

Virtual Reality: A Sampling of Online Education in Practice



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Executive Summary

Within a matter of months, “virtual education” vaulted from a niche educational offering used by less than 1% of Texas students ([Sass & Griesinger, 2020, p. 5](#)) to a widespread instructional model offered to students during continuing school closures. This explosive growth in demand met a supply intentionally constricted through state policy. As virtual education becomes a larger part of the state’s education system, the focus of such programs must shift from emergency response to creating a more sustainable, quality product that will meet the needs of Texas students in a changing landscape. This publication highlights a selection of nine virtual education institutions from across the country—two from Texas—that predate the COVID-19 pandemic. Though far from a comprehensive list, this selection may serve both to remind the public that virtual education is and can be more than an emergency response, and to provide concrete examples of virtual programs to policymakers and stakeholders as they consider what policy steps are needed to build a more flexible and resilient public education system.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic caught Texas and the nation by surprise. Nowhere was this more apparent than within public education, where schools were forced to make a rapid transition to remote education. This transition was fraught with institutional problems, including poor access to high-speed internet in rural areas and inner cities, difficulty in distribution of school lunches, and a limited state virtual education infrastructure capable of assisting individual local ISDs (due at least in part to a previously repressive state approach to virtual education; [Sass & Griesinger, 2020, p. 3](#)). The Texas Education Agency (TEA) is working to support school districts’ virtual infrastructure through building instructional supports ([Texas Home Learning, n.d.](#)) and creating technology purchase reimbursement programs via the federal CARES Act ([TEA, n.d.](#); [Office of the Texas Governor, 2020](#)). With the pandemic and its recovery still ongoing, however, the need for districts to develop quality virtual instruction in tandem with in-person instructional options remains.

The state’s challenges in shifting to virtual instruction have been exacerbated by several structural weaknesses within the Texas Virtual Schools Network (TXVSN). Before the pandemic, only eight independent and charter districts around the state (out of approximately 1,200) were authorized to offer a full-time virtual education curriculum, and all of them were prevented from offering services between kindergarten and 2nd grade. Furthermore, students must have attended a Texas public school the previous year to enroll in such a program, making students new to Texas public schools ineligible to enroll. Individual courses could be developed and offered by a slightly wider pool of providers (13), but they could only cover high school content. Waivers have temporarily lifted these restrictions for Texas school districts, but districts’ latitude to offer programs beyond the 2020-21 school year remains uncertain ([Sass & Griesinger, 2020, pp. 3, 5, 10-11, 15, 19](#)).

Key Points

- Within a matter of months, “virtual education” vaulted in 2020 from a niche educational offering used by less than 1% of Texas students to a widespread instructional model offered to students during continuing school closures.
- This explosive growth in demand met a supply intentionally constricted through state policy.
- As virtual education serves more students longer, the focus must shift from emergency response to creating a more sustainable, quality product that will meet the needs of Texas students in a changing landscape.
- This publication highlights a selection of nine virtual education institutions from across the country that predate the COVID-19 pandemic, two from within Texas.
- These examples can serve as inspiration for policymakers and district leaders who seek to reform Texas’s barebones virtual education system.

These limitations in virtual education infrastructure came home to roost during the COVID-19 pandemic, as Texas faced a particularly daunting endeavor in moving to online education. The state virtual network was not capable of handling a sudden influx of students, leading to districts scrambling to create their own virtual education infrastructure, often from scratch ([Smith, 2020](#); [Swaby, 2020](#); [Washington, 2020](#)).

Other states had more success. Florida, in particular, had developed a more robust virtual education network and was able to quickly scale its system from a few thousand students to 2.7 million, allowing for a smooth transition to online learning ([Sass & Griesinger, 2020, pp. 3, 18](#)).

This is not to say, of course, that Texas should move entirely and permanently to virtual education. In-person schooling, the American Academy of Pediatrics ([2020](#)) has noted, is vital for the academic and social development of many children. Broadly mandating any educational modality, whether virtual education, in-person education, or some other alternative, unavoidably dictates that some students for whom that modality is less suitable will suffer, while others for whom that modality is preferable will thrive.

Indeed, parents appear to be split in their preference of in-person or virtual instruction during the 2020-21 school year. In one recent national poll ([Morning Consult, 2020](#)), over half of parents said they were somewhat or very comfortable with their children returning to school, but over half of parents chose virtual/remote learning when it was offered (two thirds of parents agreed that schools should provide multiple learning options over a single approach). Especially in the aftermath of COVID-19, many parents may continue to choose virtual education as best suited for their children, and it would behoove the state to ensure such programs are as robust as possible.

