Support for Online Schooling

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Think of a major change in life—positive or negative. My major change was becoming an online student. Since I was bullied during middle school, I was homeschooled during my freshman year of high school. Unfortunately, homeschooling didn't work for me, so I become an online student in my sophomore year. I initially hated online learning. The courses were intense. They dove right into the material instead of gradually introducing it. Each course seemed to require students to complete several activities that took me all day. Nevertheless, by the end of that year, I adjusted to online learning. In fact, I grew to love its independence. I discovered that I learnt most subjects best in an online environment. Four years later, as a college student, I still enjoy online learning.

Whether the institution is high school or college, online schooling has increased in popularity over time. The National Education Center for Education Statistics conducted a study from fall 2015 and fall 2016 to compare how many college students enrolled in online courses (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data [IPED]). In fall 2015, "29.8% of college students took any [number] of online courses" (IPED). In fall 2016, "31.7% of college students took any [number] of online courses" (IPED). While this is a small increase, it still shows that as time passes, more college students became interested in online school. Another example of increasing online school enrollment occurred gradually from 2012 to 2015. In 2012, 25.9% of college students enrolled in online courses (Allen and Seaman 11). In 2015, 29.7% of students enrolled in online courses (Allen and Seaman 11). Again, although this change is gradual, these statistics demonstrate college students' increasing attraction to online learning.

A more drastic, long-term increase in online school enrollment occurred in Humboldt Virtual Education Program, a full-time online high school in Kansas. In 1999, when the program was first established, only 66 students enrolled (Von Dehrel). However, in 2014, over 6,000 students enrolled (Von Dehrel). Humboldt Virtual Education's increase demonstrates that high school students are also drawn to online learning. Overall, these increases demonstrate the growing popularity of online schooling. Unfortunately, just because something is popular doesn't mean it's good (Brownell 269). Nonetheless, online school is becoming popular among high school and college students, most likely due to its flexibility and increased opportunities.

As a result, online school is a beneficial way for high school and college students to learn. Therefore, some of these students should learn online. While I prefer full-time online learning, I recognize that this does not work for everyone, as it certainly has drawbacks. Thus, hybrid learning —defined as teaching courses via online and in-person—will be included in the definition of "online school". Learning online, at least some of the time, is a beneficial alternative and a great way to learn.

Online school provides flexibility. A Gale Opposing Viewpoints article confirms this by stating that online schools provide "greater individualization and flexibility than traditional 'brick-and-mortar' schools" ("Online Education"). This flexibility occurs because most programs are asynchronous— meaning students can log on anytime to complete schoolwork (Lei and Lei). Although Simon A. Lei and Stacy Y. Lei's article focuses on hybrid schools, they explain that being asynchronous is a benefit full-time online schools share with hybrid ones. At both the university and high school level students are able to not only access course materials anytime, but they have access to their materials anywhere. Several institutions offering online programs—for example, Corban University— emphasize how online learning fits students' schedules and can be done wherever the student prefers ("Online Programs"). It is important not to form opinions solely based on advertisements or promotional materials. Students and their families confirm online schools' promise more flexibility. For instance, according to a 2017 parent survey conducted by full-time K12 online school Connections Academy, 48% of parents cite the greater flexibility as their reason for choosing this institution (Connections Academy 7). This statistic explains that flexibility is a factor in choosing online learning. Although, no evidence, as of yet, indicates that Connections Academy offers this option. Thus, one could argue that just because parents sought Connections Academy for flexibility does not necessarily mean the school is flexible. However, since I attended Connections in high school, I agree that it is flexible, despite having strict due dates that one can easily fall behind on. Connections has more flexibility than in-person classes because it allows individuals to work on assignments on their own schedule and provides them with the freedom to work ahead. I also had the option to work anywhere that had Internet, so I completed school at different locations besides my house, which provided variety.

