

Advantages of Studying at Online Schools in Assessments of Students’ Families

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ABSTRACT

The article presents the opinions of families of online school students about the benefits of online education. In this sociological study, a survey of parents of students in grades 8-11 was conducted. The method of open questions and computer processing of the answers were used. The result of the analysis is a rating of the advantages of studying in Russian distance schools. Parents of children studying in online schools most highly value distance approach, safety, and digital educational technologies. These advantages optimize the study load, help to increase digital literacy and better pass final exams, and reduce everyday risks. Other positive aspects of online education for families of students are the individualization of the educational route of children, saving of health and family budget, and the possibility of increasing the volume of extracurricular activities. The findings can be used to develop measures to support domestic online schools, as well as for the development of digital educational technologies in secondary and higher education systems.

Keywords: *sociology of family, sociology of education, online school, distance approach, digital technologies of studying, educational route, survey of parents*

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, online schools have begun to actively develop in Russia, offering pupils and their parents a distance approach based on digital educational technologies. The new educational route has become especially popular among high school students, because it allows you to abandon the daily attendance of the school, prepare for admission to the university.

In 2016, sociologists from the Higher School of Economics, together with other researchers, conducted an extensive study of the Russian online education market, comparing it with the global market for digital educational services, and outlined the main trends in the development of online education in 2017-2021. [1]. The project studied all areas of Russian distance education, including preschool. It turned out that there are few private online schools in the country - 1.8% of the total number of gymnasiums and lyceums; state Russian distance schools do not exist. Additional school educational services are actively developing on Internet platforms. Online schools are an extremely promising area in the country and in both capitals [2]. However, the extension of online education for schoolchildren is hindered by the need to obtain a license to open a comprehensive distance school.

Online schools are actively promoting digital technologies in the educational environment and most deserve the definition of "digital" [3]. Such institutions are platforms for implementing the goals stated in the federal program “Digital Economy of the Russian Federation” (2019-2024) to provide the country's information infrastructure, train personnel for the digital economy, and increase the digital literacy of the population. At the personal and family level,

online schools provide significant freedom in varying the educational route, including the provision of individual program. The online schools offer externship, accelerated basic courses, in-depth preparation for subjects selected for the Basic State Examination (BSE) and the Unified State Examination (USE).

The aim of the project, the results of which are presented in the article, is to analyze the benefits of distance learning in the eyes of parents who have chosen online education for their children. This is currently a rare educational route in Russia with great prospects. It is useful to study the experience of online schools to introduce an indispensable, in some cases, distance approach in secondary and higher education.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY. SURVEY BASED ON OPEN QUESTIONS OF PARENTS OF ONLINE SCHOOL STUDENTS

The project is a continuation of a study launched in 2019 on the motives for high school students and their families to apply for distance learning in an online school environment [4]. One of the well-known online schools in St. Petersburg has allowed posting a survey on the VKontakte network for its students. Most of the questions in the survey were open, that is, they did not have ready-made answers. Respondents had the opportunity to independently formulate an answer [5]. I managed to collect 47 profiles from students in grades 10-11 of the online school. Survey questions clarified not only the assessment of online education by students. One of

the thematic blocks of the survey was devoted to the attitude of parents to distance education of children. The opinion of parents was found out indirectly, through the answers of schoolchildren.

The current project is supplemented with the methodology for collecting sociological information. We have developed a survey for parents of online school students. This time the sample was changed. Not only the parents of students in grades 10-11 were interviewed. The sample included mothers and fathers of eighth and ninth graders. The Russian online schools are intended for students in grades 1-11, but, in our opinion, the parents of a younger generation of schoolchildren should be interviewed using another reflexive technique. Perhaps, in-depth interviews or a focus group will be relevant [6].

Questionnaires were distributed to parents, as well as sent by e-mail and in social networks. It should be noted that the responses to e-mail questionnaires and questionnaires received from social networks were more thoughtful. According to the Russian sociologist Boris Zusmanovich Doctorov, this is an important advantage of digital methods for collecting personal information. When the respondent has time to reflect on the questions asked for a long time, to correct and supplement his own answers, a sociological study obtains more reliable and high-quality primary data [7].