Virtual Program Design, Definitions, and Research

In a year full of emergency response, emergency remote education programs can easily become confused with more intentionally designed, permanent programs. Many remote learning programs have been deployed in the past year as a quick mitigation strategy in the event of an extreme emergency and as an attempt to clone a traditional classroom in an online format without making any substantive adjustments. Worse, sometimes “remote learning” has become a euphemism for the sobering lack of any real instruction that characterized far too many districts, at least in spring 2020 ([Gross & Opalka, 2020](#)). This paper hopes to highlight programs, in Texas and across the country, that have been designed to use virtual education to serve their students more holistically and permanently.

Several key terms will be employed in describing these programs:

*Virtual education can, and often does, employ both ‘synchronous’ and ‘asynchronous instruction.’ In **synchronous instruction** [emphasis added], teachers provide instruction at the same time that students are receiving it, though not necessarily in the same place. The traditional classroom model usually provides synchronous instruction. One benefit of synchronous instruction is that students can ask their teacher questions in real time.*

*In **asynchronous instruction** [emphasis added], students receive instruction at a different time than the teacher delivered it. One benefit of asynchronous instruction is that students can absorb material at their own pace: they can stop and start the lesson, rewatch a video, or practice a sample problem. ([Sass & Griesinger, 2020, p. 4](#))*

It is also possible to combine virtual and in-person instruction, now known as a “hybrid model,” in which students spend some time physically in the classroom while also learning online. Several of the examples provided below use or offer a hybrid format for their students (see Carver Military Academy and Village High School below).

Media coverage and public perception of virtual learning in the last year have ranged from dismissive ([Hobbs & Hawkins, 2020](#)) to welcoming ([Campa, 2020](#)). The research literature is similarly complex. Studies of varying design and rigor centering on different programs have found commensurately varying results for student achievement. Some have found superior results for online instruction compared to in-person ([Heppen et al., 2011](#)), some comparable results ([Chingos & Schwerdt, 2014](#); [Heppen et al., 2017](#); [Lowe & Lin, 2018](#)), and some deeply negative results ([Woodworth et al., 2015](#)). One reason for these differences is likely that the vast array of possible digital education designs and applications can make comparisons between them difficult, even more so between an online course and a traditional course ([Digital Learning Collaborative, 2018](#)).

Perhaps the most critical task, especially in a time when both public health and parent demand call for virtual education options, is identifying the most effective virtual instruction practices. This is highlighted both by the Woodworth et al. ([2015](#)) study’s report of the impact of certain instructional practices and the Digital Learning Collaborative’s preface to its 2018 research compilation ([para. 11](#)); Kennedy and Ferdig ([2018](#)) have also created an extensive compendium of research dealing with virtual instructional practices.

As noted in a prior publication,

As districts pursue new learning formats and seek to equip their students and teachers, they have a unique opportunity and solemn responsibility to seek out the best of this landscape and implement it for their students. The potential for deployment of existing best practices and discovery of new ones, if seized, is remarkable. (Sass & Griesinger, 2020, p. 9)

Hanover Research (2014) finds that virtual education programs, public or private, must know their purpose, goals, techniques of instruction, enrollment procedures, and degrees of hybridization and student individualization ahead of time if they are going to be successful and develop their infrastructure accordingly. Establishing a virtual program, under normal circumstances, should entail selecting virtual education providers or developing district courses, establishing new scheduling patterns, and collecting buy-in from students, teachers, and district officials (pp. 7-9). As highlighted by the recent support programs initiated by TEA (n.d.), accommodations should be considered and implemented for students living in poverty or in rural areas, who may not have the technological capabilities to pursue a virtual education without support.

Virtual Education Practitioners: Key Examples Across America and Texas

In order for policymakers, districts, and parents to make decisions regarding virtual education, it is beneficial to investigate the current virtual landscape. Many schools around the country have developed virtual education systems that have produced sustained student achievement and remarkable student stories. The authors have attempted to provide descriptions of a selection of these schools below. It is hoped that these may serve as inspiration for policymakers and district leaders who seek to reform Texas's bare-bones virtual education system, and also as a resource for parents concerned about sending their children to school in person. They also provide important evidence that virtual education can be a worthwhile endeavor when the model is constructed properly.

The following examples compose a sampling of these virtual offerings, not a complete landscape. They include public district and charter schools, a military academy, hybrid models, university-sponsored schools, and private schools. Some virtual education systems pursue a virtual version of a traditional education, while others prefer to eschew existing educational norms entirely by incorporating technology to a higher degree or engaging in curriculum innovation. They are in no particular order, and we do not attempt to recommend one model over another. Indeed, since the models are in different states, are funded differently, and espouse

differing educational philosophies, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to substantively compare them against one another. All of the examples listed below exhibit various indications of benefit to students, as attested through test scores, student improvement, third-party rankings, institutional growth, and student or family testimonials.