In short, online schools allow students to work anytime, at any location. Online learning opens up a variety of opportunities for students, especially high schoolers. In-person schools in rural areas may be limited in classes due to location and costs ("Online Education"). Online schools can provide these students with opportunities to take AP and Honors classes or different extracurricular classes ("Online Education"). Limited resources no longer have to hinder students from receiving a quality education. Additionally, online schools enable students with learning, physical, and mental disabilities to still obtain an education ("Online Education"; Von Drehle). Students once limited by their struggles now have a greater chance to succeed. For instance, David Von Drehle's Washington Post article covers Humboldt Virtual Education Program's 2018 high school commencement ceremony. The program's director, Jody Siebenmorgan, explains that the program includes students with diverse situations: academically talented, juvenile delinquency, foster care, teen mothering, and sickness (qtd. in Von Drehle). One example of a diverse situation regards a girl's completing school while having a double-lung transplant (Von Drehle). Online learning enabled this student to keep up with her schoolwork and gave her an educational opportunity she would not likely have had otherwise. In fact, Humboldt Virtual Educational Program provides most of its students with an education they would not have received otherwise (Von Drehle). This high school is an example of how online schools can give students second chances in education and perhaps life.

Online colleges can also provide students with opportunities to work towards degrees they couldn't otherwise earn. According to Best Colleges' 2019 report, a majority of students choose online college because their existing commitments prevent them from taking in-person classes (9). In 2016, 50% of college students cited "existing commitments" as a reason "for choosing online vs. on-campus learning options" ("2019 Online Education" 9). In 2017, 49% of students cited this reason, and in 2018, 47% of students cited it ("2019 Online Education" 9). These statistics demonstrate that online schooling has removed the obstacle of outside commitments for the college students' educational journey. They indicate that for a majority of college students online schooling gives students the opportunity to learn new trades and pursue their dreams. Whether students need assistance in completing high school or fulfilling career goals, online schooling can remove the obstacles and open up educational opportunities, which can lead to more opportunities in life.

Full-time online school—taking every class completely online—may not work for every student. Therefore, hybrid learning presents a valid alternative by allowing students to learn through both online and in-person classes. It is still considered online school while including in-person elements. Lei and Lei explain that hybrid learning has the best of both online and in-person courses. Hybrid learning's online benefits include access to online materials, visual modes of learning, the ability to see assignments ahead of time, and the ability to catch up on assignments (Lei & Lei). Its in-person benefits include some face-to-face interaction, auditory modes of learning, and personalized assistance (Lei & Lei). Face-to-face social interaction counteracts isolation which is a common drawback to online learning ("Online Education"). Hybrid learning has additional benefits unique to itself, like saving the time and cost of commuting to class (Lei & Lei). Since students meet less frequently, than they would for in-person classes, they don't need to travel to class as often. As with everything, hybrid learning still has its drawbacks. Lei and Lei explain that students need excellent time management to do well. They also acknowledge that students cannot see nonverbal cues which are imperative for communication (Brownell 200). Another drawback is that students may underestimate the rigor required for hybrid classes. Despite these drawbacks, hybrid learning is an effective alternative to completely online learning because hybrid offers the benefits of both modes.

An important argument against online learning—full-time or hybrid—includes lack of student motivation, especially among high school students. However, online teachers can help their students stay motivated. Forty-two Canadian online teachers gave advice about motivating high school students based on their own experiences (Murphy & Rodríguez-Manzanares). These tips include, but are not limited to, offering prizes for participation, "communicat[ing] one-on-one" with students, reaching out to struggling students, finding face-to-face opportunities, creating threads for students to discuss personal or controversial subjects, using a motivational voice either through video or word choice, and creating assignments worth the students' time and effort (Murphy and Rodríguez-Manzanares). Elizabeth Murphy and Maria A. Rodríguez-Manzanares explain that teachers need to establish a social presence with their pupils to increase student motivation. They explain that students may feel isolated since online learning does not provide nonverbal cues. In essence, if teachers effectively communicate and facilitate open communication with their students, students can gain motivation. Fortunately, online college students most likely do not struggle with motivation in the same way that high school students struggle. One factor could be due to age. In 2018, 82% of online college students were adults, and 60% of these students fell between the ages of 25 and 54 and 20% of these students were greater than 54 ("2019 Online Education" 34). College students, especially as they age, typically become more mature and thus more motivated. On the other hand, high school students are still young and have not always gained internal motivation.

Of course, online school will not work for every student. Some prefer in-person classes, which is acceptable because the best type of schooling depends upon students' learning styles. Nonetheless, online schooling is an excellent way for students in high school or college to learn. It offers flexibility and opportunities since students can take all online classes, some online classes, or hybrid classes. I challenge all college students to take at least one online course during their educational career or to encourage a fellow student to do so. Perhaps they may discover that online schooling perfectly fits their varied learning styles.

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