhood brick-and-mortar school.⁴⁴



*COVA students create art with calligraphy.
(Photo courtesy of Lori Cooney)*

Heartlight Academy Online The school is run by the North Conejos School District and serves students in grades K-12. The alternative school uses the Ed Options curriculum and focuses on expelled students and those with special circumstances. The school works with Extranjero No Mas, San Luis Youth Guild, and Rocky Mt. Youth Academy.⁴⁵

LPS@home is run by Littleton Public Schools and serves students in grades K-6. The program uses the Plato Learning curriculum. Students have access to a variety of on-site activities in district schools, as well as field trips. The program gives students access to classroom materials and individual teacher attention.⁴⁶

Mountain eCademy is a new program for 2011-12. The school is run by Cripple Creek-Victor School District RE-1 and serves students in grades 9-12.⁴⁷

Peak Virtual Academy is a new program for 2011-12. The school is run by the Montrose County School District RE-1J and serves students in grades K-12. The school uses the K¹² Inc. curriculum for students in grades K-5 and the Aventa curriculum for students in grades 6-12. The school offers credit recovery and AP courses. Students may participate in sports/clubs at their local brick-and-mortar school.⁴⁸



*GOAL Academy students study at a drop-in site.
(Photo courtesy of GOAL Academy)*

Ridge Academy is run by Pueblo City Schools and serves students ages 16-21. The competency-based program uses the Apex learning curriculum. Ridge Academy has teachers available online and on-site to support students. The program also offers AP courses. Courses are also available to out-of-district students for \$250 each.⁴⁹

St. Vrain Online Global Academy is a new online program for 2011-12. The school is run by the St. Vrain Valley School District and serves students in grades 10-12. The school uses the Pearson Virtual Learning and Florida Virtual School curricula. The school also offers Honors and AP courses.⁵⁰

South Park Online is a new program for 2011-12. The school is run by Park County School District RE-2 and serves grades 9-12 using the Lincoln Interactive online curriculum.⁵¹

Southwest Colorado eSchool is a new program for the 2011-12 school year. The school is run by the San Juan Board of Cooperative Services and serves students in grades 9-12. The school is full-time, with a part-time option for students in the attendance boundaries. Courses are taught through the Jefferson County 21st Century Virtual Academy. The school also offers AP courses.⁵²

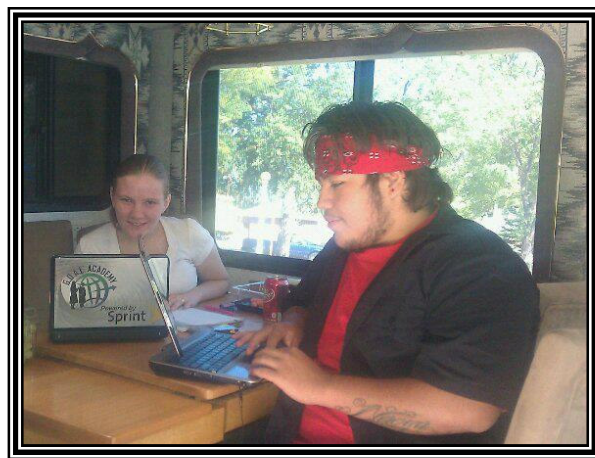
Tigers Online Program is a new program for the 2011-12 school year and serves students in grades 7-12. The program is run by the East Otero School District R-1 located in La Junta. The program offers

both full-time and part-time options and credit recovery. A variety of online programs are used including Aventa, e2020, and powerspeak¹². Students may receive extra help from teachers at the La Junta Jr./Sr. High School. The students may also participate in the district's extracurricular activities.⁵³

Trinidad Online is a new pilot program for 2011-12. The school is run by the Trinidad School District and serves grades 9-12 using the Aventa curriculum.⁵⁴

Virtual Village is a online program housed at **Lake George Charter School**, which is authorized by Park County School District Re-2 and serves students in grades K-8. The Virtual Village program uses Lincoln Interactive and Calvert curricula. Students may participate in the winter ski and snowboard program, piano lessons, and any of the other classes offered by Lake George Charter School.⁵⁵