1. Virtual Learning Academy Charter School

Modality:	Virtual
Supplemental/full-time:	Supplemental or full-time
Model, if applicable:	Competency-based
Grades served:	6th to 12th (4th and 5th in development)
Governance:	Charter

New Hampshire's Virtual Learning Academy Charter School (VLACS) considers parental involvement to be of the utmost importance; in fact, students may not enroll in a course until a virtual meeting with parents is conducted (Digital Learning Collaborative, 2020, p. 21). Learning is asynchronous, and instructors work to form relationships with both students and parents. Students may take individual courses (up to a full course load, if they desire) or enroll full time. As it is public, VLACS is tuition-free, and no entrance exam is necessary, though students wishing to enroll full time in VLACS must complete a series of preparatory steps designed to help them transition to a full-time online setting (VLACS, n.d.). Students accumulate "competencies," which then translate into credit toward graduation.

For its more than 12,000 students (about 400 of them full-time), VLACS offers several distinct "journey" options, the first of which is traditional education. Students may start at any point during the year, are self-paced, and earn badges along the way, which allow learning opportunities outside the classroom (such as an industry certification) to be incorporated into their journey. The second journey is called "Projects" and serves to introduce students to their desired career field and help them complete competencies through mock experiences (the Digital Learning Collaborative offers the example of an English student acting as an editor for the marketing department of a real estate company). A third journey is called "Experiences" and is almost entirely student-designed. Students approach teachers with a proposal for a particular skill they wish to acquire outside of the classroom, which can include work-based opportunities such as job interviews, internships, and shadowing. Students can also work collaboratively on projects through "Teams" offerings (Digital Learning Collaborative, 2020, p. 21; VLACS, n.d.).

As the Hechinger Report (Berdik, 2016) describes, for students like Emily Duggan, VLACS's innovative system

has been an educational boon. Duggan, an aspiring dancer, had always valued her passion and her academics equally. However, as she grew older, she was faced with an intensifying dance schedule that carried her well into the evening before coming home to 4 hours of homework at night. This did damage to her mental health, and she began to lose weight from the stress. However, VLACS put Emily in charge of her own education again, and she was able to balance her time to succeed in both academics and dance. Her academic experience does not appear to be unique. According to *US News & World Report* (n.d.-b) analyses, drawn from state-administered assessment data, 92% of VLACS students were proficient or above in reading, and 67% were proficient or above in math. Both scores greatly outperformed the New Hampshire state average.¹

2. Texas Tech University K-12

<i>Modality:</i>	Virtual
<i>Supplemental/full-time:</i>	Supplemental or full-time
<i>Model, if applicable:</i>	N/A
<i>Grades served:</i>	Kindergarten to 12th
<i>Governance:</i>	University-sponsored (special purpose district)

Texas Tech University's K-12 offering, TTU K-12, is an entirely virtual program that serves nearly 1,600 full-time students around the world (Sass & Griesinger, 2020, p. 14). TTU K-12 also serves thousands more through part-time and supplemental programs, as well as an extensive credit-by-examination system (Sass & Griesinger, 2020, p. 14). The program is self-paced and appears consistently in rankings of the premier virtual schools in the United States. Best College Reviews (Cranford, 2018), which uses federal data to help students make informed decisions about their college and career plans, ranked TTU K-12 as the 4th best virtual high school in the nation and the best in Texas in 2018. Unlike TXVSN, which excludes grades K-2, TTU K-12 serves all grades, offering an alternative for students not being accounted for by traditional education programs no matter the grade level. The district offers numerous CTE and fine arts classes as electives, as well as prep courses for the SAT, ACT, and Texas Success Initiative exams.

TTU K-12 is a special purpose district, created by the State Board of Education. TTU K-12 is subject to many of the same accountability regulations as the typical Texas public school, must align its courses with Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) requirements, must hire certified teachers, and must administer the State Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) exams to its students.

However, the school is not subject to the statewide A-F accountability ratings, and it currently runs on a tuition model, with the average cost of the full-time program priced at \$2,800 per year and *a-la-carte* courses costing about \$250 on average (books and other fees may bring these costs up to \$350; Sass & Griesinger, 2020, p. 14).

For students heavily involved in athletics and the performing arts, TTU K-12 offers access to opportunities that would not be available while attending a traditional public school. Another young dancer, Emma Gray, also saw benefits from attending online school. She attended traditional public school until the 3rd grade, and a university model school after, but decided to enroll in TTU K-12 in 7th grade. The school's self-paced and entirely virtual model gave Emma the necessary flexibility to pursue her education while performing in ballet. Emma has also credited TTU-K12 with teaching her how to manage her time properly, as she can allocate more time to the subjects she struggles with most (Cranford, 2019). Other notable TTU-K12 alumni include figure skater Ashley Cain (Coker, 2017), Olympic speed skater Jordan Malone (Davis, 2010), and Emmy-nominated actor Jesse Plemons (Davis, 2007).

