

10 Questions Parents Should Ask About Distance Learning

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The decision to seek help for a high school student who is in need of credit recovery or acceleration is an important decision for a parent. When virtual, distance learning, or correspondence learning is recommended, parents must consider a variety of options – public school sponsored programs, State run virtual charter schools, University independent study programs, and private distance learning schools. With an abundance of resources to aid those in decision making, parents are often confused and troubled on where to get started.

Where do parents find the most appropriate school that fits their family needs? They must first understand that not all schools are alike.

Some distance learning schools employ lesson plans not aligned to state or national standards, midterm and final exams are not proctored, and teachers are not certified. These schools only hurt children and further confuse parents in decision making.

There are, however, distance learning schools that offer nurturing and caring environments where courses are fully accredited and teachers are certified and committed to helping each student succeed. In addition, the curriculum is specifically designed to work in a non-traditional setting. Moreover, while students do not need constant supervision as they work in a distance learning school, they do need guidance, feedback, support, direct communication and a total educational experience that enriches their lives.

To find the differences in distance learning schools, parents should ask the following questions:

- 1. Is this school accredited?** Make sure the school is accredited by one of the six premier American regional school accrediting commissions. If the school is not properly accredited, secondary and post-secondary schools may reject the credits earned.
- 2. How long has the school been operating?** The longer the school has been established the more experience it will have. Longer school history does not necessary make it better or more credible; it is however a plus.
- 3. How much is tuition? Are there additional fees?** Some schools have semester tuition that are flat rates which include books and materials. Others charge tuition plus additional fees per course. Student needs (a credit or complete course load) will determine the costs. Parents should ask what is included in the tuition cost.

4. **Are teachers certified and experienced in distance learning?** When teachers grade and provide feedback, it is critical that they have the knowledge and skills necessary to do the job. Core content areas should be taught by certified teachers.
5. **What diplomas are offered?** Not every school offers a diploma. Before students enroll, ask if the school offers at least a standard diploma (a college prep diploma is a plus).
6. **How many students are currently enrolled?** Bigger schools may offer more courses while smaller schools may respond to student needs and offer personnel touches. The bottom line is making sure the child is able to communicate with the school -- typically by email, phone, fax or online chat. Communication between the school, the teacher, and student is the key to success in learning at a distance.
7. **How many students have completed a course or graduated?** The stronger the student connection with the school, the higher the completion rate.
8. **How fast or slow can a student work?** The great advantage of taking distance learning is that students have the flexibility to set their own schedule and work at their own pace. Accelerated programs enable students to get to their goal sooner while a quick-turnaround make-up course allows students to graduate on time and with their class. Some schools register students in cohorts, meaning a class requires a minimum number of students to offer the course, and all participants must begin and end on predetermined dates.
9. **What if a student needs extra help?** Some schools provide “office hours” which allows the student to communicate with their teacher when they need help. Other schools expect the student to work independently and do not offer teacher - student interaction.
10. **How do students communicate with the school?** Having a number to call or visiting an actual location is helpful when students are in need of assistance. Some schools only want students to use online methods for assistance. The most helpful schools will provide a contact phone number.

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