120 parents were interviewed. In nineteen cases, both parents of an online school student were interviewed. The article presents an analysis of the answer to the question about the benefits of distance learning. The answer was open with the opportunity to provide several arguments in favor of the online school: "Name one to ten advantages of teaching children in online schools." The answer of the respondent No. 23 was typical and looked like this:

- The online school is safe and continues to work during the coronavirus.
- The son masters useful digital education formats.
- The son gets enough sleep in the morning.
- He can attend classes in the ski section.
- Extra subjects may be taken externally.
- Less cost for a son's food.
- Classes are not every day.
- The son asked me to transfer him to a distance learning in order to work.

As you can see, informants themselves divide the answer into fragments, which simplifies computer processing of

texts. In the example above, the first statement contains two ideas: "The online school is safe during the coronavirus" and "The online school continues to work during the coronavirus". The rest of the statements do not need additional division. The processing of the informants' answers was carried out using the Discant computer program (Dialogue System for the Analysis and Classification of Texts). The program was created in 1994 and was repeatedly updated [8]. The system is most suitable for analyzing answers to open questionnaire questions. First, the answers are divided, if necessary, into semantic segments, and then they are classified and combined into groups and subgroups.

In the current project, a database was created with statements by parents of online school students about the benefits of distance education and digital educational technologies. As a result of analytical work, it was possible to develop a classifier consisting of eight sections. Each section received a full and short name.

3. RESULTS OF THE STUDY. THE BENEFITS OF STUDYING AT AN ONLINE SCHOOL

The answers of informants to the question about the advantages of online education and other questions of the questionnaire indicate that the decision to take children away from a regular school was not spontaneous. Parents carefully thought out and discussed with their children a change in their usual educational path. The theme of family development of a new educational route was constantly appeared in the answers [9]. In particular, it became clear that students in grades 8-11 are not just "co-authors" of the changed educational plan, they initiate the transition to an online school. The parents who answered us supported their children, although it is difficult to say in how many cases the students would be refused. Grandparents participated in the decision to transfer to distance learning, but in half the cases were against, considering such education a profanation of the educational process. Other family members - uncles and aunts, brothers and sisters of schoolchildren - either approved the new educational route, or took a neutral position. There were questions in questionnaire about the attitude of the immediate family members to teaching children in online schools.

The reasons for the transformation of the educational scenario in families with students in grades 8-9 and 10-11 do not differ. It can be assumed that the arguments in favor of distance learning for parents of elementary school students will be different [10]. After analyzing the answers of informants, we received the following list of family positive assessments of online school education:

Table 1 Advantages of studying at an online school in parental assessment

No.	Sections	Statements of informants	Number of statements	Frequency of occurrence (%)
1	Distance approach	the opportunity not to go to school, save of travel and preparation time to school, performing test works at home, retaking test works, a balanced curriculum, taking subjects without attending classes, improving grades in the certificate, reducing the study load, increasing the number of free days, effective preparation for final exams, the ability to focus on subjects of interest, the lack of physical education, online schools continue to work during the coronavirus, low occupancy of classes	195	20
2	Safety	online studying is safe during epidemics, low chance of terrorist attack on a child, low chance of street violence, school violence is excluded	166	17
3	Digital educational technologies	online lessons are more informative than usual, specialized computer programs for conducting online classes, effective presentations of new material, instant access to information, interesting for those wishing to become programmers, digital literacy, electronic home works, regular Skype consultations with teachers, communication with the whole class during lesson, networking, constant access to the Internet, electronic verification tests, a strong course in computer science, an archive of online lessons	146	15
4	Individualization of education	development of an individual educational route, loyalty to students, specialized training in subjects of interest, minimization of attention to “superfluous” subjects, an individual lesson schedule, the ability to choose a teacher, the choice of additional subjects on a personal request, specialized preparation for entering a chosen university	136	14
5	Health saving	good sleep, homemade food, meals on a schedule, more walks in the fresh air, a child has time for a morning run, a child has become less infected and sick, there is no need to go out with a little malaise, a child is less on the streets next to the gas-covered routes	136	14
6	Extracurricular activities	a child can attend sports sections, can participate in sports training camps and competitions, work in dance groups, the possibility of part-time work, the ability to work remotely, gaining of professional experience, learning of rare foreign languages, attending drawing and design clubs, mastering of programming	117	12
7	Family budget saving	less expenses for travel to school, less expenses for food at school, reduced expenses for classes with a tutor, no paid school activities, one can do with a minimum of clothes for a child, no parental contributions for school repairs	78	8
	TOTAL:		974	100

