

# Choosing the Right Online Education Partner

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*A Playbook for Educators*



One of the legacies of the COVID-19 global pandemic is that for some students, emergency remote instruction was their first experience with online learning. While educators and schools pivoted quickly and valiantly from face-to-face instruction to virtual instruction using video conferencing software, most educators had not been trained to teach online, which requires its own set of unique teaching skills. It is important to realize that the emergency shift to remote instruction during the pandemic is not the same thing as high-quality online teaching and learning. This playbook will focus on academic support of rigorous online courses and the benefits they deliver for students and schools.



## Contents

Mythbusting.....	3
What Makes a High-Quality Online Learning Program?.....	6
Benefits of High-Quality Online Learning .....	8
Checklist for Evaluating High-Quality Online Courses.....	9
Proof Positive: Successful VHS Learning Implementations.....	10
Choosing VHS Learning as Your Education Partner .....	12

# Mythbusting

In the classroom, students are taught to carefully weigh all the evidence before drawing conclusions—and they learn to avoid making overly broad statements.

These are extremely useful skills no matter what career path students choose. As adults, however, we sometimes forget to apply them to our own thinking. As a result, we might overgeneralize or jump to conclusions based on incomplete information.

This is what happened with respect to online learning in the aftermath of the hastily conceived shift to remote and hybrid instruction during the pandemic. In fact, some individuals and communities have written off online learning as “disappointing,” “a debacle,” and a learning modality that just “doesn’t work.”

These opinions might resonate on a personal level but applying them universally does a huge disservice to students. The reality is that many students can benefit greatly from learning online—and overly broad conclusions based on faulty assumptions limits the options available to them.

If K-12 leaders are going to have productive conversations about what’s best for their students, then we must first tackle the common misconceptions or myths about online learning that need dispelling.

In most cases, the culprit is outdated information. Increasingly sophisticated training and technology have made these assumptions moot. With a strong curriculum, highly trained teachers, and supportive web-based technology, high-quality online learning can be as good or in some cases even more effective than site-bound, in-person classes.

## Myth

# 1

*Students don't learn as effectively online.*

While every learning platform is different, the best online courses utilize proven pedagogy and on-site support to maximize students success. Highly qualified, certified teachers who have been trained specifically to engage students effectively in an online setting and to help guide students' academic progress can help ensure a successful student experience. In fact, results for Advanced Placement® courses offered online are often equal to and in some cases exceed [national averages](#), proving that online courses can be just as effective as face-to-face courses in the same subject.

## Myth

# 2

*Online courses are easier than face-to-face courses.*

Just as with in-person courses, quality online courses require extensive reading, writing, research, and assessments as key ingredients of the learning. In many cases, the online course work requires a larger time commitment than in-person classes, as in addition to online work, offline labs and special projects are often required. Online courses also require more self-advocacy skills because help is at a distance.



