PARENT GUIDE
TO ONLINE LEARNING

VERSION 5, FALL 2017

MICHIGAN VIRTUAL

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Introduction

This guide has been prepared for parents, guardians, counselors, and others who want to help students decide whether online courses are a good option for them.

In the pages that follow, you will find information about:

- Online learning opportunities,
- Characteristics of a successful online learner, and
- How to prepare for learning online.

In 2006, the Michigan legislature put into place a policy that Michigan students have an online learning experience as a high school graduation requirement. In 2013, the Michigan Legislature expanded student access to digital learning options through **Section 21f of the State School Aid Act**.[1] As a result, students enrolled in a public local district or public school academy in grades 6-12 are eligible to enroll in up to two online courses during an academic term – or more if parents, students, and school leadership agree that more than two are in the best interest of the child. The act also requires schools to cover the costs of the online courses. The Michigan Department of Education and *Michigan Virtual*™ provide answers to frequently asked questions (FAQ) about Section 21f in a document available as a free download at http://media.mivu.org/institute/pdf/21F_FAQs.pdf. The FAQ are updated every fall.

Michigan's K-12 Virtual Learning Effectiveness Report 2015-16 authored by *Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute*® revealed that the number of students taking virtual courses totaled 463,570 which represents enrollment in 871 different course titles during the 2015-16 school year. Public Sector Consultants, in cooperation with *Michigan Virtual*, surveyed 800 Michigan adults in the winter of 2016 and found that the general public knows little about K-12 online learning opportunities in the state. For example, only 22% knew students were required to have an online experience to graduate from high school and only 39% knew that middle and high school students could take up to two courses per term. The *Parent Guide to Online Learning* is one of a number of resources created by *Michigan Virtual* to increase awareness of the nature of online learning, the opportunities online learning offers, and the challenges teachers, parents, guardians, mentors, and educational decision-makers face to increase the likelihood of student success in their online courses.

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[1] http://www.legislature.mi.gov/(S(j3sxote5jovk0p3hbct0cpug))/mileg.aspx?page=GetObject&objectname=mcl-388-1621f

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Under Michigan's State School Aid Act, a district may deny student and parent requests to enroll in an online course if one or more of the following are true:

- ☐ The pupil is enrolled in any of grades K to 5;
- ☐ The student has previously gained the credits provided from the completion of the online course;
- ☐ The online course is not capable of generating academic credit;
- ☐ The online course is inconsistent with the remaining graduation requirements or career interests of the student;
- ☐ The student has not completed the prerequisite coursework for the requested virtual course or has not demonstrated proficiency in the prerequisite course content;
- ☐ The student has failed a previous virtual course in the same subject during the two previous academic years;
- ☐ The virtual course is of insufficient quality or rigor. A primary district that denies a pupil's enrollment request for this reason shall enroll the pupil in a virtual course in the same or a similar subject that the primary district determines is of acceptable rigor and quality;
- ☐ The cost of the online course exceeds an amount of 6.67% of the minimum foundation allowance for the current fiscal year. Should a parent choose to pay the cost difference in this case, the student may still be enrolled in the course;
- ☐ The course enrollment request doesn't occur within the same timelines established by the primary district for enrollment and schedule changes for regular courses; and
- ☐ The request for a virtual course enrollment was not made in the academic term, semester, trimester, or summer preceding the enrollment. This subdivision does not apply to a request made by a pupil who is newly enrolled in the primary district.

If the student's request to take a course online is denied, the student will receive written notification from the school explaining why it was denied. The letter will also describe how the student and parent can appeal the decision. The appeal process is outlined in the **Section 21f FAQ**[2].

Why Online Learning

Students take online courses for a variety of reasons. They may be full-time online students, taking all their courses over the Internet, or they may be part-time online students, that is, supplementing the courses they take at their school with online courses – including during summer. Many students use online courses for credit recovery when they have failed a class that is required for their program or graduation. Others take courses that their schools cannot or do not offer. Many students take Advanced Placement (AP) courses because there are not enough students in their school to offer a face-to-face AP class. Some use online courses for elective credit and personal enrichment.

