Colorado Springs School District 11–Achieve Online

Colorado Springs, Colorado

At-risk middle and high school students thrive and learn to love school in a blended learning alternative education school, leading to a successful educational experience

Achieve Online is Colorado Springs School District 11's (D11) full-time online and blended learning school for middle and high school students. With 60 schools serving more than 26,000 students, D11 is the largest school district serving the Colorado Springs, Colorado area.

Achieve Online focuses on at-risk students by providing a flexible blended learning and socially supportive environment suited to the particular needs of its student population. A very high percentage of students have some form of anxiety disorder, medical problem, or challenging family situation, that makes it difficult for them to thrive in the higher-paced, more stressful setting of a traditional brick-and-mortar school. From teachers and curriculum, to social support and activities, Achieve Online's entire program is specifically designed to serve these students' needs with excellence.

2nd highest SAT scores of Alternative Education Campus (AEC) schools in Colorado

(SY 2017-2018)

Opening as a K–8 online school in 2009 with 58 students, it added high school grades the following year, dropped grades K–5 in the third year, and now serves grades 6 through 12. It grew to 250 students during the first three years, and since then enrollment has been intentionally maintained between 250 and 270 students. John Bailey, Achieve Online principal, says "We think about 270 is max for our program, especially as it relates to the level of teacher to student communication desired."

While students are not required to physically attend on-campus classes or activities, many regularly come in two or more times a week to attend scheduled classroom sessions and work in the learning and science labs. By definition, blended learning programs incorporate a face-to-face component, usually in a school building, but at Achieve Online, Bailey says "We want Achieve Online to feel and function more like a traditional school, with the social climate and opportunities for student and teacher face-to-face involvement found in the best brick-and-mortar schools."

Creating a caring social setting based on strong teacher-student relationships is Achieve Online's driving philosophy. "At Achieve Online it's all about culture and climate," says Bailey. "A teacher-to-student positive relationship is our top priority." Lead Teacher Jo Ann Davis adds, "Communication is the teachers' and students' lifeline."

Achieve Online uses the online platform and Summit digital curriculum from Stride Learning Solutions. Achieve Online teachers are both the online course facilitators as well as the on-campus classroom teachers for all courses.

Over Achieve Online's ten-year history, the school has become an invaluable program for the school district, helping middle and high schoolers become successful, both as students and in life. It ranked second highest in SAT scores[1] among Alternative Education Campus (AEC)[2] schools in Colorado in SY 2017–2018 and has earned a solid reputation of excellence in the region and is a top go-to school for at-risk students, evidenced by its waiting list of over 100 students.

SCHOOL

Type of school:
Public school Alternative Education Campus (AEC)

Grades:
6–12

Program opened:
2009

School enrollment: (SY 2018-19)
200 *high school students*
70 *middle school students*

Ethnicity:
63.6% *White*
23.8% *Hispanic*
3.8% *Black*
7.6% *Multiracial*
0.9% *Asian*
0.15% *Hawaiian / Pacific Islander*
0.15% *Native American*

Free/Reduced-price lunch:
Free *for K–8*
40% *for High School*

Staff:
16 *Teachers*
1 *Lab teacher*
2 *Counselors*
1 *Social worker*
2 *Administrative / support*

Instructional model:
Full-time online and blended learning alternative education program

Achieve Online is one of Colorado Springs School District 11's alternative education schools, providing an online and blended learning program for at-risk middle and high school students.

Students' educational experience consists of studying online at home 3 days per week and attending on-campus classes 2 days per week.

The on-campus blended learning component is located in a large former high school building, where students enjoy the use of classrooms, learning and science labs, gyms, and cafeteria serving breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Students are not required to attend on-campus classes, but many do attend on a regular weekly basis.

Achieve Online uses the Summit digital curriculum from Stride Learning Solutions for its foundational instructional content.

Students use their own computers while away from school and school-owned computers when on campus.

All courses, both online and on-campus components, are taught by Achieve Online's own teachers.

Achieve Online is a community of students, parents, teachers, and staff where relationships are crucial to student success.

