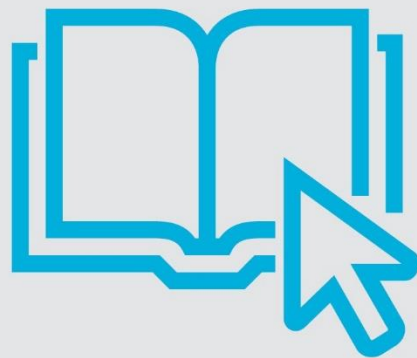


Online Learning Student & Family Guide



Alberta Education, Government of Alberta

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Online Learning Student & Family Guide

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Introduction

This student and family guide to online learning is intended to increase awareness and understanding of the nature of online learning, opportunities offered by online learning, and to provide some considerations for students and their caregivers to ensure success as they make decisions about online courses and programs.

Online learning can be a great choice for many students for a number of reasons including access to a greater variety of courses and the ability to work at their own pace. Online learning can be different from traditional face-to-face learning. It is important to understand the skills and tools needed to be successful before choosing online learning.

In general, there are two main types of online learning.

Full Time Program Grades 1 to 12	Single Course(s) Grades 10 – 12
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Whether a student is interested in a single course or a full-time program, many of the decisions and supports needed will be the same. In the pages that follow you will find information about:

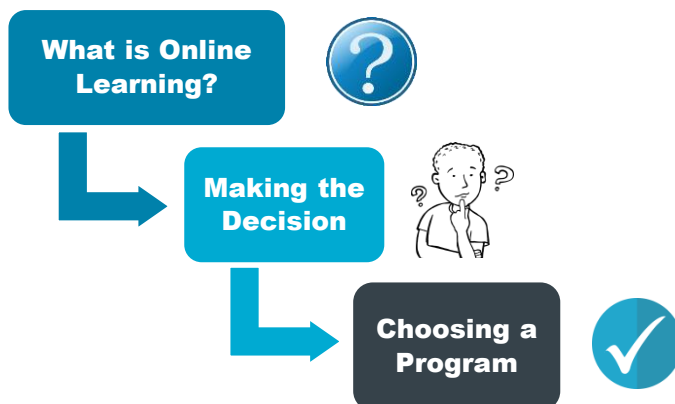
- what online learning is;
- characteristics of a successful online learner;
- how to choose an online school; and
- how students can prepare for learning online.

In Alberta, student enrolments in online learning programs have increased by 225 per cent in the past 10 years. Approximately 25 school authorities offer online learning programs. Many of these have been in existence for over 15 years. It is anticipated that these numbers will continue to increase in the coming years.

What Students Like about Learning Online

- Greater choice of courses
- Interactive and engaging content in the course
- The ability to learn at their own pace
- Frequent, supportive interactions with teachers
- Up-to-date information about their progress
- Interact with a diverse group of learners in a safe, monitored environment

This guide is divided into three main sections.











What is Online Learning?

Online learning has grown steadily in Alberta over the years offering students more choice, flexible programming and unique, personalized learning opportunities. While there are terms that are sometimes used interchangeably with online learning, e.g., e-learning, virtual learning, in Alberta it is defined as an education program in which instruction and assessment takes place primarily over the internet, through the use of a Learning Management System (LMS) ([Guide to Education](#)).

Students in Alberta take online courses for a variety of reasons. Some students take online courses to supplement their “regular” program because of scheduling conflicts or lack of course availability. Others are looking for an alternative to their traditional school environment and want to attend a school that offers online programming full time for their courses. Students may also take online courses due to medical issues, anxiety, travelling or for credit recovery. High school courses completed online are based on the same provincial curriculum (programs of study) as any other course in Alberta and are therefore eligible for the same credits.

With online learning, students can learn anywhere including their home. There is a difference between online learning at home (sometimes referred to as home-based learning) and home education. While caregivers with students in home education programs can access online learning as a resource, online courses are instructed by Alberta certificated teachers.

MYTH BUSTING: **What is Online Learning?**

ONLINE LEARNING ...	ONLINE LEARNING ISN'T ...
 Is taught by a certificated teacher	 Taught by a parent
 Follows Alberta programs of study	 Home Education
 Is student-centred, flexible and engaging	 Correspondence booklets
 Requires support from a parent, mentor or caregiver	 Easier or less work

Online Learning Terms

Having an understanding of the terms related to online learning helps provide clarity regarding what it is and how it is offered.