Today's learning environments are changing, and national experts have published the following 10 attributes to describe Next Generation Learning models. The Virtual Learning Leadership Alliance has identified how online learning can be used to support the 10 attributes. From the student's point of view, online learning is attractive because it is:

1. **Personalized** to my needs and learning goals. *When students select their courses, they take greater ownership.*
2. **Flexible** so that I can try different ways to learn. *Online learning allows scheduling to accommodate health, athletic, job and family circumstances.*
3. **Interactive and engaging** to draw me in. *Students meet people outside their community in a safe environment, and multimedia used in online learning provides different ways of learning.*
4. **Relevant** to the life I'd like to lead. *Students gain more experience using the 21st century technology tools used in college and in the workplace.*
5. **Paced by my own progress** measured against goals I understand. *Students can move faster or slower through assignments and track their own progress toward their goals.*
6. **Constantly informed** by different ways of demonstrating and measuring my progress. *Educational technology can measure and share student progress quickly.*
7. **Collaborative** with faculty, peers and others; unlimited by proximity. *Students can access learning materials and resources – including local, state and national experts – using online communication tools.*
8. **Responsive and supportive** when I need extra help. *Communicating outside the typical school day is supported by the online learning culture. Many students – and teachers – report they spend more time interacting online than in the face-to-face classroom.*
9. **Challenging but achievable,** with opportunities to become an expert in an area of interest. *Online learning reinforces lifelong learning skills and promotes information literacy and communication skills as well as thinking and problem-solving skills.*
10. **Available** to me as much as it is to every other student. *Online learning can direct the talents of some of the most skilled educators to the most underserved populations. A zip code does not have to determine learning options any more.*

[2] http://media.mivu.org/institute/pdf/21F_FAQs.pdf

Now that you know why many students like learning online, you will find answers to some of your other questions in the sections that follow. This brief list of terms may be helpful as you investigate online learning.

Definitions

Online Course:
An online — or virtual — course is defined in the State School Aid Act as a course of study that can generate a credit or a grade and is provided in an interactive learning environment where most of the curriculum is delivered through the internet. The students are separated from their teachers by time or location or both. The teacher, who holds a valid Michigan teaching certificate, is responsible for determining appropriate instructional methods for each student, diagnosing learning needs, assessing student learning, prescribing intervention strategies, reporting outcomes, and evaluating the effects of instruction and support strategies.

Mentor:
An onsite mentor monitors and supports the students as they work through an online course. Mentors may also document some aspects of participation. Some mentors are paraprofessionals. In some cases, the mentor must have a Michigan teaching certificate and be employed by the school district. See Mentor Fundamentals: A Guide for Mentoring Online Learners[4] for comprehensive descriptions of mentor roles and responsibilities as well as numerous resources to prepare mentors for working with online learners.

Learning Management System (LMS):
The LMS houses the online course. Through the LMS, students access courses and related documents and activities; assignments are exchanged between student, online instructor and often the mentor; and communication among students and instructor takes place.

Provider (also often referred to as a Vendor):
The provider is the source of the online course. The provider may be a school, a school district, a community college, *Michigan Virtual* or another third party entity, including colleges, universities and private companies.

Credit Recovery:
Credit recovery is the opportunity for a student to take a class online that he/she may have failed in a face-to-face setting.

Using data collected by the state during the 2015-16 school year, the *Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute™ (MVLRI™)* published **Michigan's K-12 Virtual Learning Effectiveness Report**.[3] A few of its key findings included:

- ☐ Almost 91,000 Michigan K-12 public school students took at least one virtual course in the 2015-16 school year, accounting for over 453,000 course enrollments.
- ☐ The core subject areas (English Language and Literature, Mathematics, Life and Physical Sciences, and Social Sciences and History) account for 68% of virtual enrollments.

[3] https://mvlri.org/research/effectiveness-report/
[4] https://micourses.org/resources/pdf/toolkit/mentorguide.pdf

First Things First

The most important question you have to answer is whether your student is well suited to an online learning environment.

Profile of a Successful Student

Instructors with years of online teaching experience agree that students who have a successful, satisfying experience learning online share several critical characteristics:

Good Time Management:

Can your student create and maintain a study schedule throughout the semester without the face-to-face interaction with a teacher?

