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Swap backpacks for headsets: A new Utah charter school will be set entirely in virtual reality

Virtual Horizons Charter School is slated to open in August 2025.



(Kristina Barker | The New York Times) A virtual reality headset at Sheridan High School in Sheridan, Wyo., on May 15, 2019. A new Utah public charter school will be set entirely in virtual reality, where students can use headsets at home to go to class in the virtual realm.

By Carmen Nesbitt | Jan. 30, 2024, 6:00 a.m.

Comment

Students who want to swap out their backpacks for a headset are in luck: A new public charter school coming to Utah will be set entirely in virtual reality.

Virtual Horizons Charter School is slated to open in fall 2025, according to the Utah State Board of Education. Unlike traditional or online schools, all instruction at Virtual Horizons will be held in the virtual realm.

Enrolled students will be provided with virtual reality headsets, Chromebooks, Wi-Fi and any other technology needs to participate, according to the school's application to the Utah State Charter School Board. Virtual Horizons will be open to students statewide, and as a public charter school, it will be tuition-free.



"There's an equity piece here and equal access for all students, no matter where they live in the state," said Kristin Elinkowski, board chair of Virtual Horizons. She also served as the former chair of the Utah State Charter School Board.

Similar to video games, students will create avatars — virtual characters representing themselves — and interact with the avatars of their peers and teachers, Elinkowski explained.



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The virtual world won't resemble a traditional school setup, where students go to a building, navigate hallways and sit in a classroom, Elinkowski said.

Instead, as lessons begin, they will be whisked away to the bottom of the ocean, the Taj Mahal or back in time to the Jurassic Period, for example.

Elinkowski, who has some experience in the virtual reality education frontier, said she thinks students have better "recall" and "retention" when learning through virtual reality. Elinkowski co-founded [OasisXRE](#), a Utah-based virtual reality service provider.

"They're more engaged because it's a completely immersive experience," she said.

The 3D environments will be interactive and capable of visual, audio and haptic feedback. Teachers, who can work from anywhere in Utah, will be specially trained in virtual reality instruction, Elinkowski said.

“It’s not based on location,” she said. “We can recruit the very best teachers in the state, no matter where they live.”

There also is an emphasis on career and college readiness where students can, through virtual reality, get hands-on training in various fields, Elinkowski said.

Students will have the opportunity for in-person gatherings as well, through field trips, guest speakers and activities at community centers or other places around the state, according to the application.

In its first year, Virtual Horizons plans to enroll about 350 students in grades 4-8. The school plans to gradually expand to grades 9-12 over the next five years, until reaching a maximum enrollment of 900, the application states.

One of the first virtual reality K-12 schools in nation

While Virtual Horizons is not the first school to use virtual reality, it may be among the first K-12 schools in the country to implement a completely virtual reality environment, said Elinkowski.

“As far as we know, this is the first 100% virtual reality school in the state of Utah and in the nation with our exact model,” Elinkowski said.

A similar virtual school called [Optima Academy Online](#) launched in 2022 in Florida. The school offers a combination of online and virtual reality components.

Virtual Horizons plans to incorporate that academy’s curriculum, [Optima Domi](#), which is the “only classical curriculum virtual instruction provider” in the U.S., its website states. Its courses emphasize “phonics and grammar, intensive writing, Singapore math, and the study of classic literature,” according to the site.

Optima Academy Online and Optima Domi are owned and offered through Florida-based company OptimaEd, founded by Erika Donalds, a conservative education activist, the [New Yorker](#) reported. Donalds has been one of Florida’s most outspoken advocates for the school choice movement.

Virtual Horizons will also incorporate a curriculum developed by [VictoryXR](#), a leader in virtual reality education software, Elinkowski said. The virtual reality service provider Elinkowski co-founded, OasisXRE, is a [sales partner of VictoryXR](#).

Do Utah kids want a virtual reality school?

As part of the application process to become an official charter school in Utah, schools are required to provide a market analysis to the State Charter School Board.

In 2022, over a period of three months, Virtual Horizons polled 483 families in Salt Lake City. The poll consisted of two questions: Would you support a virtual reality charter school in Salt Lake City? Would you prefer a charter school that uses virtual reality for instruction, or a more traditional type of learning?

Of the families surveyed, 93% said they would support a virtual reality charter school, and of those, 73% said they would prefer a virtual reality charter school over traditional learning, according to the application.

“We do think there’s going to be a lot of interest in this,” Elinkowski said.

Virtual Horizons will begin recruiting next winter, but much could change between now and August 2025.

“That’s what’s exciting,” said Elinkowski, “[Virtual reality] is an emerging field and it’s changing so quickly. The headsets are going to get better, the software is going to get better. Everything’s improving.”

Parents interested in learning more about Virtual Horizons may email Elinkowski at kcelinkowski@gmail.com.

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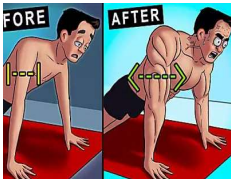
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