Woodland Park Online Program is a new program for 2011-12. The school is run by Woodland Park District RE-2 and serves students in grades K-12. The school uses the K¹² Inc. curriculum for the primary grades and Lincoln Interactive curriculum for the secondary grades. The school offers enrichment opportunities such as field trips, clubs, and athletics. Online students may also attend the elementary Cottage School or enrichment classes at the local middle school.⁵⁶



*GOAL Academy students study in a mobile lab.
(Photo courtesy of GOAL Academy)*

World Academy is a new program for 2011-12. The school is run by the Eagle County School District and serves students in grades K-12. The school uses the K¹² Inc. and Aventa curricula. Students receive a monthly face-to-face meeting with teachers in more difficult subjects like math. Dual enrollment in Colorado Mountain College is available.⁵⁷

What Does an Online School Look Like?

The following profiles are intended to provide a clearer and more detailed picture of what different online schools look like. Each of these programs is different, and helps to show the wide range of approaches that online schools have taken to best meet the needs of Colorado's students.

Branson School Online

Branson School Online (BSO) serves students in grades K-12 and is run by Branson School District RE-82 in rural southeastern Colorado. The school serves a wide range of students across the state.



*Branson School Online students go bowling.
(Photo courtesy of Branson School Online)*

Branson School Online does not use any single curriculum for its courses. Instead, the school uses a teacher-driven model that helps meet the needs of its students, as well as align with the Colorado Model Content Standards. Rather than use a single third-party curriculum, or one that is purely designed by the district, the school uses elements from several different curricula.⁵⁸ As Judith Stokes, Assistant Superintendent of Branson School District, explained, "The curriculum does not drive our school's educational programming."⁵⁹ Teachers choose course materials from several different third-party curricula, and then determine what other supplemental resources are needed to ensure student learning success. According

to Stokes, the third-party curricula are "used like a textbook" and adjusted "based on student needs and personal levels."⁶⁰ The school uses Blackboard as its Learning Management System, which provides students with access to their courses, as well as other supplemental materials.

Branson School Online also emphasizes the importance of the relationship between parents and teachers for student success. Teachers work closely with parents and students, holding weekly parent-teacher conferences via telephone. According to Stokes, there is a shared responsibility between the school and families. For example, parents at the elementary level are "like a teacher's aide in the home"⁶¹ who follow the teacher's guide and are partners in providing a good educational environment to assure student success. Teachers help establish a schedule for each student, provide instruction, support, and assessment as well as guidance for parents and students. In addition to conducting direct instruction via a virtual classroom, small-group instruction and, when needed, individual instruction, there is access via phone, email, instant messaging (IM) and traditional means like mailing of work and faxing or scanning materials when needed.

Students have numerous opportunities for social interaction. Branson School Online offers field trips/workshops and activities monthly throughout the state. The school also offers face-to-face workshops as needed. For example, BSO has held writing workshops, science workshops—including dissection, science fairs, Math Day at the Sky Sox, the climbing wall experience in Pueblo, and many other opportunities to combine learning, community-building and fun for students.⁶²

Colorado Connections Academy

Colorado Connections Academy serves students in grades K-12. Mapleton Public Schools contracts with Connections Academy to provide the full-time online program.

Colorado Connections Academy emphasizes the importance of collaboration among its teachers. Most instructors are based in Colorado and work out of the school's central office. This enables a significant amount of cooperation between elementary and secondary teachers.

The school uses the national Connections Academy curriculum; however, the local teachers add supplemental activities to the program. According to Christine Tanguay, principal of Colorado Connections Academy, “everything is built into our system” but “we map our curriculum for our Colorado State Standards.”⁶³ These changes are collectively determined by teachers for different subject areas.

The school offers support to students and their learning coaches in several ways. The school provides families with materials such as textbooks, workbooks and lesson plans. Additionally, teachers are regularly in contact with parents and students, while also conducting curriculum-based assessments. They hold conferences every other week in the elementary grades, and at least once per month for high school students. These conferences help to ensure that students are on track and doing their own work. Additionally, students can come to the office and receive one-on-one help from their teachers.