Effective Communication:

Can your student ask for help, make contact with other students and the instructor online, and describe any problems she/he has with learning materials using email, texting and/or the telephone?

Independent Study Habits:

Can your student study and complete assignments without direct supervision and maintain the self-discipline to stick to a schedule?

Self-Motivation:

Does your student have a strong desire to learn skills, acquire knowledge and fulfill assignments in online courses because of an educational goal? Can she/he maintain focus on that goal?

Academic Readiness:

Does your student have the basic reading, writing, math and computer literacy skills to succeed in the class?

Technologically Prepared:

Does your student know how to open, create and/or save a document; use various technology tools (e.g., dictionary, thesaurus, grammar checker, calculator); and identify various file formats (e.g., doc, xls, pdf, jpg)? (from Michigan Educational Technology Standards for Students 2009).

Counselors and teachers often use the *Michigan Virtual Online Readiness Rubric* on page 11 to help students understand what is required of a successful online learner. If you identify areas in the rubric where your student is lacking, you can determine what needs to be addressed to best support them in those areas.

See Is Online Learning Right for Me? on page 12 for more guidance.

Another free resource for students, parents, and school staff to increase a student's readiness for learning online is the Online Learning Orientation Tool[6] or OLOT, which is available at olot.mivu.org. OLOT is intended to help students understand what online learning entails while introducing them to the skills and knowledge that are key to success in online learning. For more information about OLOT, see page 10.

The Stanford Research Institute's publication ***Supporting K-12 Students in Online Learning: A Review of Online Algebra 1 Courses***[5] examines the accessibility of online learning for students, especially those who were at risk of failure. The report cautions that students who have failed a face-to-face class may have challenges that will affect their success in an online course, too. For example, many students do not realize that they will have to be even more accountable for their time, performance and productivity in an online course.

[5] https://www.sri.com/work/publications/supporting-k-12-students-online-learning-review-online-algebra-i-courses
[6] http://olot.mivu.org/

Making the Decision

As a parent, your role in helping your student decide if online learning is the most effective way for him/her to learn is extremely important. According to the State School Aid Act, you must give your permission for your student to take online classes. Before you sign off, you need to have determined if your student is well suited to online learning. Using the rubric and the skills mentioned in the previous section as a starting point for the conversation is the first thing to do. Once you decide your student is likely to be successful, you have additional issues to consider.

From **Speak Up 2014: Digital Learning 24/7: Understanding Technology — Enhanced Learning in the Lives of Today's Students**[7]
The availability of online learning continues to increase with only 27 percent of high school principals reporting that they are not yet offering any online courses for students. Interest among students continues to grow, with 24% of high school students saying they wish they could take all their classes online – a large increase from 8% in 2013.

From 2015: ***Trends in Digital Learning: Empowering Innovative Classroom Models for Learning***[8]

- ☐ Over three-quarters of parents (78%) say that the best way for their child to develop the college, career, and citizen ready skills they need for future success is to use technology on a regular basis within his or her daily classes at school.
- ☐ Two-thirds of middle school students (64%) agree that effective technology use increases their interest in what they are learning at school.
- ☐ Almost three-quarters of technology leaders (73%) say that their school or district is now offering online courses for their students. Top subjects offered: math, social studies/history, English language arts, science, and world languages.

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Technology

- ✔ What are the technical requirements for the courses your student wants/needs to take?
- ✔ Can you provide the technology your student needs or will the school district?
- ✔ Are there well-defined steps for getting tech support?

Learning Environment

- ✔ Does the school or provider offer an orientation for parents, students, and mentor?
- ✔ What kind of feedback and support does the instructor provide?
- ✔ What kind of assistance does the mentor provide?

Considering the Course

- ✔ Does the course meet academic requirements?
- ✔ Has the course been approved for credit by the school of record?
- ✔ Are there prerequisites for online courses? Has your student met the prerequisites?
- ✔ Can students take courses without being enrolled in a local school?
- ✔ Does the course meet NCAA Eligibility Requirements for potential Division I and II student athletes?
- ✔ How rigid are the course assignment due dates?
- ✔ Are the test dates flexible or rigid?
- ✔ What is the time commitment (daily and length of term)?
- ✔ Does the course have e-texts or are textbooks required? If textbooks are required, who pays for them?
- ✔ How do students receive their final grades?
- ✔ When can a student drop the course if he/she finds it too difficult or encounters challenges?

