"Those making policy should be clear on this key point: **there exists no research from evidence that full-time virtual schooling at the K-12 level is an adequate replacement for traditional face to-face teaching and learning.** Yet to date, this lack of support appears to have exerted little or no influence on the proliferation of virtual K-12 schools."
National Education Policy Center

Online K-12 Schooling In America
Online learning can include traditional classrooms that offer online activities, fully online classrooms outside of the school building, and blended classrooms that fall somewhere in between. In 2017-18, 501 full-time virtual schools enrolled 297,712 students, and 300 blended schools enrolled 132,960 students. Enrollments in virtual schools increased by more than 2,000 students between 2016-17 and 2017-18, and enrollments in blended learning schools increased by over 16,000 during this same time period. In contrast to traditional "brick and mortar" classrooms, online schools offer full-time learning—in front of a computer—not necessarily in a space dedicated to learning, or with any adult supervision. One of the biggest disadvantages of online schools is a lack of social interaction with teachers and peers. Many educators agree that early social interaction is particularly beneficial for child development. Social interaction helps children develop strong language skills, creativity, empathy, communication and confidence. Other issues with online learning include technology and connectivity issues, time management challenges and equity issues including lack of access, parental support and language barriers. There is little research on the issue of access for students with disabilities in online education, especially at the K–12 level.

Proponents of online education suggest that benefits include a curriculum that can be tailored to individual students and are cheaper to deliver versus traditional methods. They suggest an individualized learning plan will boost achievement results. These claims are not supported by the research evidence. In fact, student performance at virtual schools tends to lag behind those in traditional brick and mortar schools. Research shows that full-time virtual and blended schools consistently fail to perform as well as district public schools. Fewer than 50 percent of virtual and blended schools that had state performance ratings were rated as having acceptable performance.

District Virtual Schools Versus Charter Virtual Schools
These trends hold true even with high-achieving student populations. The findings suggest that online schools post low outcomes not simply because the students they serve face challenges, but because of problems with how online learning works and the limitations of not having a physical classroom. Online charter schools are one type of virtual school. In 2017-2018, just under half of all virtual schools (46.5 percent) were charter schools, but together they accounted for 79.1 percent of the enrollment. They are a big business that mostly benefits for-profit companies that run and manage them. Charter schools are tuition-free, independent public schools exempt from most of the rules, regulations, and statutes that apply to traditional public schools. Students attending online charter schools give up their classroom seats and face-to-face time with teachers and other learning resources.

There is strong evidence that online charters are of limited value to students, local school districts and taxpayers for the following reasons:
- Online charters often have poor academic results: low four-year graduation rates, poor test scores, and high dropout rates.

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- Online charters tend to offer limited interaction with teachers—in many cases, the student and teacher are not even online at the same time.
- Online charters can cause taxpayers to foot the bill twice, once to pay tuition to the for-profit corporation running the online charter, then to the local public school district when a student returns to a brick and mortar school to catch up on what they did not receive in their online program.
- Online charters cause significant loss of revenue and resources to traditional public schools when local districts are required to turn over funds to for-profit online charter corporations. A loss of funds poses significant challenges for traditional public schools, which are often forced to reduce staff, programs, and other basic expenditures.
- There are no well-established best practices or state endorsements to prepare teachers to instruct in a full-time online environment.

Around the country, virtual charter schools have been plagued with problems. Education Week reported that nearly three-quarters of students enrolled in virtual charters nationwide attended a high school where less than half graduated in four years. A study in Indiana found that students fell further behind their peers after transferring to virtual charter schools. There is no uniform system of checks and balances to ensure online charter schools are well managed and serve the needs of students. The largest charter school failure in Ohio's history occurred in January 2018, when the *Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow (ECOT)*, an online school, shut down its school due to lack of finances. ECOT lost money after a ruling that it repay the state $60 million for over-reporting student attendance.