*A Hope Online student studies with his computer.
(Photo courtesy of Hope Online Learning
Academy Co-Op)*

The program offers a range of courses including Gifted and Talented, AP and language courses. When there is not enough local enrollment to offer certain classes (such as AP or languages) with a Colorado-based teacher, the course will be taught by a national Connections Academy teacher. Several field trips are organized across the state each month. Teachers plan most of the Denver Metro events, and community coordinators from each region plan events in other parts of the state.⁶⁴

COVA

Colorado Virtual Academy (COVA) is an online charter school authorized by Adams 12 Five Star Schools and serves students in grades K-12. COVA uses a home-based approach through the K¹² Inc. curriculum and is also managed by the company. COVA has a Gifted and Talented program and AP courses for advanced students. Additionally, the concurrent enrollment program encourages students to take courses at post-secondary institutions that partner with COVA. COVA's approach enables customization and provides opportunities for students to learn based on their academic needs.

COVA emphasizes the key role of the family in ensuring student success. “Not only are we proud of our school, we also believe that it is a profoundly good choice for families that are interested in getting actively involved in their children's education,” states Heidi Heineke-Magri, COVA Head of School.⁶⁵ A parent is a student's “learning coach” and facilitates their student's learning, in partnership with a highly qualified teacher. According to Lori Cooney, a COVA board member and mother of three COVA students, the parent or guardian who acts as the learning coach is especially important for younger students. Students in grades K-8 generally need more support and one-on-one interaction, while high school students “are expected to become more independent.”⁶⁶ The level of

independence expected of students is reflected in the mixture of online lessons, Class Connect instruction, textbooks, and hands-on activities that varies according to grade level. According to COVA's website, "only about 30 percent of the K-8 lessons are taught online, with the percentage higher for high school."⁶⁷ COVA teachers also provide tutorial time for students who would like to meet in person with their teacher.

In addition to providing supplemental materials, the K¹² Inc. curriculum allows for greater flexibility for each student to learn at his or her own pace at the K-8 level. The program uses a mastery-based approach where students must demonstrate comprehension before they can continue on to the next



COVA students study at home. (Photo courtesy of Lori Cooney)

part of each course. This approach enables students to work at a faster pace if they master material quickly, or to work more slowly and get additional support if they are struggling. While COVA has requirements for grade advancement, the K¹² learning program allows families and teachers to work together to help elementary students maximize their academic potential. As Cooney explained, "Every student in this school has an individual education plan" to ensure they get that support and stay on track. Each student's plan is broken down into daily and weekly plans that can be adjusted to reflect the student's needs. Middle and high school classes are more

synchronous, but still allow for more customization than is typically possible in traditional schools. At the high school level, each student's learning is customized through his Individual Career & Academic Plan (ICAP), which includes academic pathways as well as career planning and postsecondary readiness. COVA also offers four different versions of high school courses based on student needs and abilities: Core (standard level), Comprehension (more in-depth), Honors and AP courses.⁶⁸

The program offers social support for students through school-sponsored field trips, clubs and other social events and activities. COVA provides various opportunities for students to interact with one another and socialize. These activities include field trips, school dances, and various types of clubs such as student government, anime club, and international clubs. According to Cooney, "Although most schools offer field trips, we have a wealth of field trips at COVA."⁶⁹ COVA students can attend these activities without missing class time.⁷⁰

GOAL Academy

GOAL Academy began by serving students in grades 9-12, but added a middle school in the 2011-12 school year to serve students in grades 6-8 as well. The program uses the Nova Net curriculum from Pearson. GOAL primarily serves students who are at risk of not graduating on time or at all.

GOAL Academy is designated as an Alternative Education Campus, meaning that 95 percent of the students attending the school meet the legal definition of “high risk” students. These students fall into several categories, including, but not limited to: student parents, students who have a history of abuse or domestic violence in their families, students who have dropped out, expelled students, juvenile delinquents, and students whose parents are incarcerated or on parole.⁷¹ GOAL Academy seeks to provide such students who have difficulty attending a brick-and-mortar school with new opportunities and extra support in order to help them graduate. The program staff develops a highly individualized graduation plan for each student.