Online Course

An online course is one in which instruction and assessment takes place primarily over the internet through a Learning Management System (LMS).

Learning Management System

LMS is web-based software designed to store learning content, coursework, feedback, communications, and to manage student progress online.

Online Learning Program

An online learning program is a structured learning environment in which students engage with their teachers in one or more courses online. Alberta certificated teachers are responsible for instruction and assessment of student learning.

Blended Learning

Blended learning environments provide students with the opportunity to engage in their learning partly online away from their teacher and partly in a face-to-face environment, e.g., in a classroom or outreach setting.

Asynchronous Instruction

Instruction or communication that is not “live” between participants, e.g., email, forums, message boards, blogs, videos or podcasts.

Synchronous Instruction

Online teaching and learning in which the participants interact at the same time and in the same space. Video or web-based conferencing is an example of a tool used for synchronous instruction purposes.

Web-based Conferencing

Web-based conferencing is a way of meeting “live” or synchronously using a web cam, headset and microphone using software such as Blackboard Collaborate, Google Hangout, Skype, Zoom, Adobe Connect or Big Blue Button.

Credit Recovery

Credit recovery provides opportunities for students who have not been successful in a course to redo coursework or retake the whole course in order to obtain credit or a higher mark than previously earned. Online learning is one of many ways to achieve this.

High School Credits Online

High school students are the biggest users of online learning in Alberta Kindergarten to Grade 12 schools.

Supplemental Online Course

Supplemental courses are single courses offered in Grades 10 to 12 and are usually taken due to timetable conflicts in a brick-and-mortar school, e.g., a student cannot fit Math 30-2 in their first semester schedule and takes it online instead. Some students will take a supplemental online course as a matter of choice.

Students generally take only 1 to 2 supplemental online courses at the same time to avoid academic overload.

Concurrent Registration

When a student enrolls in a supplemental online course at a school that is not their local school, this is referred to as a concurrent registration. Students would be registered in two schools, their local school and the concurrent school.

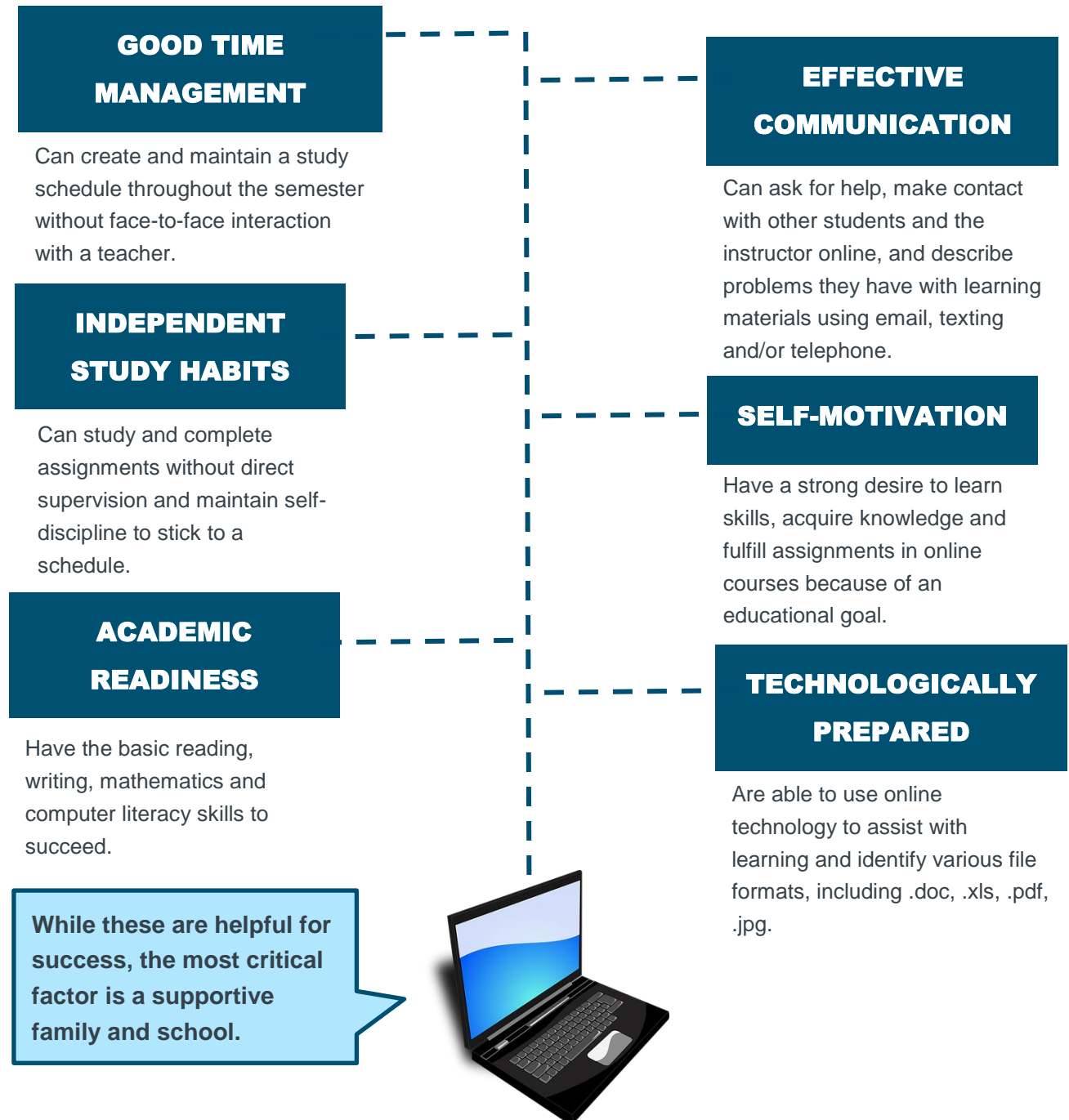
Many schools offering online learning programs accept students as “concurrent” registrations. These online course registrations can occur at any school that provides online learning programming throughout the province, not just in the student’s local area. See Alberta Education’s Online Learning Directory at education.alberta.ca/online-school-directory