District-run virtual schools are another type of online school. State virtual schools are entities created by legislation or by state-level agencies, usually funded partially or entirely by a state appropriation, course fees and/or grants. In general, the bulk of state virtual school funding comes from the state allocation and/or course fees based on course enrollments. Most state virtual schools do not grant diplomas and are not responsible for many of the functions performed by schools. Among virtual schools, far more district-operated schools achieved acceptable state school performance ratings (56.7 percent acceptable) than charter-operated schools (40.8 percent). There were 268 district virtual schools and 233 charter virtual schools nationwide in 2017-18.

NC Virtual Public School & Virtual Charter Schools: What's the Difference?
In 2005, on the recommendation of the North Carolina e-Learning Commission, the General Assembly established the North Carolina Virtual Public School under Session Law 2006-66:Section 7.16.(a-e). The purpose of the North Carolina Virtual Public School (NCVPS) is to provide e-learning opportunities to students. NCVPS is the second largest state virtual school in the United States. The North Carolina Virtual Public School is not associated with either virtual charter school. NCVPS is a supplemental program for all the public middle schools and high schools in the state. NCVPS helps students enroll in courses that are not offered in their schools. Students can take all of their courses with NCVPS and still be a member of their local school. Classes are **taught by educators with an NC professional teaching license.**

Students can compete in sports and participate in clubs at their own schools when taking NCVPS classes. NCVPS is a cost-effective way to educate students who need access to courses unavailable at their local school. NCVPS also offers its classes to homeschooled and private school students. For

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the 2018-2019 school year, there were 51,950 course enrollments and 32,081 unique students enrolled. The pass rate was 84.6 percent.

In February, 2015, the NC State Board of Education approved the opening of two online charter schools, the North Carolina Connections Academy and the North Carolina Virtual Academy. The virtual charters function like regular charter schools except all of their courses are online. The North Carolina Virtual Public School is not associated with either virtual charter. They are four-year pilot programs. Students **cannot be enrolled in courses** with both their traditional school and a virtual charter school.

Students attending online or *virtual* charter schools give up their classroom seats and face-to-face time with teachers and other learning resources. Since their launch in 2015, North Carolina's two virtual charter schools have never risen above a "D" school performance grade nor have they met pre-set student growth goals. Last year, virtual charter schools were in the news because the State Board of Education allowed N.C. Virtual Academy to **grow by 20 percent** the following school year, **in spite of poor performance**. Senate Bill 392 attempted to expand virtual charter schools enrollment but was later vetoed by Governor Cooper. Many public education advocates and educational researchers have questioned why such poor-performing entities are being expanded.

NC Virtual Public School (NCVPS) Is Not A Virtual Charter School
- NCVPS is a supplemental program for each high school and middle school in the state.
- All NCVPS courses are taught by North Carolina **certified teachers**.
- NCVPS helps schools with complex scheduling issues.
- NCVPS helps students personalize their schedules.
- NCVPS helps students enroll in courses that are not offered in their schools.
- Students can take all of their courses with NCVPS and still be a member of their local school.
- Students can compete in sports and participate in clubs at their own schools when taking NCVPS classes.

The Virtual Charters
- Virtual Charters are similar to regular charter schools.
- Students take all classes online in virtual charter schools.
- Virtual charters only have to have 50 percent of their teachers be NC certified teachers.
- Parents function as "learning coaches" for students in virtual charter schools, especially in early grades.
- Virtual charters aren't subject to same teacher/student ratios-they can have one teacher per 50 students.
- Virtual charters can grant diplomas.
- The virtual charters are four-year pilot programs.
- Students **cannot be enrolled in courses** with both their traditional school and a virtual charter school.

Learn more about NCVPS.
Learn more about the North Carolina Connections Academy.
Learn more about the North Carolina Virtual Academy.

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When Does Online Education Make Sense?
Using an online learning environment for course recovery or to supplement face-to-face learning has been shown to be effective. Students across the state enroll in individual classes taught by certified teachers and designed to provide courses that students are unable to take at their local schools. Health issues are another reason students may prefer or even require online instruction. In the midst of a global pandemic, the transition to virtual school was necessary to keep children and educators safe. As of 2017, North Carolina had the second largest online or virtual public school in the country.