Though academics are provided online, GOAL also offers support to students through in-person meetings with teachers and at the school’s drop-in centers. GOAL Academy operates drop-in



Five teen parents gather for mentoring and tutoring at a GOAL Academy Drop-in site. (Photo courtesy of GOAL Academy)

centers around the state in order to facilitate these connections. In contrast to a Learning Center, no instruction is conducted at the drop-in centers. However, the centers do provide locations for students to access services such as mentoring, counseling, and occasional tutoring. They also provide places for testing, dropping off paperwork, and meeting with GOAL staff.

In the GOAL model, teachers take on a greater role, acting as both instructor and mentor for their students. According to Executive Director Ken Crowell, “teachers also act as a life coach for students.”⁷² GOAL teachers typically meet with students at least once every two weeks, or more often, in order to offer additional support. As Crowell explained, the idea behind this face-to-face connection is that GOAL “is not an online model for education as much as a relationship building one.”⁷³ In order to offer additional academic support, GOAL maintains a 25:1 student-to-teacher ratio, and all teachers are highly qualified in at least one content area. GOAL students are assigned a homeroom teacher, who acts as their main contact. They are also part of a larger group with one teacher from each of the four main content areas. These teachers offer students additional support, such as tutoring, in their highly qualified area.⁷⁴

Hope Online

Hope Online Learning Academy Co-Op is a charter school authorized by Douglas County School District that serves students in grades K-12. Hope Online uses a site-based approach in which students attend one of the school's Learning Centers. Hope Online contracts with Learning Centers statewide to provide students with access to computers, Internet, and mentor and teacher support. Hope Online uses the Odyssey curriculum from Compass Learning for core courses, while also incorporating elements from other curricula for electives and extra support.



A Hope Online mentor works with a high school student. (Photo courtesy of Hope Online Learning Academy Co-Op)

Hope Online primarily serves students who are at-risk for a variety of reasons, including such factors as poverty, social pressures, neighborhood and family issues, performing below grade level, and developmental problems. Learning Centers also expand access to online education to students who are unable to learn at home because their parents are working, such as students from low-income or single-parent households. According to Bill Snyder, lead mentor at the Front Range Academy-Arvada Learning Center, "A lot of students here did not succeed at traditional schools."⁷⁵ Hope Online mentors and teachers work with students to help them navigate through school at their own pace, stay in school, graduate and go to college. In order to earn a high school diploma,

students must achieve a minimum composite score of 18 on the ACT or minimum Accuplacer scores of 80 in reading, 95 in sentence skills and 85 in math.⁷⁶ These achievement standards help to ensure graduating students are ready for college. Hope Online also offers a GED program, which Snyder says "has been very successful."

Students are required to attend their Learning Center daily, where they complete course work and receive help from their mentors and teachers. As of the 2011-12 school year, there are 45 Hope Online Learning Centers around the state. The Learning Centers are an important part of the public-private partnership between Hope and local organizations. As Heather O'Mara, founder and CEO of Hope Online, explained, "Our goal was to equalize access to online education for at-risk students and provide them with an alternative opportunity for academic success. Through community-based Hope Online Learning Centers, Colorado's at-risk children are provided the best opportunity to participate in online education in a supportive environment."⁷⁷ Each center is operated by a local community group, while "Hope Online provides professional development," according to Katie Sixta, Director of Policy Initiatives. These community groups apply to Hope Online and then are approved, if they meet certain criteria.⁷⁸ Hope Online's Learning Centers "maintain an average mentor-to-student ratio of 1:18" in order to ensure that students receive the support they need.⁷⁹ This approach helps provide students with in-person support, while also giving them the flexibility of taking online courses.⁸⁰

Jeffco's 21st Century Virtual Academy

Jefferson County Public Schools (Jeffco) offers both part-time and full-time online options to middle and high school students. Advanced elementary students also have access to the courses. According to the Director of Student Online Learning Judy Bauernschmidt, "Elementary school students who have accelerated course needs are enrolling in middle and high school level courses with great success."⁸¹ Jeffco uses Blackboard as its Learning Management System for delivery of the Jeffco curriculum. In order to facilitate online education options in the district, all Jeffco students in grades 7-12 have Blackboard accounts.