Making a Decision

Deciding if online learning is the right learning choice is very important. Research indicates there are some characteristics that contribute significantly to a student's ability to be successful in online learning programs.

Successful Online Students



Students Requiring Additional Supports

Some students have profound and ongoing needs and others have short-term or situation-based needs. This calls for flexibility, responsiveness and adapting to the changing needs of students. While online learning may provide flexibility for some students, those with severe learning or language challenges may need additional support to be successful in their learning. Families are encouraged to talk with staff at their school to learn about face-to-face support options that may be available.



Welcoming, Caring, Respectful and Safe Online Learning Environments

Students, parents and school authorities have responsibilities for ensuring welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments that respect diversity and nurture a sense of belonging and a positive sense of self for all students.

Students who learn online must also feel respected and have a sense of belonging. Families are encouraged to talk with school staff about how students learning online can participate in school life. Additionally, families may also ask about options for other services that may be available to students based on individual program plans, previous assessments or other individual and diverse student needs.

Year-Round Enrolment and Pace of Learning

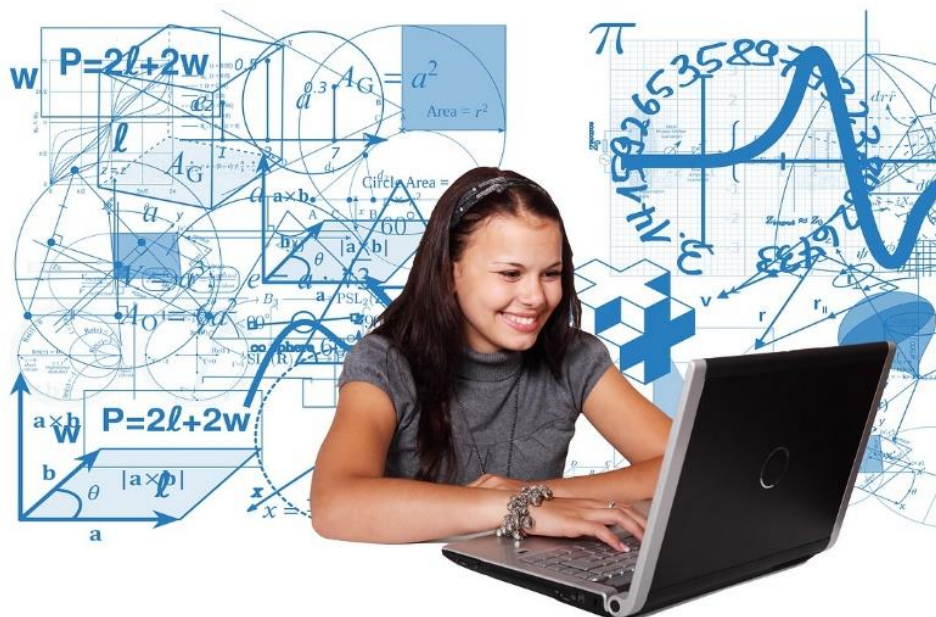
Online learning offers a unique opportunity for freedom of pace often allowing students to register at different points in the year and work through the material at their own pace.

