Parents of Michigan’s littlest learners want to make sure, right from the start, that their children are on an education path that will lead to academic and emotional success. For an increasing number of kindergarten students, that option is public virtual school.

While an increasing number of families are exploring virtual school for their kindergarteners, it’s easy to understand that many still have questions on whether such a learning model is appropriate for their young child. Some parents may be concerned their child is too young for online learning — but the reality is students of all ages can thrive in a virtual school setting.

A 2013 third-party survey of enrolled families at Michigan Connections Academy determined 98 percent of parents agree their students (grades K-2) were making good academic progress, arguably the keenest evaluation of a child’s education. In addition, 97 percent of parents of students (grade K-2) said they were pleased with the helpfulness of their children’s teachers, specifically praising their responsiveness and accessibility.

There are many success stories from our littlest learners and we believe all
students can and will learn at high levels of achievement. A primary reason many parents give for sending their young children to virtual school is the desire to be an active participant in their child’s education and to have a positive effect in their child’s overall development. The success of young learners in the online setting is due in part to having an involved learning coach, a parent or other adult, who works closely with the teacher to create a supportive learning environment in the home. Teachers are responsible for instructing students — facilitating lessons, working through the curriculum and grading assignments — but learning coaches also play a key role in helping their student grasp the material and develop necessary study skills.

Virtual school teachers are specially trained in the nuances of online instruction and frequently communicate with both the student and the learning coach. In the virtual classroom, teachers are able to create the same real-time, lively interactions of a traditional classroom, but in an online setting. It may come as a surprise, but many virtual school elementary teachers I've worked with say the work they do online is similar to what they did in a traditional classroom.

Through the virtual teaching model and its reliance on the learning coach at home, rich relationships can be built with students. The amount of communication they have with families and students provides opportunities for a robust and deep understanding of what drives their students to succeed.

When it comes to technology, the computer is a tool for teachers and parents to manage and track assignments, communicate and deliver interactive curricular materials. However, much of the actual work is completed “unplugged,” especially for the younger students. Students spend time using textbooks and workbooks, reading library books and doing hands-on experiments — just like they would in a traditional school.

And much like their brick-and-mortar peers, virtual school students also have the same opportunities to interact with teachers and classmates. Aside from the online classroom, statewide field trips, school-sponsored events, as well as clubs and activities offer opportunities for students to forge friendships and connect face-to-face with their virtual school community. Programs such as ours at Michigan Connections Academy are intentionally designed to embrace life outside the classroom, and the flexibility of online learning allows families more time to pursue other social events and extra-curricular activities.

While online learning may be the right fit for any age, it may not necessarily be the right option for every student. I encourage parents interested in virtual school for students of any age to do their research — attend an information session, speak with an enrolled family, and ask questions. It is important to really get a feel for what to expect and what’s involved in online education before determining if it is the best environment for your little learner to thrive.

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