# Myth

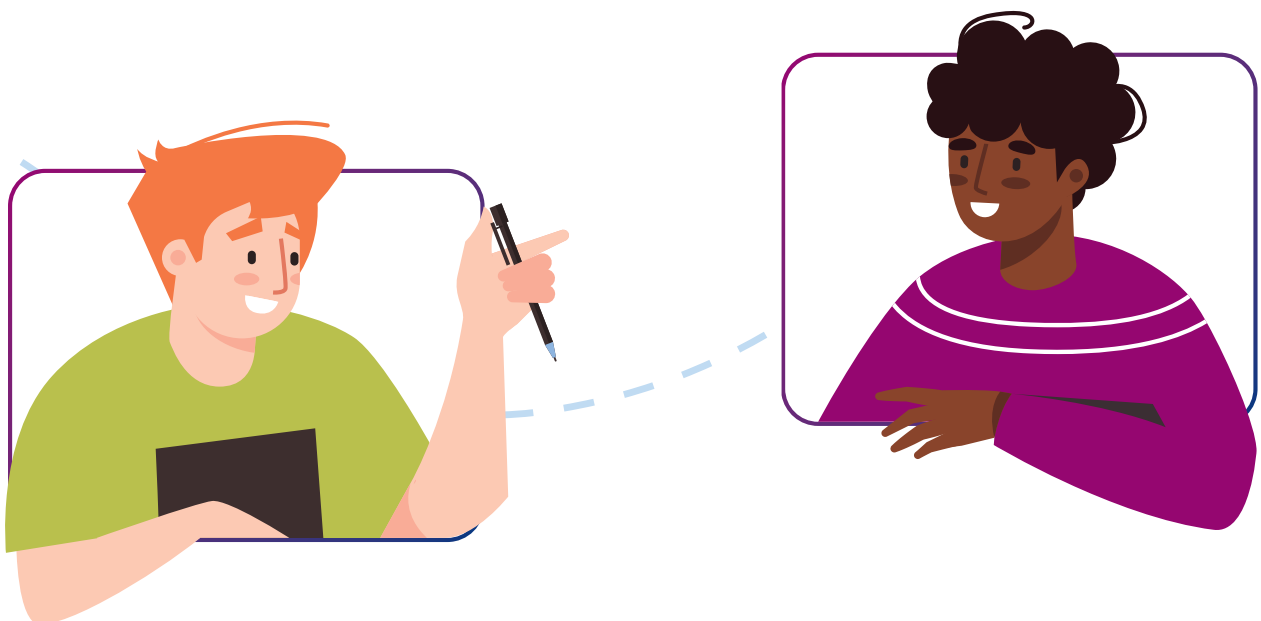
# 3

## *Online learning lacks interactions with teachers & peers.*

Strong relationships between students, their teachers, and peers are at the heart of successful instruction, and online learning is no exception. Even though the curriculum is online, students aren't learning in isolation: a high-quality online learning program offers a healthy balance of teacher guidance, group work, and collaboration with peers.

Having an online teacher who is certified and trained in online learning best practices is key to creating effective student online learning experiences. When educators are highly skilled and experienced in teaching online, they know how to foster strong student engagement and interaction. They guide and inspire students individually and bring students together through collaborative assignments that involve active engagement and interaction between peers.

Online learning is not inferior to face-to-face instruction, and for those situations where a face-to-face course is not an option, online learning can play an important role in a student's academic journey. Whether students are taking online courses for convenience, health or safety reasons, or as a supplement to traditional classroom learning, the best programs provide the right pedagogy and support to help students be successful.



# What Makes A High-Quality Online Learning Program?

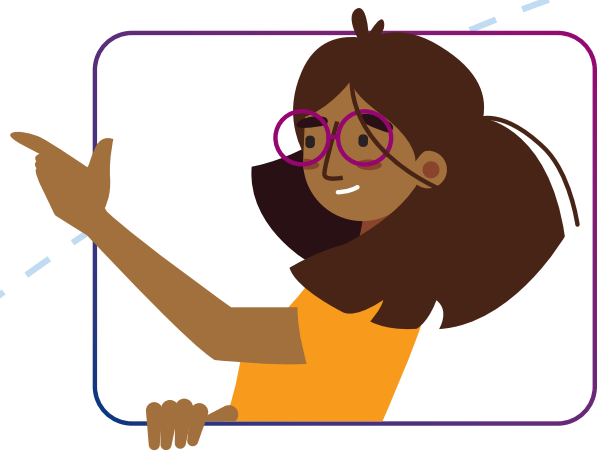
There is a misconception that online learning is always a self-paced endeavor with little or no interaction with teachers and fellow students. The attributes of high-quality online learning may include:

- *Asynchronous* online classroom. Students do not have to report to scheduled Zoom classes at a certain time. Classes occur at the time that works best for students, providing students with the ultimate in scheduling flexibility. Discussions take place over time, so students have time for reflection, and participation by all students within the classroom is encouraged. Asynchronous courses can provide many of the same relationship-building outcomes as an in-person class, using discussion forums and group work. As in person, student engagement and outcomes for online learning can be highly impacted by relationships: teacher to student or student to student.
- *Paced* course work. Students move through a scope and sequence following a specific schedule. Assignments must be completed by specified dates and there are penalties for late work. Typically, paced courses have assignments due each week. Deadlines and due dates, and an established schedule of activities help students stay on track and progress forward.
- *Cohort-based* online classroom. Instead of learning alone, a specific group of students will proceed through the course together, with an emphasis on group work and community building. This encourages interaction between peers and helps foster collaboration between students, so they are not working in isolation.
- *Teacher-led* instruction. A quality program provides teachers with a small student-teacher ratio so teachers can provide one-on-one support to each student. The teacher uses proven strategies to foster a learning community. The teacher also provides customized feedback and communicates directly with students to help resolve issues.