For students starting online coursework part way through the year, course load adjustments may be necessary to ensure success. Timelines that are more flexible allow students to finish course work sooner or to take longer if needed. However, students tend to be more successful when there are defined timelines for course completion.

To support high school students who begin and end courses outside of a typical learning period (semester or school year), there are now five times during the year that a student can write Alberta provincial diploma exams. More information at <https://education.alberta.ca/writing-diploma-exams/schedule/>.

Online Learning Readiness

Are you ready to be an online learner? What supports do you need to ensure you will be successful? Numerous online learning readiness interactive quizzes can be found with a quick search on the internet.



Digital Citizenship and Online Safety

While it is important for all students to use technology appropriately, safely and responsibly, this can be even more challenging when most of a student's learning takes place online. Media Smarts <http://mediasmarts.ca/>, Canada's Centre for Digital and Media Literacy, provides excellent resources and interactive activities intended to help students and families better understand how to navigate the digital world.

Accessing Support for Online Learning

It is important to know what kind of support to expect from the local or concurrent school offering an online course. In the local brick-and-mortar school, online course/program coordinators play a key role in student success in online learning. Be sure to know who the online coordinator is and how to contact them. It is also important to know what kind of support the caregiver is expected to provide. If there is an individualized program plan in place or if the student is eligible for special needs support or special education services, contact the local school for further information.

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

- What is the responsibility of the caregiver? The school?
- What is the best way to contact the online teacher?
- Does a teacher, a mentor or an educational assistant provide face-to-face support at the local school or does the course provider?
- How do you arrange for assessments and support for an individualized program plan?
- What kinds of resources are available to students and caregivers?
- Does the local school provide access to space, technology and internet connectivity?



Important Conversations

Planning ahead is key to success in all learning, including online learning. Online learning can contribute to more independence in students. Here are some questions to consider together with your family that are above and beyond the usual types of supports. Use this page to talk together with your family about how best you can manage challenges and be set up for success.

Is your home work area designed for success?

- Do you have an organized place for textbooks, binders, and supplies?

Is your desktop computer or laptop set up for success?

- Do you have reliable high speed internet? What is your backup plan if it is interrupted?
- Do you have a word processor like Microsoft Word or Google Docs? Can you open PDFs?
- If the computer will be shared, is there a folder or desktop profile set up specifically for the student's use?
- Do you have a secure file or app for important passwords?



What routines will you need to establish in your week?

- When is it time to begin school work during the day? How will you structure your school week?
- How will you plan for important deadlines in the course?
- What time are synchronous classes? Are they online or in person?
- Is there a place you can work without noise and distraction if needed?
- What daily physical activity can you schedule to avoid sitting for long periods?

How will you get help with your learning?

- What arrangements can you make to ensure communication between the teacher and the caregiver?
- Is there a mentor that will help you during the day? A school counsellor, family friend, caregiver, grandparent or older sibling?

For the family caregiver(s):

- How will you monitor to ensure learning is successfully being completed each week?
- Do you have the username and password for the login to the courses, if under 18?
- Have you introduced yourself to your student's teacher through email or phone call?
- Are there opportunities for the student to take advantage of social opportunities that the school may offer, e.g., field trips, on-site activities, if interested?



Family Checklist: Choosing an Online Course/Program

Once you have made the decision to pursue online learning the next step is to decide which online learning program is the best fit for your student. Every online program is different offering a variety of choices and opportunities.

Think about the questions within the checklists below. Check with the school offering the online learning program before registering. A directory of school authorities offering online programs in Alberta can be found at education.alberta.ca/online-school-directory.