Jeffco has four different models through which students can access online courses and resources. First, any Colorado student may enroll full-time in Jeffco's 21st Century Virtual Academy, which is certified by the state to be a statewide full-time online program. Second, students already enrolled in the Jeffco school district may also choose to enroll as part-time online students through the Virtual Academy, where they can take one to three courses online and the remainder in their brick-and-mortar school. Third, Jeffco students may enroll in "hybrid" courses, which combine an online course with face-to-face instruction. In this hybrid model, students meet with their teacher in person one to two days per week for instruction and complete the remainder of their work on their own. Finally, Jeffco teachers may choose to use a "blended" model of instruction to incorporate some elements of online education into their regular classroom. In this approach, teachers can use individual lessons or elements from online courses to help students who need remediation or acceleration.⁸²



*Jeffco Virtual families take a field trip to the Denver Zoo.
(Photo courtesy of Jeffco's 21st Century Virtual Academy)*

Online education in Jeffco also receives a significant amount of support from both the school board and the superintendent. As Bauernschmidt explained, "We have 100 percent board and superintendent support" for online programs in Jeffco.⁸³ This commitment has been reflected in the district policy since 2007, with the adoption of the policy entitled "Instruction through Online Courses." This policy affirms that "online education courses will be a part of the district instructional program to increase accessibility and flexibility in the delivery of instruction."⁸⁴ In order to accomplish this goal, the district is both bringing more technology into brick-and-mortar classrooms, and giving students the opportunity to take courses fully online. Additionally, Jeffco offers training to teachers who have decided to teach online courses.⁸⁵

Conclusion

Many, but not all, online schools offer a great deal of useful information on their websites. Learning about a cyberschool can be more difficult than learning about a brick-and-mortar school. Most parents are unfamiliar with online education, and full-time K-12 online school programs vary significantly. However, parents should be as diligent about finding the right online school for their children as they would be in finding the right brick-and-mortar school. Before enrolling a student in an online school, a parent must fully understand his or her responsibility and time commitment, as well as the program's features and requirements. Most importantly, parents and school staff should consider whether the student has the self-discipline, motivation, and skills to be successful with an online program.



Jeffco Virtual students enjoy extracurricular activities offered at their local schools. (Photo courtesy of Jeffco's 21st Century Virtual Academy)

Notes

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- ⁶ House Bill 04-1362, Colo. Rev. Stat. § 22-30.5-501, 503.
- ⁷ Charles E. Dukes, "Concurrent Enrollment Program Act," Colorado Department of Education, <http://www.cde.state.co.us/SecondaryInitiatives/downloads/CE%20White%20background.pdf>
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- ¹⁰ Colorado Connections Academy, "Enrollment FAQs," <http://www.connectionsacademy.com/colorado-school/FAQs/enrollment-faqs.aspx#4>
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- ²² Information available at the College Pathways website, <http://collegepathways.org/>.
- ²³ Information available at the Colorado Calvert Academy website, <http://coloradocalvertacademy.com/>.
- ²⁴ Information available at the DPS Online High School website, <http://online.dpsk12.org/>.
- ²⁵ Information available at the Colorado Cyberschool website, <http://edcsd.org/>.
- ²⁶ Pat Bershinsky, telephone interview by Ella Peterson, May 5, 2011. Further information available at the Edison School District 54JT website, <http://edison54jt.schoolfusion.us/modules/cms/pages.phtml?pageid=220870&sessionid=107051c34e2f8afa0314d346630b63c8&sessionid=107051c34e2f8afa0314d346630b63c8>.
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- ²⁸ Information available at the Insight School of Colorado website, <http://co.insightschools.net/>.
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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES on this subject can be found at: <http://education.i2i.org/> and <http://SchoolChoiceForKids.org>

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