3. Williamsburg Academy

<i>Modality:</i>	Virtual
<i>Supplemental/full-time:</i>	Full-time
<i>Model, if applicable:</i>	N/A
<i>Grades served:</i>	6th to 12th
<i>Governance:</i>	Private

Williamsburg Academy is an entirely virtual private school headquartered in **St. George, Utah**, that serves nearly 1,100 students around the world. Tuition is \$375 per class, \$2,100 per semester, and \$4,200 per academic year on average (Williamsburg registrar's office, personal communication, June 2020). Williamsburg offers a combination of live (synchronous) and self-paced courses (Williamsburg Academy, n.d.-b, n.d.-f), as well as credit for extracurricular activities, "provided [students] log roughly 60 hours of practice/performance during the semester, complete brief monthly reports, and receive instruction from a qualified professional" (Williamsburg Academy, n.d.-e, para. 1). Teachers are referred to as "mentors," and the school's hiring process deliberately prioritizes a passion for education that can be passed on to students, requiring both evidence of an entrepreneurial approach to a candidate's own education and high mentorship capacity (Williamsburg Academy, n.d.-c). Students also have access to a wide variety of elective and language courses, and many core classes include the

¹ A similar section describing the VLACS system also appears in the Foundation's recent publication *Beyond Four Walls: How Competency-Based Learning Can Enhance Public Education* (Sass et al., 2021).

option of an “Honors” designation for exemplary learners. While the education model is fully virtual, Williamsburg provides in-person experiences for its students through Williamsburg Adventures, which includes school-sponsored trips to countries like France, Germany, Guatemala, Morocco, Nepal, and Peru, as well as Elevation, which is a week-long camp that focuses on nature-based exercise and team-building activities (Williamsburg Academy, [n.d.-a](#), [n.d.-c](#)).

This diversified and sophisticated model has produced sustained student success. Williamsburg reports the “highest percentage of course completion in online k-12 education” ([Williamsburg Academy, n.d.-c](#), “[Want More Proof?](#)” [section](#)). On average, Williamsburg students score 4.2 points higher on the ACT and 254 points higher on the SAT than the national average score. In 2014, Williamsburg was honored by the United States Distance Learning Association as a premier institution for excellence in the distance learning industry ([Williamsburg Academy, n.d.-c](#)).

For brothers Andre and Sergio Padilla, the benefits of Williamsburg were tangible. Andre, the older brother, was taking extensive Honors classes at his traditional public high school. As Andre and his family reevaluated their options, Williamsburg presented itself as one with immediate benefit. Sergio, seeing Andre thrive, decided to join his brother at Williamsburg. Not only did both brothers feel more at ease with their education, but they also credit Williamsburg for developing them as individuals. The curriculum emphasizes personal development alongside academics, and the brothers credit it with encouraging their leadership capabilities, understanding of accountability, and general responsibility ([Williamsburg Academy, n.d.-d](#)).

4. Carver Military Academy

<i>Modality:</i>	Hybrid
<i>Supplemental/full-time:</i>	Full-time
<i>Model, if applicable:</i>	Military academy
<i>Grades served:</i>	9th to 12th
<i>Governance:</i>	Public

Carver Military Academy, a high school located in the low-income Riverdale neighborhood in the south side of **Chicago**, is a unique entry on this list, not only because of its student demographics, but also because of its structure. Though it is public and has no attendance boundaries ([Chicago Public Schools, n.d.](#)), admission is not guaranteed, and prospective students are required to score in the 48th percentile or higher in “reading and math on the 7th grade NWEA MAP (Northwest Evaluation Association Measures of Academic Progress). Candidates must also attend an Information Session where they sign a Commitment

Agreement, complete a Motivation and Perseverance Assessment and write a brief essay” ([Evergreen Education Group, 2016, p. 2](#)). Each prerequisite is assigned a point total, and the applicants with the highest point totals are admitted. In the 2019-20 school year, 90% of Carver’s 479 students were low-income students, and 99% were minority students ([Illinois Report Card, 2020](#)).

Carver was “the first existing public high school in the nation to convert to a public military academy” ([Carver Military Academy, n.d.-a, para. 1](#)). In its first years of existence, Carver faced the same trials and tribulations of other inner-city schools, and its graduation rate hovered around 50%. Credit recovery courses (to obtain credit for previously failed courses) were offered in person after school, creating a disorganized and often difficult-to-manage process. Even if a student had the motivation to improve, they did not always have the time or transportation to do so ([Evergreen Education Group, 2016, pp. 8-10](#)).