Checklist: Getting Started	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Does the school offer full-time online education, supplemental courses or both?
<input type="checkbox"/>	What grade levels does the school offer for their online learning program?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Can students work at their own pace, accelerating when possible and slowing down when needed? Are there any limits to how quickly they can work through one course and move onto the next?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Is coursework fully online or is there a face-to-face component? If there is a face-to-face component, is it required?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Does the school have any real-time (synchronous) components such as live chat, video conferencing? If so, is my student required to attend these sessions?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Can a student start at any point during the school year also known as “continuous enrolment” if necessary?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Are students required to write Provincial Achievement Tests or other final exams at a particular site? Are there alternative arrangements that I can make?
<input type="checkbox"/>	What percentage of the work is done online vs. offline? For the offline work, are print and hands-on materials provided?

Checklist: Learning

<input type="checkbox"/>	Do courses contain a wide variety of media and learning technologies such as video clips, animation and live web conferencing with the teacher? How are they used in the lessons students will complete?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Does the course offer multiple ways to learn the same material including visual, auditory and hands-on learning activities?
<input type="checkbox"/>	For younger learners, how does the school teach early literacy skills including reading and writing?
<input type="checkbox"/>	If additional supports are needed for students with visual, speech or hearing impairments, are the courses compatible with assistive technologies?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Are there opportunities to take courses such as music, physical education and art? How are these courses taught?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Are all tests and assignments computer graded? How much feedback will there be from the teacher on assignments? What is the turnaround time for feedback?
<input type="checkbox"/>	What happens if a student finishes a course before the end of the year or is not finished by the end of the year? Can students work during the summer if they need additional time?

Checklist: Supports

<input type="checkbox"/>	Does the school provide student orientation before students begin course work so that students know what is expected of them, how to use the online course software, Learning Management System (LMS) and how to address any technical support issues?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Does the school have an orientation program for caregivers?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Whom do I contact for technical support? Is technical support available by phone or live chat? When is technical support available?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Does the school have guidance counselors for elementary, middle school and high school? If so, exactly what services do they provide. Are there counseling services available if a student needs someone to talk to about personal issues?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Is career or post-secondary counseling available for students? Is tutoring available if students need extra help?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Is there a library available for students to use?
<input type="checkbox"/>	At what point does the school intervene if there are problems with my child's participation, such as failure to log in or complete work on time? How is the caregiver notified? Who do I contact if I have concerns about my child's progress or program?

<input type="checkbox"/>	How do I access my child's current Individual Program Plan (IPP) and to whom should I direct questions about their programming in order to access instructional strategies and supports?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Who is responsible for assessing and/or identifying student needs? Who do I contact about the need for creation of an IPP based on identified needs?
<input type="checkbox"/>	How do I access specialized supports such as speech therapy, occupational therapy or assistive technology?
Checklist: Socialization	
<input type="checkbox"/>	What social activities does the school provide? How often? Where?
<input type="checkbox"/>	How does the school instruct students in social skills, online etiquette and cyber safety (digital citizenship)?
<input type="checkbox"/>	How much of the coursework allows students to interact and collaborate with each other?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Are there any school-wide activities or celebrations, e.g., field trips, clubs, science fairs, cultural day events, pow wows, graduation ceremonies?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Does the school use social networks for students and if so is it a private and monitored environment?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Are there socializing opportunities for caregivers?

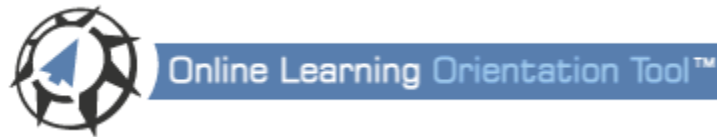
Where Do I Go Now?

If you have some questions you would like to ask in exploring online learning as a potential educational choice, there are resources available to help you get started as an online learner.

Michigan Virtual has created an [Online Learning Orientation Tool](#). This free tool is intended to give students a sense of what it might be like to move through an online course and includes the following four modules:

1. Knowing What to Expect.
2. Technical Skills You'll Need.
3. Learning Skills You'll Need.
4. Managing Day-to-Day.

The OLOT can be accessed here: <http://olot.mivu.org/>.



Many schools in Alberta that provide online learning programs require students to complete a basic introductory course to ensure they are prepared for to be successful. [COM 1255, E-learning and Learning Management Systems](#) is an example of a one credit high school course that can help students better prepare for the online learning experience.

Talking with other students who have taken online courses can also contribute to preparation for a successful online learning experience.

Visit Alberta Education's Directory of Online Schools in beginning your journey at education.alberta.ca/online-school-directory.

References/Resources

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