Virtual Schools

When "Monique's" grandson was forced into a virtual school, she had no idea how he would finish 5th grade. She felt lost and unsure what to do. Unfortunately, these kinds of stories have become far too common. The COVID-19 Pandemic made virtual learning widespread, accelerating a trend SAC started noticing more than nine years ago. Since the return to in-person learning, we are seeing increases in students being unjustly placed or counseled into virtual schools for disciplinary, behavioral, and academic reasons.

Virtual placements vary widely in the level of support and amount of resources provided. The lack of live teacher instruction and peer interaction poses challenges to students' academic, social, and emotional well-being. Students in these settings – too often students with disabilities and students of color – are often expected to complete work on their own with little to no teacher assistance. They miss the richness of classroom discussion, the engagement of hands-on learning, and the motivation that comes from strong relationships within a school community. They also miss access to free school meals, one-on-one academic support, social work services, and other critical resources.

For virtual school environments to work, students need a lot of motivation, skill, and/or parent/caregiver support. Behavioral challenges in school can be a sign of academic deficits and a need for more support – not less. The students exiled to virtual school for disciplinary reasons are often the ones who need in-person support the most. Parents and caregivers feel the strain and struggle to support while juggling work and other obligations. We know of cases where students are unilaterally assigned to virtual programs or given a "choice," have an expulsion on your record or go to virtual school. Others say they felt there was no choice because of un-addressed bullying or frequent suspensions.

While sending students to virtual settings (artificially), lowers disciplinary rates, increases achievement scores in the home school, and may be a solution for specific situations such as for medically fragile students, virtual schooling does not work for many students and families. Instead, it increases the chances of school failure and dropout for too many young people.

> "Full-time virtual schools as they are currently designed do not show promise ... the overall performance of full-time virtual schools remains poor with little substantive improvement evident over time."
>
> -National Education Policy Center, 2023

Stories

To gain a better understanding of how virtual school placements are impacting the lives of students and their families, here are the perspectives of several who have received services from our organization:

QUAWN

Quawn was expelled for 180 days in 8th grade, after being accused of throwing a pencil (a charge he says is not true). He moved to another district but was forced into a virtual placement and told he would have to "earn his way" back to in-person. He had a set schedule of when he was allowed to go to in-person lab. "But sometimes they'd say I wasn't allowed to come in and say get out," he said. "I was struggling. Some days, I just wouldn't go to school. And other days, I'd go and not know what to do. I was a little angry. I felt like I wasn't really in school."

Quawn noted that he liked the staff there. "But I don't think that's OK to just put a student in virtual like that when they're trying to have a fresh start."

Quawn graduated after receiving extensive in-person support from SAC.

To listen to Quawn's story, visit:
http://bit.ly/QuawnStory

JADA

"Jada," mother of "Brooklyn," saw many adverse effects of a virtual school placement on her daughter's emotional and social well-being. After experiencing severe bullying by her peers, Brooklyn wrote a letter expressing her feelings regarding the situation. The letter was determined by administration to be a "threat" and resulted in a long-term suspension of three weeks, followed by virtual school placement. Jada expressed that she felt that no other alternatives were considered during the decision-making process and her daughter was unjustly put into a virtual school.

Brooklyn is described as a "self-motivated student." But that doesn't mean virtual school has been easy. Jada shared that her daughter has experienced more anxiety and depression due to being in such an isolating environment: "It's the social aspects. She's definitely a people-person […] And at this particular school, they don't allow you to even participate in the extracurricular activities if you're not going to [in-person] school […] which I think it's a punishment mechanism."

In addition, Jada expressed concerns with the communications from the virtual school throughout her daughter's enrollment. The lack of in-person support and the inconsistency within the communications have proven to be frustrating. Brooklyn has been able to maintain her academics, but many children cannot, evidenced when looking at poor achievement data during the pandemic.
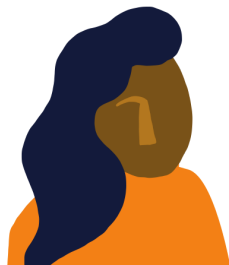
VALERIA

Another parent, "Valeria," shared her daughter's virtual school experience. "Alejandra" was repeatedly bullied at school, including some physical altercations that resulted in her being injured. During one incident, Alejandra pepper-sprayed a group of girls out of self-defense because they were about to jump her. The principal's immediate response was a threat to expel Alejandra. The expulsion was ultimately averted because it was determined that the school was not following Alejandra's IEP or Safety Plan.