In high-quality online learning environments, teachers devote considerable time to making sure that students feel part of the learning community and that they feel valued by their teachers and peers. All of this is possible within an asynchronous online course.

**Researchers** Kaleen Healey and Chloe Strohman speak to the importance of building a learning environment where students feel they belong:

“Belonging is a universal human need that is fundamentally linked to learning and well-being. It describes an individual’s experience of feeling that they are, or are likely to be, accepted and respected as a valued contributor in a specific environment. When students experience a sense of belonging in a learning environment, there are both immediate and long-term positive consequences for their academic performance and well-being.”



# Benefits of High-Quality Online Learning

The primary benefit of high-quality online learning is that it increases school and student access to courses that are not offered face-to-face due to scheduling, budget, staffing, or other restrictions. Since online learning is color, gender, and class neutral, it [fosters educational equity](#). It broadens the number of topics available to students and helps them develop skills related to self-direction, self-regulation, and collaboration through rich and comprehensive instruction. Students can work and learn with students from other countries, providing them with insight and experience in global citizenship.

[Other benefits](#) to high-quality online courses include:

- Small class sizes allow teachers to provide personalized feedback to each student
- Instructors use active learning techniques to help students achieve deeper learning
- Curriculum that emphasizes real-world examples and projects to make the content relevant to students
- Students complete hands-on, authentic tasks and projects and engage in robust discussions with their peers
- Students create learning artifacts that demonstrate mastery of learning standards
- Courses include regular deadlines and milestones that motivate students forward
- Teachers place a strong emphasis on student success.



# Checklist for Evaluating High-Quality Online Courses

Use this checklist as a guide when reviewing options for online learning.

Criteria	Key Elements	Yes	No
<b>Accreditation</b>	Is the program accredited and is the accreditation nationally or regionally recognized?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Learning model</b>	Do students learn synchronously or through a flexible asynchronous model? Do they complete their coursework independently or as part of a group? Is the student experience at the heart of the learning experience?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Teacher-student ratio</b>	Does the teacher spend time on high-value interactions, such as deepening student learning? Do they address individual challenges and have time for one-on-one interaction?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Professional development</b>	Have teachers studied online teaching best practices? Have they received training to learn how to teach effectively online?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Teacher certification</b>	Are the teachers certified in their disciplines?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Local support</b>	Who will be locally available to monitor student progress and help identify and troubleshoot problems?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Time management</b>	Are courses scheduled so that students can manage their time effectively and keep up with their course work?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Course offerings</b>	Do the provider's courses offer the opportunity to explore careers and subjects not offered by the school?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Global classroom</b>	Are students collaborating with their peers from diverse social, economic, and geographic backgrounds? Will they develop respect for different ideas and cultures, so they are prepared to live and work in a global society?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Technology skills</b>	Are students learning digital citizenship skills to carry forward to college and career?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Evidence of Success</b>	What is the pass rate for courses? Average completion rate? Student scores on AP® exams?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

# Proof Positive

## *Successful VHS Learning Implementations*

### **Shrewsbury High School, Massachusetts**

Shrewsbury High School in Shrewsbury, Mass., has always had a select group of students interested in coursework that stretched beyond the school's curriculum, but didn't always have a way to meet those requests.

In the mid-1990s, the school became one of the first to partner with VHS Learning, thus enabling students in all grades to expand their knowledge horizons by taking courses online. As online learning evolved into what it is today, Shrewsbury High School remained an avid user of the nonprofit's vast selection of online courses.

Assistant Principal Nga Huynh noted, "It's such a great program and a good alternative for students," she said. "And some students learn better this way."

Huynh reports that most students who sign up for VHS Learning courses are motivated by the subject and platform. Students sign up for classes that are not available at Shrewsbury. They apply to take VHS Learning courses and are vetted through their academic record and a recommendation from their counselor. This process helps ensure that students have what it takes to be successful. The school also provides a lot of student support. "I love the weekly emails from VHS Learning to the students," Huynh said. "I use those to follow up with students. If they're not doing well, they meet with me in person, and we work through the issues."