A blended learning approach: Learning online and on campus

Orientation. Before students are confirmed for enrollment, both parents and students must attend a middle or high school orientation program at the school. Bailey says "Based on experience, we know that we must have a solid and effective parent and student orientation program. We tell parents we are going to over-communicate with them. We want them to know what's going on all the time." Students and their parents must sign the Achieve Online Learning Agreement affirming their commitment to the program, its values, academic performance, and other expectations.

All first-time enrollees are required to attend at least the first four on-campus sessions. This provides teachers and students an opportunity to forge initial relationships and understanding, and gives students experience in using online courses while teachers are available first hand.

Teachers. A dedicated and caring teaching and administrative team forms the heart and soul of the program. Achieve Online teachers are responsible for on-campus instruction, as well as facilitating online courses. They monitor students' online work and provide suggestions, encouragement, and learning pathways for individual students.

To meet individual needs, Achieve Online teachers customize the Summit digital curriculum from Stride Learning Solutions. Teachers know that, at Achieve Online, they have the autonomy necessary to create and deliver instruction for each student to best make them successful. Kay McNeil, electives teacher, says "We teach to the students' different learning styles, which vary widely, because our kids come from all walks of life. The majority of them have had a really tough road."

A typical week at Achieve Online

Most students study online at home three days per week and attend classes and activities on campus the other two days, with middle and high school students on campus on alternate days (See Table 1 below). Some students may also work online in an on-campus learning lab during part or all of the three days they are not scheduled for on-campus classes. "Students have the option to attend all five days a week, or they may choose to attend fewer, or not at all," says Davis.

Table 1: Standard Achieve Online Weekly Schedule

GRADE LEVEL	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
Middle School 6–8	Study online at home or attend labs on campus.	Home room. On-campus classroom instruction. Clubs. Tutoring center open (3–5 PM)	Study online at home or attend labs on campus. Tutoring center open (3–5 PM).	Home room. On-campus classroom instruction. Clubs.	Study online at home or attend labs or teacher office hours on campus.
High School* 9–12	On-campus classroom instruction. Home room. Clubs.	Study online at home or attend labs on campus. Tutoring center open (3–5 PM).	On-campus classroom instruction. Home room. Clubs. Tutoring center open (3–5 PM).	Study online at home or attend labs on campus.	Study online at home or attend labs or teacher office hours on campus.

Achieve Online High School curriculum uses a quarter-based block schedule system. A minimum of three periods is required for full-time enrollment, with a minimum of 80 hours of work required for each credit earned.

Online learning time. Students access their digital courses online at home through the internet using their own computers. They are expected to study online one hour per day per course—three to four hours total each day—in combination between home and on campus. Annie Bammesberger, English teacher, says "Our blended learning model, in which students don't have to get up and come to school every day, can be a game-changer for a lot of at-risk students that would otherwise drop out. They don't mind spending a few hours a day on the computer at home, but they don't want to come in and deal with the noise and anxiety in a traditional school setting."

On-campus time. Achieve Online strives to offer students a very similar social and educational experience as that found in traditional brick-and-mortar schools. Along with a few other D11 alternative education programs, the on-campus component is housed in a large former high school building located on a campus setting in a residential community of Colorado Springs. Students enjoy the use of several classrooms, school gyms, outdoor sports areas, science and learning labs, and a school cafeteria that serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner. "We have really excellent indoor and outdoor facilities for football, basketball, softball, and more," notes Josh Smit, PE teacher. There is even a daycare center for student parents, helping to remove roadblocks to getting a high school education.

Middle school schedule

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, middle school students and teachers are on campus. A middle school day is more like a traditional school, spanning the day (See Table 2 below).

Table 2: Middle School Schedule on Tuesdays and Thursdays

Grade	Period 1 8:30-9:10	Period 2 9:15-10:05	JAM 10:10-10:20	Period 3 10:25-1:15	Period 4 11:20-12:00	LUNCH 12:05-12:35	Period 5 12:40-1:20	Period 6 1:25-2:05	Period 7 2:10-3:00
6th	Homeroom	Core Class	Walk to	Core Class	Clubs/ Study Hall	Lunch	Core Class	Core Class	Elective
7th								Elective	Core Class
8th							Elective	Core Class	

Davis explains "Mornings begin with homeroom to help ground the students and help them focus their energy for the day. Then students attend two cores with an activity period in between. The activity period, a research-based approach, enables students to increase their learning." Right before lunch is club time for middle schoolers, or based on need, study hall time. Following lunch, students attend three classes, which include two core courses and one elective course.