The situation drastically improved for Carver when it moved its credit recovery courses to an online format using the Fuel Education (FuelEd) online curriculum. This allowed courses to be completed during class periods or at home. The school also added courses for original credit to augment its course offerings. FuelEd teachers are universally certified in the state of Illinois and serve as teachers of record for all online classes. The program enabled Carver to achieve a 100% 5-year graduation rate by 2015 ([Evergreen Education Group, 2016, pp. 9-11](#)).

FuelEd courses are only one piece of the puzzle, as Carver students also fulfill their academic requirements through traditional face-to-face and AP classes. All students are also cadets ([Carver Military Academy, n.d.-b](#)) and participate in sports and fitness, service learning, and JROTC (Junior Reserve Officers’ Training Corps) training, which includes training in team building, leadership, marksmanship, military history, citizenship, communication, and more ([Evergreen Education Group, 2016, p. 8](#)).

Carver is now a Level 1 school, a high performance rating for Chicago public schools ([Chicago Public Schools, n.d.](#)). Although, per *US News & World Report* ([n.d.-a](#)) data, Carver students score below the district average in math, they score above the district average for reading. Its graduation rates significantly exceed district rates, and its college enrollment rates are comparable to the district average of approximately two thirds of students (Carver’s college enrollment rate is in addition to its graduates who enter the military; [Chicago Public Schools, n.d.](#); [Evergreen Education Group, 2016, p. 11](#)). Carver students have been Citywide Mock Trial Champions in 2013, 2014, and 2016. The result

is a campus referred to as “the Jewel of South-side” ([Chicago Public Schools, n.d.](#)).

5. Village High School

<i>Modality:</i>	Hybrid
<i>Supplemental/full-time:</i>	Full-time
<i>Model, if applicable:</i>	Competency-based
<i>Grades served:</i>	9th to 12th
<i>Governance:</i>	Public

Village High School (“the Village”) in **Colorado Springs** emphasizes flexibility, and its hybrid construction allows students to attend school in person for a shorter daily period Monday through Thursday, with staff availability extending before and after that time ([Academy School District 20, n.d.-c](#)). The facility is public, but an application and informational interview are required. The application mainly consists of personal information, current school, and a few short narratives about why the student is interested in Village High School ([Academy School District 20, n.d.-a](#)).

Core classes combine online content with face-to-face support and are competency-based, allowing students to focus on content mastery while still fulfilling semester deadlines; electives are entirely in person and constitute the vast majority of the physical school day ([Digital Learning Collaborative, 2020, p. 16](#); [Academy School District 20, n.d.-b](#)). The Village offers classic electives, as well as unique, skill-based electives such as Career Skills, Personal Finance, Individual Projects, and Emerging Leaders, and career internships or mentorships ([Academy School District 20, n.d.-d, pp. 5, 20-21](#)). Each student is given a mentor who serves as a guide both in and out of school, offering assistance with everything from program navigation to problems outside of school. Fridays are set aside for electives alone ([Digital Learning Collaborative, 2020, p. 16](#)). Excursions, which normally occur as part of an elective course, are also available and can include travel and outdoor activities.

Initially, Village High School supported a niche demographic of students who, often for artistic, athletic, or medical reasons, struggled with the time demands and rigid structure of traditional schooling. However, even before the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, the school had seen a surge in demand as all manner of students were attracted to its flexible scheduling and high teacher quality, necessitating a move to its third facility in as many years. The Village expects to increase its student population from its previous capacity of 160 students to about 400 ([Kelley, 2020](#)). The school consistently scores at the highest level of Colorado’s individual school evaluation scale ([Colorado Department of Education, 2019](#)).

6. The Georgia Virtual School

<i>Modality:</i>	Virtual
<i>Supplemental/full-time:</i>	Supplemental
<i>Model, if applicable:</i>	N/A
<i>Grades served:</i>	6th to 12th
<i>Governance:</i>	Public (GA Dept. of Education)

The **Georgia** Virtual School (GAVS) is a fully accredited virtual program that offers supplemental up to full-time courses and is sponsored by the Georgia Department of Education’s Office of Technology Services. The program does not itself award credit or diplomas but instead works in tandem with public, private, and home schools across the state (Georgia Virtual, [n.d.-e, n.d.-f](#)). Courses are tuition-free for middle and high school students enrolled in Georgia public schools and taking GAVS courses as part of their regular school day. Courses are available to private school, home school, and out-of-state students as well, with or without state aid (some state funding is available for courses taken by private and home school students; once that funding has been used, the courses remain available on a tuition basis). Course enrollment is on an a-la-carte basis: Middle and half-credit high school classes cost \$250, while full-credit high school classes cost \$500 ([Georgia Virtual, n.d.-d](#)).

