The loss of learning that students are experiencing isn’t entirely the fault of the digital divide, it has something very much to do with the fact that full-time virtual learning is a lesser model. There is an important place for the responsible use of technology in the classroom, but technology should not be the classroom.

Students enrolled in full-time virtual schools perform at levels well below their brick-and-mortar counterparts, and it has mattered little by whom the research was conducted. Legislative audit divisions, investigative journalists, policy think tanks, and academic researchers all have consistent results.

• Although district-operated virtual schools achieve acceptable state performance ratings at rates (56%) higher than either charter-operated (40%) or for-profit (29%) virtual schools, they still perform far below acceptable
• Just 50% of students enrolled in full-time virtual schools have graduated from high school, compared with the national average of 84%
• Across all grades and subjects, students who attend online schools perform worse on state tests than otherwise similar students
• Across all tested students in online charters, the typical academic gains are equivalent to 180 fewer days of learning in math and 72 fewer in reading
• Teachers in virtual schools have nearly three times as many students as the national average

International organizations that work to shape polices that foster prosperity and opportunity for all have argued that excessive time on a computer is not in the best interest of students.

We’re at a point where computers are actually hurting learning. Students who use computers very frequently at school do a lot worse in most learning outcomes, even after controlling for student demographics. Anything beyond more than a few hours a week of classroom screen time drops off to diminishing, or even negative returns.

—The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2015)

Texas leadership have argued that virtual schools are not in the best interest of students.

There is no substitute for in-person learning, both for [students’] educational needs and their mental health.

—Texas Senate Finance Chair Jane Nelson

60% of students learning virtually have had a materially worse experience.

—Texas Education Commissioner Mike Morath

Both research and the actual experiences of students during the pandemic resoundingly show that virtual schools are a bad idea. This is an emergency, and we do things differently in an emergency, but beyond a declared state of disaster full-time virtual learning is not in the best interest of students.