[7] http://www.tomorrow.org/speakup/SU14DigitalLearning24-7_StudentReport.html
[8] http://www.tomorrow.org/speakup/2015_ClassroomModels.html

Support

It is important to know what kind of support the student will receive from his or her primary district or the provider district or provider offering the online course. Mentors in particular are critical to student success in online learning. Be sure to know who the mentor assigned to your student's course is and how to contact him or her. It is also important to know what kind of support the parent or guardian is expected to provide. If your student has an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or is eligible for special needs support or special education services, contact the school of record for further information.

Questions to ask about the role your local or host school plays:

- ✔ What is the responsibility of the school?
- ✔ What is the responsibility of the parent?
- ✔ Who is the mentor?
- ✔ Does an instructor, a mentor or a paraprofessional aide provide face-to-face support at your student's local resident district or does the provider?
- ✔ How do you get support for IEP compliance?
- ✔ What kinds of resources are available to students and parents?
- ✔ Does the local resident district or the nonresident district provide access to technology and Internet connectivity?

Other Considerations

- ✔ Accreditation – Has the online course provider earned accreditation from a recognized regional or national accrediting body?
- ✔ Credit – Will successful completion of the course generate credit?
- ✔ Teaching standards – What requirements, guidelines or additional information does the provider share in the statewide catalog?
- ✔ Data – What kind of data does the provider have to share about course completion?
- ✔ Quality – Has the course been reviewed against quality standards, and if so, do they meet your needs and expectations?

Covering the Cost of Online Learning

The recent legislation requires districts to use its foundation allowance or per pupil funds to pay for expenses associated with the online course or courses and to cover the cost of the online course.

Taking All Courses Online

Students in Michigan may attend a full-time online cyber school or may participate in a seat time waiver program approved by the Michigan Department of Education to allow them to take all their coursework online. In these circumstances, the students' school is required to provide them with a computer and Internet access.

Before You Decide

- ☐ Ask questions.
- ☐ Consider the time required each day for course work.
- ☐ Participate in webinars offered by the provider.
- ☐ Let the student choose the specific online course whenever possible.
- ☐ Use OLOT[9] to introduce your student – and you! – to online learning.

[9] http://olot.mivu.org/

Before Enrolling

Once you decide your student is well prepared to take a course online, he or she understands what will be required to be successful, and you find the appropriate course, review the following checklist to be sure you're ready.

Checklist

- ☐ The student has access to the technology needed on a regular basis to work on assignments.
- ☐ The student has a place to complete work.
- ☐ The student has the basic computer skills needed to navigate the course and complete and submit assignments.
- ☐ The student has support for her or his IEP.
- ☐ The course fits in the student's academic plan.
- ☐ The student understands that online courses often take as much or more time than face-to-face courses.
- ☐ The student has sufficient time in his/her schedule to complete assignments.
- ☐ The school offers a mentor or another adult to support the student's online learning as needed.
- ☐ The student knows who the mentor is and how to contact him/her.
- ☐ The student needs the credits.
- ☐ The student knows the course grade will become part of the academic record.
- ☐ The student knows the start and end dates of the course.
- ☐ The student is willing and able to ask for help from the online instructor via email, text, phone, or in person and respond to the instructor using the same methods.
- ☐ You and the student know how to contact the help desk to resolve technical issues.

Michigan's Catalog of Online Courses

In October 2013, Michigan's Catalog of Online Courses (https://micourses.org) was made available to the public. The catalog contains the syllabi for online courses offered by any Michigan district and *Michigan Virtual*. The catalog contains links to the sites for information about and access to enrollment and registration for the courses.

