

It is clear that just as technology has changed, so many other facets of our lives, so too it is rapidly changing the experience that our children are having in school. Once the province of homeschoolers, distance learning – that is learning via computer – has entered the mainstream in districts across the area. Classrooms, where once there was only a teacher illuminating concepts with a whiteboard, there are now classes filled with students blogging, [Skyping](#) and enjoying rich educational experiences with others halfway around the world.

"In a global society and a society that is digitally and socially hooked up, this is a natural way for students to learn," says Dr. Vicki Cohen, director of the Peter Sammartino School of Education at Farleigh Dickenson University. She adds, "It introduces students to life-long learning and it develops skills they can use for the rest of their life. For students who are quiet in class, this is a wonderful way for them to communicate. Sometimes it's hard to get these students involved. These students can flourish in an online course."

As a parent, however, you may wonder about the quality of something that you have likely not experienced yourself. You may wonder how online courses work and what kind of feedback and communication your child may be getting from an instructor that they will never meet. It's also natural for parents to doubt whether the communication methods used in an online seminar, such as blogging or forum discussions, are really any replacement for term papers and pop quizzes. Experts are convinced that online learning is changing the classroom experience in ways that we don't even know yet, but as with any new tool, there are bound to be some bumps along the way.

Why?

Particularly in this era of budget cuts, districts like online learning programs because it allows them to broaden their offerings without having the cost of additional staff and facilities. Liz Pape, president and CEO of the Virtual High School Global Consortium, a non-profit organization that offers courses through member schools such as Tenaflly High School, says that VHSC gives schools a chance to offer interesting and challenging classes, even if only a few students elect to take them. "For instance, it might be difficult to find 25 high school students at Tenaflly who want to take Contemporary American Poetry, but when you are offering it to 700 schools throughout the world, it is quite different."

Also popular, is [blended learning](#) , which is when certain segments of classroom work migrate online. For instance, at an elementary school level, Saddle River Day School uses Skype as a way for its 4th graders to communicate with students in other schools through a "My Hero" project in which students share their writing with other schools. "This started off as a writing assignment," says Laly Porras, technology integrator. "Once the essays are completed and checked, they are posted on the My Hero website." She adds that the assignment is particularly meaningful because the students are "writing for an authentic audience."

Another option that is growing in popularity is one where an entire curriculum is delivered to students online as part of an online public school, so that there is no cost to parents. Jeff Kwitowski, vice president of public affairs for K12 Inc., largest provider of online school programs in the U.S., says it is now providing these services for 80,000 students in 27 states and the District of Columbia. "In most cases these are public schools that are open to any students in the state," he says. "Unlike most situations, where you can only get into your district school, we call this the most public of all public schools. Your child can have a choice, regardless of where he lives."

Questions to ask

Just because learning is coming via a computer, or will involve children outside of your child's school, doesn't necessarily mean that it is better. Right now, distance learning is evolving so quickly, the answers to questions are constantly changing. In addition, new questions – such as whether colleges will view grades coming from online institutions in the same light as they view grades from bricks-and-mortar schools – are being asked.

Pape says, "Parents should ask – what kind of online course is this? What kind of blended course? Is it designed to self paced, or is it designed for students to work together as a cohort? Has it been written to state standards? People don't always think about how to make that translation effectively."

Kwitowski adds that parental education about distance learning is important, and that his company holds community meetings often, and invites parents to get a greater understanding of the benefits of online learning. "One of the great benefits of this program is that it invites parents in," he says. "Every educator would agree that student success is largely based upon how actively involved parents are in their child's education. Parents and teachers can communicate better with these programs."

Cohen adds that if your student is self-motivated, or needs a lot of face time with the teacher, you should be leery of online courses. "For a student who is not highly motivated and very well organized, in terms of time management, it can be a problem. For those students who need the interaction in the classroom, and need to see a teacher there to deliver the material – they will get lost. That is one of my main concerns." She adds that you always want to make sure that your child has a qualified instructor, and that this person will give feedback in a timely manner.

There is no question that a classroom 10 years from now will look very different from the classroom that your child is in now, or that you were in decades ago. But rather than be nervous about that change we should embrace it, says Pape, who notes that it means great things for our students. "It is my belief that the killer application will be blended classrooms in K-12 – every classroom, every day. There is so much that we can do with the technology. Why wouldn't we want to have that as part of the repertoire of how we teach kids?"

By Jan Wilson

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