Out of safety concerns, Valeria decided to enroll Alejandra in virtual school. Valeria reflected on the virtual school experience: "I am very dissatisfied with virtual, but I know I have no other option […] Instead of getting to the why of their behavior, they are just sending them to virtual."

> " Instead of getting to the *why* of their behavior, they are just sending them to virtual."

Ultimately, Valeria expressed concerns that many other students, in addition to her daughter, end up in virtual school where there are inadequate resources and support. Due to the subpar quality, in comparison to in-person education, both academic and social progress are hindered.

As seen in her daughter's experience, students in virtual schools can fall through the cracks because there is not enough monitoring or individualized support to ensure that students are not falling behind.

Even though Valeria made the decision to enroll Alejandra in virtual school, the information given prior to enrolling did not end up being all that it was "talked up to be," which has made this transition challenging and disappointing.

MONIQUE

A grandparent, "Monique," shared her experience with her grandson's virtual school placement and concerns for the treatment of other Black boys who could be at risk for experiencing similar situations. After a disciplinary incident, "Jayden" was out of school for over 30 days without a discipline hearing. He ended up being placed in a virtual school without a hearing and was told by the district that he would not be allowed to attend any in-person school in his district.

"Virtual school placement didn't work for my grandson … he wasn't given a computer [at first]…It was very hard to get him to sit there for any amount of time," Monique said. Jayden has ADHD and is described to be a "hands-on learner." The minimal amount of teacher instruction, combined with the lack of resources, inhibited his learning progress.

"It felt like he was being expelled to me. He wasn't allowed to have access to peers," Monique lamented, demonstrating the detrimental consequences of virtual placements on students such as hers.

Monique believes districts need to revise their Codes of Conduct to include clear rules for due process for those who are being considered for virtual placements due to disciplinary reasons.

Asks
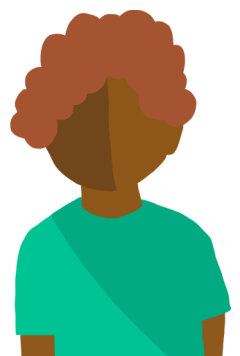
Michigan Department of Education

DATA TRANSPARENCY

The state should publicly track the number of students enrolled in full or partial virtual learning environments (including seat time waivers and virtual programs within traditional schools). Demographics, achievement, graduation and dropout data, student-teacher ratio, and student to support staff ratio should be published.

ISSUE GUIDANCE

MDE should issue guidance on virtual learning, including screening tools, a placement decision rubric, a clear process when using virtual schools as disciplinary placements, and recommendations for staffing ratios. The National Education Policy Center should be consulted, as well as families directly impacted by school pushout.

Michigan Legislature

DUE PROCESS

Work with Student Advocacy Center to pass legislation that clearly outlines due process protections for students facing virtual disciplinary placements.

DECREASE FUNDING

Too many children are being pushed into virtual school placements with inadequate support, yet schools are getting per pupil allocations as if they are providing them with a higher level of support. Virtual schools cost less. Specifically, the Legislature should cut cyber school funding or maintain the allowance of $9,150 per pupil **and** cut per pupil funding for students on a 100% Online Seat Time Waiver in traditional public schools (students in a blended learning seat time waiver would be eligible for the full per pupil amount).

Local Districts

DUE PROCESS

Change district policy to require a placement/due process meeting with the student, parent/guardian and an impartial hearing officer to determine if a virtual school placement is the best option/"lesser intervention." Alternatives should be considered.

SCREENING

Change district policy to require a process for screening students before placing them in virtual school and consider factors like reading level and ability to work independently.

Michigan Virtual's Online Learner Readiness Rubric is one tool (bit.ly/OnlineReadinessRubric).

RE-ENTRY PLAN

If the only option is a virtual placement, districts should document plans for FREQUENT face-to-face contact, and robust support. These plans should be co-developed with families. Virtual placements should be re-evaluated every 30 days and be limited to as short a period as possible. A re-entry plan to full days of in-person school should be required by district policy.