Each syllabus in the statewide catalog includes information that will help you decide which online courses are the best fit for your student. In the syllabus, you will find how the course is structured – the state academic standards addressed, the prerequisites, the content outline, learning outcomes and objectives, and required assessments. You can see the guidelines for how much instructor contact and student-instructor communication to expect as well as the academic support available to the student. The syllabus includes the name of the institution or organization providing the online content and the name of the institution or organization providing the online instructor, too. The price of the online course, along with enrollment periods and drop policies are clearly noted. The syllabus also contains the results of the online course quality review conducted using the guidelines and model review process published by *Michigan Virtual*. Lastly, all sylalbi include enrollment and performance data for the school years in which the course was offered, including the number of students who enrolled in the course, as well as the number and percentage of students who earned at least 60% of the total course points. You can learn more about the guidelines and review process (http://media.mivu.org/institute/pdf/guidelines_model_2013.pdf) and find more information about 21f in the FAQ (http://media.mivu.org/institute/pdf/21F_FAQs.pdf).

Advice for Parents

Advice for parents once your student is enrolled, before class starts and until the course is completed:

- Set up a study space, including the technology required.
- Be prepared for technical issues that may come up.
- Review the syllabus with your student.
- Define expectations.
- Agree on incentives and consequences.
- Reinforce that online courses are as important as traditional, face-to-face courses.
- See that your student establishes a routine for working on his/her virtual course daily.
- Help your student maintain a regular study schedule.
- Monitor your student's progress weekly using your access to the course LMS.

Final Suggestions

If you decide your student is not quite ready for online learning, you can prepare him or her for a successful experience in a subsequent semester.

- Build online fluencies: Help your student become familiar with organizing Word documents (setting up files and folders), and saving documents in different formats.
- Look at provider websites for webinars and resources directed at parents and students: When you discover those together, you can generate questions for your school and the provider. Talk about what your student is ready for and what areas might need some work.
- Use an online orientation tool available through some schools and providers. This is another way for you to discover what to expect and talk through opportunities and concerns before your student commits to an online course.
- Talk with the person at your student's school who is most familiar with online learning – your school's mentor, curriculum specialist or counselor – and ask what materials or suggestions they have to help you make the decision.
- Investigate OLOT, *Michigan Virtual*'s free, self-paced, web-based orientation tool available at olot.mivu.org.

Online Learning Orientation Tool™

Michigan Virtual's Online Learning Orientation Tool – OLOT – is a free, self-paced, web-based resource to help students understand the online learning experience while introducing them to the skills and knowledge that are key to success in online learning. Students can move at their own pace and work through a unit or module as many times as they choose. Even though OLOT may be used by students independently, often it will be more effective if students have someone they are accountable to for the results and someone – their mentor, parent, or guardian, for example – directing and supporting their efforts. OLOT is compatible with any device so it is widely accessible. OLOT and its Getting Started Guide can be found at http://olot.mivu.org/.