Middle school students are expected to work online independently, usually at home, on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. However, on any or all of these non-classroom days, they can return to campus to study in the learning lab, meet with teachers or attend tutoring sessions.

High school schedule

High school students and teachers are on campus for classes on Mondays and Wednesdays. Freshman are required to come in for Freshman Academy every Monday and Wednesday. Students start the day by attending four one-hour classes in the morning, followed by lunch. Core course blocks are scheduled as follows:

8–9 AM	History
9–10 AM	English
10–11 AM	Science
11 AM–12 PM	Math

High school students usually take only two core courses at a time, so when they're not in a core class, they go to OCP (Online Class Period), where they study their other courses online independently in a room hosted by certified teachers who assist students as needed.

Right after lunch, high schoolers go to homeroom, where teachers connect with their core group of students.

Club time is in the afternoon, from 1 to 3 PM. Some students only stay on campus for the first half of the day because they might have a job or other responsibilities, but most stay for the afternoon to participate in clubs that meet in the school, or a field trip away from school.

High school students are expected to work online independently, usually at home, on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays. However, on any or all of these non-classroom days, they can return to campus to study in the learning lab, meet with teachers, or attend tutoring sessions.

DAYCARE CENTER FOR STUDENT PARENTS

"Achieve Online works well for young mothers or fathers who are able to sneak in slices of time to study online between napping children, for example. These young parents want to be good moms or dads and not drop out of school. Achieve Online has an on-campus daycare center, but many young parents can't easily get to the school, so Achieve Online gives them the flexibility and availability to continue their education by studying online at home. Achieve Online has ten to twelve young parents—moms and dads—that graduate each year."

– Sally Jergensen, head counselor

Friday open school day

No face-to-face or in-person classes are scheduled on Friday. Fridays are optional days, and students can come to campus as they wish. Teachers hold office hours for students, counselors are available, and students can use computers to work on their online courses in the learning lab. A full-time lab teacher is available all day Friday and has a middle and a high school teacher on-call as needed. Davis says "The ability to come in on Fridays, or other non-class days, really helps our students. At home they may have a lot of distractions, it might be loud or maybe they are alone at home and find that it's harder to be disciplined. So they can come into the school where there is more structure, and where they will have interaction, oversight, and care from the staff." Attendance is taken on Fridays and students are expected to study and complete assignments while they are there.

Learning Lab

The learning lab is a large open room with comfortable chairs, couches, and work tables where students can work alone or collaborate with each other. A lab teacher is always present to assist students. The learning lab is primarily dedicated to middle schoolers on Mondays and Wednesdays, when middle school teachers are not teaching scheduled classes, and to high schoolers on Tuesdays and Thursdays, when high school teachers are not teaching scheduled classes. It is open five-days a week, including all day Friday, when it's available to all students.

Tutoring Center

The tutoring center is a key component of Achieve Online's instructional strategy. Teachers provide face-to-face assistance to students. It is available to all students and is open on Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 3 to 5 PM. The center can also be a good alternative learning environment for some students. For example, Davis says, "I have a student who is challenged to manage his own behaviors in the larger classroom setting. So, we've worked it out with his family that he will come to tutoring from 3 to 5 PM. Tutoring's setting, with fewer people and shorter length of time, is facilitating a much greater degree of success for him."

Homeroom

An essential component of the program for both middle and high schoolers is homeroom. Homeroom for middle schoolers is first thing in the morning, and right after lunch for high schoolers. This is where teachers connect with their core group of students. Homeroom teachers are the students' primary contact. "A homeroom teacher here at Achieve Online is almost like being a social worker," says Davis. "We get to know our students and their families and understand their needs. We keep up to date on anything that might impact our students' ability to obtain their educational goals, and ensure all staff are prepared to support our students."

Josh Smit, PE teacher, agrees saying, "My homeroom is my family of students, for which I am responsible. I strive to know and understand the student, parents, and whole family. It really helps to know what's going on in their out-of-school lives."