The rating of the benefits of online school education for students in grades 8–11 was developed on the basis of counting the number of judgments on a particular topic. The result of computer analysis was a list of arguments in favor of online schools. In total, we received 974 judgments distributed among seven groups. The questionnaire also asked about the shortcomings of the new educational route. In particular, parents noted that children do not always use

their free time healthily. The problems of online education in the eyes of families of students are a topic for another article, although there are negative assessments in the answers of informants.

4. DISCUSSING THE RESULTS. DISTANT APPROACH, SAFETY AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

A. Answer Groups 1-3.

The informants paid most attention to the discussion of the advantages of the distance approach. First of all, parents noted the opportunity not to go to school and save time. The remaining advantages are the result of an efficient use of time. Students do not need a five- or six-day studying week, three days a week is enough. The distance approach provides a balanced curriculum and allows you to take some of the subjects externally. For example, studies in physics and chemistry can be completed in grade 10. Students spend free time on the subjects of their interest and prepare effectively for exams in grades 9 and 11. Reduced and redistributed study load increases academic performance and the average mark in the certificate. As parents write, in the higher forms of online schools, optimal conditions have been created for preparing graduates to enter a university.

In second place in the frequency of references there was a group of responses, briefly called "Safety". Obviously, this is due to the time and place of the survey - March 2020, St. Petersburg. In each questionnaire, there was an indication of the safety of online school learning during the coronavirus epidemic. Several people explained that they are wary of cases of violence against a child (assault, fights, robbery) on the street and at school. There are fears of acts of terrorism in the subway and schools.

Third place went to the answer group "Digital educational technologies". Among the advantages of online studying, parents called the increased digital literacy of children. 35 out of 120 parents work in the field of IT-technologies and orient children towards the same specialty. Such families find digital learning methods more suitable for today's youth. Other informants highly appreciate the effective visualization of lessons, instant access to information, homework in electronic form. As a major advantage of the digitalization of education, parents consider the possibility of constant communication of classmates with each other, as well as the increased involvement of students in the educational process through digital teaching methods.

B. Argument Group 4: about the individualization of the educational route.

The topic of an individual approach to teaching students in grades 8-11 at an online school occupied the middle of the ranking. For families, both the psychological support of children from teachers and development of a personal training program for each student are important. In online schools there is an opportunity to devote more time to subjects of a student's interest, to choose additional courses. Individual preparation for passing exams in grades 9 and 11 is organized. Upon request, you can prepare with teachers

for admission to the university, taking into account the specific requirements of the selected university.

C. Answer Groups 5-7.

Groups of answers from the fifth to the seventh can be combined with the title "Saving personal and family resources". The fifth group of judgments is about saving the health of schoolchildren as a result of refusal to attend schools and the transition to distance learning. Students in grades 8-11 get better sleep, rest and exercise, walk in parks. The sixth group contains short messages about the possibility of investing time freed from schooling for extracurricular activities. We assumed that children of informants are often engaged in sports sections and aspire to a professional sports career. It turned out that there were three of these guys, another 15 people attend sports and dance clubs. In addition, children of nine informants from different families chose creative universities for admission, so most of these students go to study at design and acting studios. Another answer of parents about extracurricular activities was work, professional employment of children. We received unexpected answers in the last seventh group. Parents said that online schools help save the family budget. Online tuition is compensated by lower costs for children's food, transportation and clothing. Judging by the answers of informants, expenses for tutors has also decreased, especially in those subjects that children are not going to take at final exams.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In the survey a rating of the benefits of studying at online schools was developed in terms of families of students in grades 8-11. Parents of children studying at online schools most highly value distance learning, safety, and digital educational technologies. These advantages optimize the study load, help to increase digital literacy and better pass final exams, and reduce everyday risks. Other positive aspects of online education are considered by the students' families to be the individualization of the educational route of children, saving of health and family budget, the opportunity to increase the volume of extracurricular activities. The empirical prospect of the study is a representative survey of students at online schools, as well as expert interviewing of specialists in distance education.

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