

Comparing the cost of online schooling

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, many South African schools now offer the option of online learning, raising the question of what education may look like in the new normal. Could this be the safe, affordable option for parents looking to secure a quality education for their children?



Kerry Fynn, CEO AlphaWealth

Previous research from independent advisory firm AlphaWealth found that the cost of top-rate, traditional private school education in South Africa averaged between R1.8m and R8.7m over a child's entire schooling career. These numbers, while staggering, exclude external necessities such as textbooks and uniforms, and refer only to the actual fees.

How do fees for alternative online options compare?

Premium options

The majority of premium private schools appear to be offering online classes for current learners during the pandemic, including St John's College which reportedly moved classes online within 48 hours of the announcement of school closures.



Things to consider before selecting an online institution

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St Stithians stands out for its purely online school offering for learners from Grade 8, which comes in at a reduced cost of R85,000 per annum. With annual high school fees of R154,000 for in person classes, this could amount to an annual saving of over R69,000 for just academics, or over R200,000 when taking into account boarding and entrance fees. The "purpose built online school" offers all academics completed online and on-demand technical support.

Kerry Fynn, CEO of AlphaWealth says "Over time we may see more top-rated private schools adapting to provide purely online offerings in an effort to retain admissions and remain competitive. This could result in premium education becoming more affordable for parents."

More accessible options

The independent school network Curro, who offer traditional private schooling options across South Africa, also offer Curro Online. In alignment with their relatively affordable school fees, their online offering provides a lower price point for parents looking to try an alternative learning method.

While Curro's traditional schooling fees (including a monthly fee) can range from around R73,080 (Grade R full-day) to R110,880 (Grade 10-12) annually (Curro Aurora, 2021), their 2021 annual online fees amount to between R44,160 (Grade 4-7) and R50 400 (Grade 8-10 only), including a monthly fee. These fees do not include e-books, learning materials and e-learning devices such as laptops. By opting for more accessibly priced online learning, parents could be making savings of up to R60,480, annually.

"The Covid-19 pandemic hastened a trend that would have arrived eventually, presenting parents with the opportunity to access affordable, quality education for their children in the form of online learning. Companies such as Curro will continue to capitalise on this trend for the foreseeable future," says Fynn.



The actual cost of one South African school day

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Purely online options

Online schooling has been an option since long before the pandemic, with many established virtual offerings providing South African learners with alternatives to traditional schooling.

These include:

- Brainline, which follows the CAPS curriculum and is available to thousands of learners from Grade R to 12 worldwide. The school went fully online in recent years, and has been offering distance learning for over 30 years. Their annual fees range from R4700 (for single subjects) to R29,950.
- Cambrilearn offers the British curriculum, from pre-primary to A levels. Their fees are between R10,000 and R60,000 annually, and can include private lessons and an on-demand chat platform.
- Virtual Schools, which caters to learners from grades one to 12, encourages independent learning, allowing for completion of a years' work in a shorter amount of time. Their annual fees, which range from R3,500 to R27,530, include on-call tutors.
- Think Digital College, which follows the CAPS curriculum, uses private tutors and recorded lessons, teaching learners from grades R to 12, as well as the R to A levels of the British schooling system supported by the Cambridge curriculum. Their fees range from R3,800 to R14,500 annually.

- Clonard Education, which has been offering home-schooling assistance since 1996, follows the CAPS curriculum, and is managed by qualified South African assessors and teachers. Their fees range from R3,500 per annum to R22,000.

Tertiary education options

The employment rate is 30% higher for South Africans with a tertiary qualification, compared to those who only have a matric pass. With the growing popularity of online learning, which learners who completed their schooling virtually may be better equipped for, higher education may become far more accessible, and give learners an edge in the job market.

The move towards greater reliance on new teaching methods and the integration of technology now seems inevitable, with most South African universities now offering some form of online course availability.

“The online learning trend has also extended to tertiary education, which could lead to higher employability, a healthier job market and a more robust economy overall,” concludes Fynn.

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