Many districts across the country reported a significant increase in enrollment in online school as parents sought consistency and safety as districts scrambled to deal with the impact of COVID-19 and various state and local rules and regulations. According to Chalkbeat, "K12, the country's largest operator of virtual schools, says enrollment has jumped from 123,000 students last year to 170,000 this year (2020), and that number could still grow. Connections Academy, the country's second largest virtual school network, doesn't have national enrollment numbers yet but says applications jumped 61 percent."

How Are Schools in NC Responding to the Pandemic?
In North Carolina, as in much of the country, schools moved to online instruction in the spring. Many students had difficulty connecting to online services and obtaining devices. Educators did enormous amounts of work in ensuring their students received the best education possible, often while teaching their own children. The most vulnerable students suffered due to the lack of support services and food distribution that could not be easily replicated or distributed.

The North Carolina State Board of Education (SBE) and NC Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), in consultation and response to guidelines issued by the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS), developed guidance to support state's public school units (PSUs) and communities in determining their plans and strategies for reopening schools.

- Plan A does not limit the number of students in a classroom but does require other safety measures such as the use of face coverings, social distancing, symptom screening, and more.

- Plan B allows in person instruction but limits the number of children allowed in each classroom. Both plans allow for the use of remote learning for any child who chooses it.

- Plan C allows school districts to implement all remote learning.

As of October 5, 2020, public school districts and charter schools were permitted to move to plan A for grades K-5. Schools were permitted to operate in 'Plan B' or 'Plan C' for all 6th – 12th grade students.

What's Next for Virtual Schools in NC?
As COVID-19 cases continue to rise around the nation, the return to brick and mortar school buildings remains unclear. Even with a vaccine now available, it will be some time before a critical number of people are vaccinated to impact infection rates.

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In an interview with education scholar Diane Ravitch about the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and the migration to online learning stated:

> "Now that the entire country has had a stiff dose of distance learning, its faults are showing. Parents and teachers are complaining about technical glitches, student privacy, and hacking of online platforms, as well as the sheer tedium of sitting in front of a screen for hours on end."

Face to face interaction cannot be replicated. Education researchers and sociologists agree that the [implications of the coronavirus on U.S. education are dire, but primarily for disadvantaged students](). Advantaged students will probably not have a large learning gap, if any ground while learning at home. Disadvantaged students stand to lose more, and the achievement gap may grow even wider.

Notably, the pandemic has cause the digital divide to grow even wider. In a [recent report]() around 1 in 10 of the poorest children in the U.S. has little or no access to technology for learning. About 12 percent of respondents from households earning less than $25,000 a year said a digital device was rarely or never available for a child to use for learning and nearly 10 percent said the same of the internet. These gaps have profound and lasting negative impacts on student academic achievement.

Recent Legislative Updates: Virtual Instruction
On September 4, 2020, a nearly $1 billion COVID-19 relief bill was signed by NC Governor Cooper. The bill included a few points [impacting virtual learning]():

- A hold harmless provision for average daily attendance measurement.
- The state's two virtual charter schools are being expanded to enroll up to 3,800 students.
- A $335 stimulus check to every family that has at least one child. The intention of this item is to offset costs incurred due to COVID-19 and remote learning.
- $21 million was allotted to NCDPI to improve Internet connectivity for students.
- Schools are allowed to use funds in the transportation allotment for school nutrition and remote instruction.

As of this writing, the lasting effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the timeline of fully reopening school buildings is unknown. Replacing face-to-face learning entirely could send North Carolina public education into a costly tailspin, with children bearing the brunt of the effects according to research and evidence. Public education advocates have an opportunity to anticipate what will best serve students and teachers upon their return and work towards meeting those needs. The most vulnerable students will require more support than ever when they return to physical schools.

More helping professionals and trauma-informed practices will be necessary to mitigate the trauma children and their teachers will surely experience from the pandemic. There will be well-funded groups clamoring for the financial gains that would benefit education tech if North Carolina decided to make permanent moves in the direction of virtual schooling. We must make sure that all children receive an equitable education, and virtual charters are not the answer.

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