

Parents of school-age children are facing tough decisions about how their child will attend school in the midst of the coronavirus. For one option, homeschooling, the deadline to declare a decision is tomorrow (Fri). KUAR's David Monteith has more on homeschooling and virtual schools in Arkansas.

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Governor Asa Hutchinson says brick and mortar public schools in Arkansas will reopen for in-person instruction the week of August 24<sup>th</sup>. Many districts have already asked parents to declare whether their children will be attending in-person or online. Some parents are looking at other options, like homeschooling, or attending one of the state's virtual charter schools.

Jennifer Chosich has homeschooled her 8<sup>th</sup> grade daughter for her entire life. She believes interest in the homeschool network has increased over the summer.

(0:23) "What I'm seeing is a growth in the message boards of parents asking about the different virtual schools in Arkansas—Virtual schools are not traditional homeschooling. Those are public schooling, but at home—as well as asking questions about standard homeschooling. What do you do? What are the methods? When do you start? How do you start? These are all things that are coming up now."

To officially register for homeschooling, parents must submit a Notice of Intent through the Arkansas Department of Education or to the superintendent's office of their school district. The deadline for this school year is August 15<sup>th</sup>.

Chosich says typically many homeschooled students meet together for learning, and sports, but that has been scaled back during the pandemic.

(0:19) "As homeschoolers in the coronavirus, a lot of our activities are moving on-line. We are not having so many organized meetups and we are only looking at on-line activities, and on-line book clubs, and on-line meetups, and on-line team-building exercises and things to get our kids face-to-face, but in a virtual way."

According to the most recent data from the Department of Education, about 22,000 students are homeschooled in the state each school year. Concerns over the coronavirus don't appear to be significantly adding to that number. Superintendents in Springdale, Bentonville, Fort Smith, and Little Rock say that's consistent with or below numbers from recent years. But two of Arkansas's virtual charter schools say they are seeing an increase in enrollment. Amy Johnson is the head of school for the Arkansas Virtual Academy, a kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade on-line charter school.

(0:20) "Our elementary has pretty much doubled in size from what it was last year, so it's definitely the area we're seeing the most growth. We are seeing growth in middle school and high school, certainly there, but much quicker uptick in the elementary grade levels, in K-through-5."

Johnson says the on-line charter school got permission from the state to raise its enrollment cap from 3,000 to 4,000 students in response to an increase in requests over the summer. The school currently has over 3,600 students registered and has hired close to a dozen new teachers.

(0:15) "I think we're a really great space for families that would really like to homeschool, but they don't really understand maybe as much about how school works. Or they're not sure that they themselves are confident enough with content or the way they would structure their homeschool."

Arkansas Connections Academy, another of the state's on-line charter schools, anticipates a 50% increase in enrollment this year, expecting to serve 2,400 students. Both virtual charter schools are public and tuition-free.

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