Online Learner Readiness Rubric

Name: _____ *Developed By:* MICHIGANVIRTUAL

Student Readiness	Technology Skills	Work & Study Habits	Learning Style	Technology / Connectivity	Time Management	Interest/ Motivation	Reading/Writing Skills	Support Services
Less Ready	Student has little, if any, experience using a computer or the Internet and has minimal desire to develop more skills in this area.	Student often needs reminders to complete routine assignments, often turns homework in late and is not able to spend 5-10 hours per week on each online course.	Student is not a self-directed learner and often requires real-time feedback from teachers regarding basic directions and follow-up support.	Student does not have consistent access to a computer and a reliable connection to the Internet at home or at school.	Student does not manage his or her time effectively in doing research, basic studies and preparing for tests or quizzes.	Student has little or no interest in the content area of the online course offering and has a negative or unrealistic attitude toward online learning.	Student is reading below grade level and has experienced difficulty with routine writing assignments.	In general, parents and school personnel do not actively support online learning and are unable or unwilling to provide support assistance.
↓	Student has limited experience using a computer and the Internet and has expressed a strong interest in developing more skills in this area.	Student sometimes needs reminders and assistance in completing routine assignments and has pledged to spend 5-10 hours per week on each online course enrollment.	Student is beginning to demonstrate a behavior of self-directed learning and sometimes requires real-time feedback from teachers regarding basic directions and follow up support.	Student has limited access to a computer with low-speed Internet service at school or at home.	Student is beginning to demonstrate effective time management skills in doing research, basic studies and preparing for tests or quizzes.	Student has an interest in the content area of the online course offering but has expressed concerns about enrolling in an online course or has an unrealistic attitude toward online learning.	Student is reading at grade level and has demonstrated limited proficiency with writing assignments.	Student support system is limited and parents and school personnel are somewhat supportive of enrollment in online courses.
↓	Student has strong computer skills and more than adequate experience using a word processor, email application and web browser.	Student rarely needs reminders or assistance in completing routine assignments and has demonstrated good independent study habits.	In general, the student is self-directed and does not require real-time feedback from teachers regarding basic directions and follow-up support.	Student has consistent access to a computer with moderate-speed Internet service at home or at school.	Student has demonstrated effective time management skills in doing research, basic studies and preparing for tests or quizzes.	Student has an interest in the content area of the online course offering and has a positive and realistic attitude toward online learning.	Student is reading at or above grade level and has demonstrated success with a variety of writing assignments.	Student has open access to school-based mentoring/ counseling service and parental support.
More Ready	Student has excellent computer skills and significant experience using a word processor, email application and web browser, and is comfortable downloading information from the Internet and using other technology tools and applications.	Student does not need reminders or assistance in completing routine assignments, usually finishes homework ahead of time and has successfully completed an independent study experience or taken an online course.	Student is a self-directed learner and demonstrates a high level of comfort and skill in learning new material without requiring real-time feedback from teachers regarding basic directions and follow-up support, and deals well with ambiguity.	Student has daily access to a computer with high-speed Internet service at home and at a convenient location in the school building before, during and after regular school hours.	Student has demonstrated outstanding time management skills while participating in a variety of clubs, student organizations, sports and work activities.	Student has a strong interest in the content area of the online course offering, is highly motivated to enroll in an online course and has a positive and realistic attitude toward online learning.	Student is reading above grade level, has strong reading comprehension skills and has demonstrated success with complex writing assignments.	Student has regularly scheduled access to school-based mentoring/ counseling services, parental support is strong and district has adopted policies and identified best practices to support students as online learners.

Note: This rubric was not designed to be used as a tool to determine eligibility for enrollment in online courses, but instead to be used as a resource to help identify specific areas where students may need additional support to better ensure success.

Is Online Learning Right for Me?

From Idaho Digital Learning
http://idahodigitallearning.org/Parents/ResourcesforParents.aspx
retrieved January 28, 2013, at 4:30 p.m.

Online learning offers great flexibility for students of all skill sets, but it's important to know if it's the right learning style for you. These questions will help you make that determination.

Are you self-directed and motivated?

- Most of online learning happens on your schedule.
- You'll need to be self-directed and motivated to complete activities and initiate the communication required to be successful.
- You'll be responsible for creating the structure to finish each course.

Are your technical skills adequate?

- You need to be comfortable with Internet browsing and searching, email, sending and reading attachments, word processing, and occasionally downloading and installing software plug-ins (a normally simple, but sometimes intimidating task).

Do you have strong reading/writing skills?

- The ability to read and comprehend subject matter without it being a chore is critical to your success.
- In most cases writing is the primary method of communication in online classes, so you should be at ease expressing your thoughts, sharing ideas and asking questions through writing.

Will you ask questions when you need to?

- If you typically don't hesitate to seek help you'll do fine.
- Since you'll be in an online environment it's important to let your instructor and classmates know when you need assistance.
- Remember they won't be able to see your expressions of doubt, confusion or other body language to indicate when things aren't going well.

Will you miss the social interaction?

- Interaction with instructors and classmates in online learning is often an integral part of the learning experience.
- Absent is the in-person contact — being able to see facial expressions, hear reactions and speak.
- Campus life may be different or non-existent.

Do you have the discipline to study regularly?

- Like a traditional school you'll need to set aside adequate time for study.
- You may discover you need to be online frequently to complete assignments or communicate with classmates and instructors.
- Plan to spend at least as much time working on assignments and studying as you would with a traditional course, and you'll be setting your own pace in many instances.

Notes

Notes

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