



Remote Instruction Interferes With Learning. So Why Is It Expanding?



The pandemic was not exactly the apex of K-12 educational quality. As students [pivoted](#) to remote learning to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus, test scores dropped, absenteeism skyrocketed, and youth mental health declined. Angry parents [disrupted](#) school board meetings with protests against school closures and other pandemic era restrictions.

Yet three years after the crisis officially ended and schools resumed in-person instruction, the number of K-12 students engaging in remote learning is roughly [twice](#) as high as it was in 2019. A total of 610,000 students, or 1 in 80 American children, attended fully virtual schools in 2024-25. Disproportionately, they are enrolled in remote learning programs operated by for-profit companies: Close to 40% attend schools run by a single company, Stride, Inc. (formally called K12, Inc.), according to that organization's August [earnings report](#). The company reported a 4% year-over-year increase in enrollment, even as the total number of school-aged children [declines](#) due to long-standing decreases in birth-

rates and recent reductions in immigration.

Yet decades of research suggests that virtual schools diminish educational opportunities for most of their students—fully supporting what Americans witnessed during the pandemic. In a 2023 brief, NEPC researchers [described this research](#) and the disconnect with policy:

Since 2013, NEPC has published nine comprehensive reports on the performance of U.S. virtual schools, including this one. Six of the earlier reports also provided reviews of the research literature on virtual education and the policy landscape related to virtual schools. In this 10-year period, little has changed. Virtual schools in general perform poorly, state virtual school policies remain inadequate, and little if any research supports the claims being made for virtual education. Despite their poor performance, the heavily financed flood of technological and business model innovations has far outpaced research on the impact of virtual teaching and learning.

In 2015, a [study](#) led by a fellow at the right-leaning Hoover Institution found that the impact of attending a virtual charter school was “literally as though the student did not go to school for the entire year.”

“And yet virtual schools continue to spread,” NEPC researchers wrote in their 2023 [report](#):

No doubt this is in large part because: The policy environment remains, if not friendly, then indifferent; oversight is lax; and millions of dollars from profit-seeking investors promote the enterprise.

Whatever the reasons for their continued spread may be, however, virtual schools are clearly not spreading based on research evidence.

NEPC Resources on Virtual Education

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