Course offerings include numerous Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education (CTAE) programs, fine arts activities, Georgia’s core courses, and 26 AP classes (Georgia Virtual, [n.d.-a, n.d.-g](#)). Credit recovery options are also available through an associated but independent program ([Georgia Virtual, n.d.-b](#)). GAVS provides a teacher-led, asynchronous virtual classroom experience through Canvas (Georgia Virtual, [n.d.-b, n.d.-c](#)), and all teachers have Georgia certifications. Classwork is due each week during the fall and spring (daily during the summer), and students are usually expected to spend 90-120 minutes a day on each class ([Georgia Virtual, n.d.-d](#)).

GAVS students score exceptionally well on the End of Course (EOC) Georgia Milestone exams for those classes that include EOCs; data from 2015-18 show consistently over 40% of students scoring at the Distinguished Learner level (the highest level of proficiency), four times the state rate of approximately 10%. Moreover, GAVS AP students pass their AP exams at a significantly higher rate than both the Georgia and national averages ([Georgia Virtual, n.d.-h](#)).

GAVS has also empowered students who would have very likely been left behind by traditional school alone, and this is best exemplified by Lauren Walier. Lauren has cerebral palsy. When she faced a decision between a time-intensive regimen of physical therapy and the possibility of being

permanently in a wheelchair, GAVS accommodated her demanding schedule. Lauren enjoyed GAVS classes so much that she decided to continue her education with them even after her therapy was complete. While taking a full course load from GAVS, Lauren also runs her own charity, Make Lemon Aide for Cerebral Palsy, which raises funding for critically needed disease research and treatment ([Georgia Virtual, n.d.-i](#)).

7. The Laurel Springs School

<i>Modality:</i>	Virtual
<i>Supplemental/full-time:</i>	Supplemental or full-time
<i>Model, if applicable:</i>	College prep
<i>Grades served:</i>	Kindergarten to 12th
<i>Governance:</i>	Private

The Laurel Springs School, located in **Ojai, California**, is considered to be elite not only among virtual schools but among private schools in general. Serving students in grades K-12 in the United States and 90 other countries, Laurel uses an asynchronous model that emphasizes student and parent responsibility. In the Lower School (K-5), parents play an integral role in their child's education, and they partner with their child's assigned teacher to facilitate a one-on-one experience that is catered to the child's unique learning style. Laurel also emphasizes learning a world language, which starts in kindergarten and continues throughout the child's learning experience ([Laurel Springs School, n.d.-b](#)). When the child advances into the Middle School (6-8), parents take a step back, and the student becomes more responsible for completing the assignments ([Laurel Springs School, n.d.-c](#)). At this age, students also gain access to over 30 student organizations and Laurel's unique and monitored social media platform ([Laurel Springs School, n.d.-d](#)). The Upper School (9-12) builds on the independence gained during the Middle School years and sets students on the path toward college success. Honors, AP, Dual Credit, and SAT/ACT prep courses are available, and students also have the opportunity to take life preparation electives such as Anthropology, Military Careers, Careers in Criminal Justice, and Real World Parenting ([Laurel Springs School, n.d.-i](#)). Participation in the National Honor Society and National Junior Honor Society is encouraged ([Laurel Springs School, n.d.-c, n.d.-i](#)).

At the Middle and Upper School levels, Laurel ([n.d.-g](#)) also offers a Gifted and Talented Academy for academically exceptional students, which includes more rigorous coursework and advanced training in critical thinking and communication. All grade levels are offered both virtual and in-person field trips, as well as regional social events, all of which are designed to engage students with class material

and one another more organically ([Laurel Springs School, n.d.-a](#)).

Laurel students display a high degree of college readiness, as they outscore typical California and national averages on both the SAT and ACT. Laurel composite ACT scores were 20% higher than the national average in 2020. Over 75% of Laurel Springs students score a 3 or above on AP exams, putting the school in the top 10% worldwide for this metric ([Laurel Springs School, n.d.-e](#)). Laurel operates on a per-course tuition model, with course costs increasing as the students age. The Lower School core courses begin at \$425 for a semester-long course and \$625 for a year-long course; most full-year Upper School courses cost over \$1,000. The Gifted and Talented Academy has a tuition rate of \$13,000 per year. However, discounts are available, especially for military families or families with multiple children enrolled in the school ([Laurel Springs School, n.d.-h](#)).

