



Growth of on-line schools sparks funding debate

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WORTHINGTON, Ohio (AP) — Ohio [Connections Academy](#) doesn't feel like a typical public school. Teachers work from closely spaced cubicles preparing lessons, grading or consulting quietly with colleagues.

You'll find no playground, no cafeteria, not even any students here.

This is what's known as an e-school, an online learning center whose students connect from home computers. It's an educational option that's exploding in popularity around the country — raising perplexing and divisive questions for policymakers about what proportion of public education dollars should go to these school without walls.

Since 2007, Connections has seen its student enrollment grow from less than 9,000 to more than 44,000. Nationally, full-time e-school enrollment has more than quadrupled in the past five years, from 50,000 in the 2006-07 school year to 275,000 last school year, according to the [Evergreen Education Group](#).

Among students riding that wave are [Larissa Bukowski](#)'s two children, 12-year-old Helen and 6-year-old David.

Back home in Akron, the Bukowski children receive a bundle of textbooks in the mail each year. They attend interactive "live lessons" with Connections teachers, the academy's version of classes, at set times and days each week — or they have the option of streaming them later. They study and do homework and complete projects just as any public school student would.

Bukowski said attending an online school allows her kids to be independent and gives her family flexibility.

She says Helen is a straight-A student, accelerated in every subject — and she credits online learning.

"I spent a lot of her early, early development teaching independent thought, independent learning and this absolute desire to want to know things," Bukowski said. "And I knew that if I put her into traditional schooling that, unfortunately, because of the way traditional schooling is, she wouldn't be able to follow her own direction as much. They would tailor her, they would squash

that independent, 'Well, I want to do reading and language arts for the next three weeks.' In a bricks-and-mortar school, you can't do that. You have to be very structured."

The format has its share of critics — particularly among supporters of traditional public schools and their unionized teachers.

[Dale Butland](#), a spokesman for Innovation Ohio, a liberal policy think tank, said Ohio funds its e-schools similar to traditional public schools and allows them to advertise on television without divulging their academic track records.

"Like the charter schools, they have no busing costs, they have no transportation costs, there's just a whole series of costs that they don't have," he said. "So the question is, Why would we give them as much money as we give to traditional public schools? The vast majority have worse graduation rates than do traditional public schools, so why are we rewarding failure?"

Students choose online schools for a host of reasons. More than half of Connections parents indicated in a recent survey that their children didn't learn well in a traditional school setting. Others reported their children were involved in competitive sports or artistic pursuits, had been bullied at school or perhaps had a physical disability that made it difficult to get to their local school.

[Jamie Callender](#), a former Republican lawmaker whose Cleveland-area law firm specializes in charter school issues, said a review of state audits would show that e-schools incur almost all the same costs as traditional public schools.

"There are 50 pounds of books for each of these kids. There's the cost of that mailing," he said. "Obviously, there's a cost to socialization. Socialization is very important for kids, and there has to be some mechanism to make up for that."

[Steve Dyer](#), a former Democratic state representative, said he reviewed Ohio's e-school spending for a 2011 report published by Innovation Ohio. He said Ohio allots more money to the online public schools than is justified, given their lack of overhead costs — such as school buildings, cafeterias and buses — and average teacher salaries of about \$38,000 a year.

"Taking their average teacher salary into account, with the amount we pay them, they would be able to have a 15-to-1 student-teacher ratio, give every kid a \$2,000 laptop and still clear a 30 to 40 percent profit," he said.

[Michelle Howard](#), a first-grade teacher at Connections Academy, said the school offers students a more intimate relationship with their teacher than a traditional public school.

"I get to know my students more one-on-one," she said. "I have a class of 30 students, and I have one-on-one time with them every week. I'll schedule a call once a week with each, say Tuesday at 10, to go over their progress. So we have the live lessons, calls, protected webmail for them to ask us questions about their work."

Besides the annual textbook mailing, e-school students at the younger grades might mail work that can't be done online — say, a large piece of artwork or a project — to Connections' offices, and Howard mails it back graded. Teachers also might mail an occasional card to their students just to make them feel connected.

"Even though we're not in front of them, I feel like we're oftentimes more accessible to them than in a traditional school," Howard said.

[Julie Riley](#), a high school social studies teacher at Connections, said the school also hosts regular field trips, clubs for students and a virtual yearbook.

Bukowski said she was intimidated to home-school her children because of her lack of knowledge in certain course areas, and online school has worked out well for her family.

"It just fit," she said.

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