There is an approximate 50/50 split between AP® and non-AP® courses. Seniors have priority for AP® classes. Huynh notes that students often experience a challenge with

time management. "Students sometimes prioritize their face-to-face classes over the online courses," she said. "But they learn for themselves that they have to manage their time to stay current with their assignments." She noted that students also learn to advocate for themselves with their teachers. "I push the kids to do that first and then if they get stuck, I'll step in to help." Time management and self-advocacy are valuable skills that students will carry forward to college and career.

VHS Learning is not just popular with schools in the US, but also fills a gap for international schools that offer access to an American curriculum with rigorous standards. As with stateside schools, international schools use VHS Learning's courses primarily for students' special interests or courses they don't carry themselves. The international school featured below is a typical example of how international schools use VHS Learning.



# Proof Positive

## *Successful VHS Learning Implementations*

### **Carlucci American International School, Portugal**

Wesley Simoes is a teacher, academic coach, and site coordinator for VHS Learning at this international school outside Lisbon. Student nationalities have shifted over the years from primarily Portuguese and Brazilian to include students from China, South Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, so the student population is very diverse. There is a NATO installation nearby, so there are American, Russian, and French students as well.

Carlucci offers both an American curriculum and the International Baccalaureate program. Students can choose either curriculum. Simoes took a lot of online courses in college, which led to his being named site coordinator, as he was able to help students learn how to manage their time and prioritize their responsibilities from his own experience.

“Although we have a rigorous curriculum, we use VHS Learning courses for some AP®

classes and electives, such as biochemistry and biotechnology,” he said. “We had a student headed to a theater school, so she took film, screenwriting, and literature.” Students take classes from journalism to entrepreneurship. After the student chooses courses, the school counselor reviews the choices to ensure the student is getting the right kinds of credits to fulfill graduation requirements. “VHS Learning’s courses are just as rigorous as our own,” Simoes said.

“It’s great that we can offer students AP® classes and electives through VHS Learning when we can’t offer those courses ourselves,” said Simoes. “It’s not just that there are additional courses to choose from, but some students really like being more independent in their studies,” he said. “Some of our students did very well with online learning and successfully developed executive skills that will serve them well as they move through their lives.”



# Choosing VHS Learning as Your Education Partner

VHS Learning's nonprofit mission is to provide students and teachers with collaborative and engaging learning opportunities. VHS Learning's vision is to prepare students to be successful in college, careers, and life.

VHS Learning partners with schools anywhere in the world to offer comprehensive, high-quality online courses for high school credit. Education partners demonstrate their satisfaction with the courses through their retention rate with the program. 94% of school administrators reported satisfaction with their VHS Learning experience. 92% of schools partnering with VHS Learning do so year after year, with some schools having utilized the program for more than twenty years. Successful student outcomes are evidenced by the program's 10-year history of surpassing average national Advanced Placement® pass rates. Student pass rates for the last three years in VHS Learning courses averages at 91%.

One of the most important features of VHS Learning is their commitment to ensuring only certified qualified teachers lead the courses. Before teachers are approved to teach, they must complete VHS Learning's proprietary graduate-level Online Teach Methodologies course to learn best practices for online teaching and learning. In addition, 81% of VHS Learning teachers possess a master's degree or higher.

## Take The Next Step

This playbook makes clear that successful and comprehensive online learning is available to every school, regardless of location. VHS Learning has been fine-tuning its teaching and learning model for more than 25 years. Whether filling a gap for a rural school in the US or providing an AP® course for an international school in a global capitol, or helping a parochial school resolve a scheduling or staffing issue, VHS Learning can help. VHS Learning has received multiple awards for the caliber of its programs; however, it is the relationships it has built with schools, educators, and students over the past 25 years that are its proudest legacy.

Adding VHS Learning courses to your catalog is an easy way to expand your curriculum. They provide everything you need to get started. Contact VHS Learning at [info@VHSLearning.org](mailto:info@VHSLearning.org) for your personal introduction today.





# About VHS Learning

VHS Learning is a nonprofit organization with over 25 years of experience providing world-class online programs to students and schools everywhere. Offering more than 300 unique online courses for high school credit, including 26 AP® courses, credit recovery, and enrichment courses, VHS Learning is accredited by Middle States Association Commission on Elementary and Secondary Schools (MSA-CESS) and Accrediting Commission for Schools and Western Association of Schools and Colleges (ACS WASC). Courses are approved for initial eligibility by NCAA. For more information about VHS Learning please visit <https://www.vhslearning.org/> and follow on Twitter at @VHSLearning.



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