For Taylor Rivera, a lover of horses and rodeo, Laurel Springs has been a dream come true. Daily chores on her family's California ranch, hours of training, and frequent travel for rodeo competitions would make completing a traditional education challenging. Laurel Springs is another matter entirely, as Taylor can "arrange her daily schedule so that school and outside interests can be accommodated" ([Laurel Springs School, n.d.-f, para. 6](#)), complete her work at her own pace, and develop relationships with her teachers. Taylor is eagerly looking forward to college (where she aspires to join a rodeo team) and is confident that Laurel Springs is helping her along the way.

8. The University of Texas High School

<i>Modality:</i>	Virtual
<i>Supplemental/full-time:</i>	Supplemental or full-time
<i>Model, if applicable:</i>	N/A
<i>Grades served:</i>	9th to 12th
<i>Governance:</i>	University-sponsored (special purpose district)

The University of Texas High School serves "more than 400 full-time students enrolled in the UT High School Diploma Program, thousands of students taking one or a few online courses, over 29,000 students completing credit by exams, and approximately 250 partner school districts offering specialty services to students provided by UT High School" ([UT High School, n.d.-a, Students section](#)). Regularly listed as a top virtual high school in the country, it has achieved this status despite a relatively modest price of \$260 per semester course, or a full-time diploma program rate of \$3,640 per year. Typical Texas high school diplomas are available for Texas residents, while students from anywhere in the world may receive a diploma under

UT's international program. All students have an individual graduation plan ([UT High School, n.d.-b](#)). Designed to accommodate aspiring athletes, actors, or any student who needs broader or more advanced course options ([UT High School, n.d.-a](#)), enrollment is available during the spring, summer, and fall, and classes are self-paced, engineered to give students as much flexibility as possible. Like many other virtual schools, supplemental and credit-by-exam opportunities are available for both transfer to the student's regular school district and early advancement purposes. AP and Dual Credit classes are available if a student seeks to graduate early or obtain college credit (UT High School, [n.d.-e](#), [n.d.-b](#)).

However, UT's most unique offerings may be its variety of student services. International students may partner with a school in their home country and graduate with a diploma from each, giving them more flexibility for both economic opportunity and college admissions ([UT High School, n.d.-c](#)). Recent arrivals from Spanish-speaking countries to the United States may benefit from the Language Learners at the University of Texas at Austin's Center for Hispanic Achievement Program (LUCHA), in which they enroll in a specialized curriculum at UT High School to facilitate their transition to Texas public schools ([UT High School, n.d.-d](#)).

Testing data are harder to come by, as UT High is a special purpose district and does not generate state accountability ratings and reports. However, one ranking lists the average student SAT score at 1125 ([Bergman, 2020](#)), well above the College Board's reported national average of 1051 ([2020](#)). Alumni attend universities such as UT itself, Texas A&M, Texas Tech, the University of Houston, and the American University in Cairo ([UT High School, n.d.-a](#)). Best College Reviews ranked UT High as the second best virtual high school in the country between 2018 and 2020 based on a variety of factors, including "range of course selection, level of course flexibility to earn a diploma, testimonials, support and guidance, quality of technology, and noteworthy features" (UT High School, [n.d.-a](#), [2019](#)). College Transitions, a consulting organization of scholars, admissions officers, and former counselors dedicated to helping high school students be admitted to their college of choice, included UT on its list of the top 15 online high schools in the country on a holistic basis ([Bergman, 2020](#)).

9. The Oak Meadow School

<i>Modality:</i>	Virtual
<i>Supplemental/full-time:</i>	Supplemental or full-time
<i>Model, if applicable:</i>	N/A
<i>Grades served:</i>	Pre-K to 12th
<i>Governance:</i>	Private

The Oak Meadow School, a private school in **Brattleboro, Vermont**, that serves 600 full-time Pre-K to 12th-grade students from around the world, is a unique option in that it provides an effective education for students (Oak Meadow alumni are attending universities such as Yale and Cornell) while eschewing the use of standardized testing ([Bergman, 2020](#)). Oak Meadow offers both supplemental education for homeschooled students and an independent diploma, the latter of which is accredited and recognized by multiple U.S. agencies. Courses last all school year (36 weeks), and the curriculum is formulated around encouraging student creativity. All teachers have previous experience, and a majority of them possess a postgraduate degree. Most assignments use print-based materials to limit student screen time and can include frequent art projects, knitting, studio artwork, music, and creative writing. Influenced by the Waldorf philosophy, the Oak Meadow approach to education offers other critical elements such as empathetic development, critical thinking, self-reflection, and communication skills ([Oak Meadow School, n.d.-b](#)).

Due to the school's philosophical opposition to standardized testing, Oak Meadow does not offer AP or Honors classes, but this is offset by its support of dual enrollment and its accreditation through the New England Association for Schools and Colleges (Oak Meadow School, [n.d.-a](#), [n.d.-b](#)). All high school students are also required to participate in an "Advanced Study Project," which is similar to an "Independent Study" requirement but offers the student more choices and flexibility. This requirement can take the form of anything from a research paper to a well-produced artistic creation or multimedia production (Oak Meadow School, [n.d.-c](#), [n.d.-d](#)).

Despite its unorthodox approach to education, Oak Meadow has garnered recognition. College Transitions ranked Oak Meadow among the top 15 online high schools in the country overall, putting it toe to toe with university-backed programs and elite gifted and talented academies ([Bergman, 2020](#)). The school generates its funding on a tuition model, and the rate increases as students age. For a full year, K-4 students pay \$2,850 in annual tuition, students in 5th to 8th grades pay \$3,790, and high school students pay \$1,890 per class. Military families and families with multiple children are eligible for a tuition discount ([Oak Meadow School, n.d.-e](#)).

Paresa lives on a farm in Texas with her family, where she loves doing her daily chores, caring for her family's farm animals, volunteering at a local library, and working alongside her local political action group. She credits much of her leadership experience and academic success to Oak Meadow (of whose National Honor Society chapter she is a member), saying that some students, "like [her], do better when they have more freedom with their education," as distance learning has granted her the opportunity to learn from her own endeavors ([Oak Meadow School, n.d.-d](#)).

Additional Resources and Recommendations

The discussion of developing high-quality virtual offerings in Texas is largely moot, of course, if prior structural impediments are not altered. As mentioned in the introduction, many of these limitations have been waived during the course of the 2020-21 school year, but legislative action is needed to ensure a robust and continuing virtual sector. Current limitations and recommendations to amend them have been discussed in detail in prior publications ([Sass & Griesinger, 2020](#)). Those recommendations, in brief, included

1. *Lift the moratorium on districts' establishment of virtual education programs.*
2. *Allow state funding to be applied to more than three courses in the state course catalog.*
3. *Limit the provision allowing districts to deny a student's course catalog enrollment if the district provides a "substantially similar" course.*
4. *Open provision of virtual resources to all grade levels.*
5. *Revise the process by which courses are approved for the TXVSN.*
6. *Extend the timeline for required teacher professional development that could prohibit teachers from filling gaps in available online course teachers.*
7. *Direct a portion of available federal emergency education grant funding to modernize the state virtual education system.*
8. *Align virtual education admission and enrollment requirements with those of in-person campuses.*
9. *Evaluate the course fee limit placed on TXVSN catalog courses and determine whether it is appropriately set for given subject areas.*

In addition, TEA ([2021](#)) has issued updated guidance throughout the pandemic to assist districts in navigating an

adapted regulatory landscape. Among other waivers, one has been made available for charter schools rated A or B to allow students to transfer to a fully remote instructional program from outside the charter school's current geographic service area ([pp.32-33](#)). This mirrors the status quo for districts: Districts may accept transfer students regardless of the student's district of residence.

On the other hand, there is not any limit on the number of students that a district may accept as transfers, in person, or now remotely. Current guidance still applies charter school enrollment caps to their student transfer process.

Maintaining the first waiver would create ongoing parity for districts and would allow families to select and access a high-quality virtual program regardless of its governance structure. The enrollment cap provision, however, may prove to be as real a barrier if enrollment caps intended to apply to in-person seats cause needless transfer denials to remote students. Both provisions merit the Legislature's attention—one to retain, the other to adjust.

Conclusion

Virtual education will be an integral component of the Texas education landscape for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Student and district circumstances, health-related and otherwise, will necessitate increased structural flexibility. Of course, in-person education options will almost certainly continue to be the preference of the majority of parents, especially post-pandemic; the objective of developing a strong virtual education ecosystem in Texas is not and should not be to replace that format. However, a more robust virtual system can better serve the families who prefer virtual education for the long term, equip Texas to offer parents more high-quality choices, and prepare the state more effectively for the next pandemic or emergency.

Fortunately, whether one is a parent searching for a more sophisticated virtual education option for their child, a district leader working to improve their virtual programs, or a policymaker seeking to strengthen Texas's public virtual education system, one can turn to a myriad of models and methods for examples. Whether the model is a public charter school that emphasizes flexibility and individualized learning, a hybrid school that combines rigid military discipline with online classes to help struggling students recover academically, or a private school that offers homeschool support, all of the above models offer insight as to the quality and variety of educational offerings that intentionally designed virtual education can provide. It is hoped that the various models listed in this paper may provide a starting point for continued research for districts and lawmakers exploring program design at the state and local levels. ★

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