It's all about relationships

Teachers believe that strong, positive relationships created through school community are central to Achieve Online's success, and a major reason why students stay at Achieve Online. Frequent communication between teachers and students, and with parents and families, is what makes it all work; this is crucial in an online and blended learning setting where teachers and students don't see each other every day. Davis says "We are constantly communicating via text, email, phone, and face-to-face in school."

Positive feedback log. Each teacher maintains a positive feedback log, recording positive, weekly communication with every student in their home room. The log helps identify, for instance, a student who is not engaged and disconnected. "Making this a positive and personal relationship is key," says Davis.

Communication gap hot list. "If our teachers have not been able to make contact with a student for three weeks, the student's name is placed on the hot list for immediate action," Bailey notes. If it is thought to be more of an emotional issue, counselors reach out to the student and parent. For disciplinary issues, the principal or assistant principal will likely reach out. Sally Jergensen, head counselor, says "We think that if we don't reach out, there is a good chance they will fall between the cracks or drop out. It's a highly intensified communication. The hot list has been one of our most effective intervention means."

Clubs. "A terrific part of Achieve Online's program is our clubs, which students can log as PE activities," says Josh Smit, PE teacher and leader of many club activities. Clubs have been proven to be very effective for student engagement. Clubs include a wide variety of activities and events, including rock climbing, art school visits, archery, bowling, golf, horseback riding, Colorado Springs Sky Sox baseball games, Cave of the Winds outdoor adventure course, and more. Davis says "At the high school level Clubs have been phenomenal. High school clubs are from 1 to 3 PM, and most high school students participate. Older middle school students who are on campus on a regular basis are invited to join in; it helps bridge the transition from middle school to high school." Middle school-specific clubs meet just before lunch.

In addition to the more active outside clubs, there are in-school club activities, such as the popular game club, computer software coding, and open gym.

A STUDENT'S BEST FRIEND

Chaucer, Achieve Online service dog

Achieve Online has a service dog to help students, a stunningly cute King Charles Spaniel named Chaucer–after the author and poet Geoffrey Chaucer. Students love to spend time with Chaucer to help them calm down and feel good.

"When the dog is with a student, we call it "Chaucer Time," says Sally Jergensen, head counselor. "He's helped so many students with emotional problems, and even improved student attendance and frequency of behavioral incidents. Students know that their positive behavior leads to Chaucer Time." Kay McNeil, electives teacher and Chaucer's owner, says "Students lie down on Chaucer's bed and cuddle up with him. They talk to him and tell him everything and anything, and they come back to class feeling great."

A young male student would often go into emotional distress and lie down in a fetal position under the desk, and there was no moving him. He often would start screaming. "It was traumatic to even watch," says Jergensen. An exercise was developed for the boy called "match the breathing," in which Chaucer is placed next to the boy's stomach and he knows that he has to try to match the dog's breathing, and Chaucer senses that this child is in distress. They work through their breathing together, and after a few minutes, he's calmed down and will come out from under the desk. Before this, the entire class had to be moved out of the room and wait for the boy to settle down.

Curriculum content and tools

Online courses and content. In the early years of the program teachers developed much of their own online course content, but ultimately that approach proved undesirable. They knew they wanted to move to a professionally developed online curriculum, and in 2012 Achieve Online decided to use the online course catalog from Stride Learning Solutions, which includes the new Summit curriculum. Bailey says "Stride has been a good partner. The curriculum is flexible and our teachers really like the ability to customize courses by adding our own content."

Annie Bammesberger, English teacher, uses Summit English Language Arts in her 10th and 11th grade English. She says "A major impact for me is Summit's ability to individualize learning and choose different pathways. In our special-needs, alternative education setting that is crucial. Overall, I think Summit is amazing when it comes to rich curriculum that is easy to use and differentiate for students' needs. I feel like the Summit curriculum is so rich and broad. Stride has also done a great job in making sure we're hitting the standards—it's a no brainer; we don't have to think about that. Also, diving deep into Stride Brightspace reports is invaluable. It's imperative for me to know, for instance, if a student has logged in but hasn't put any time into the class."

Jo Ann Davis is using the Summit curriculum in her Algebra classes and plans to expand its use next year. Lisa Chantiny, math teacher and assessment coordinator, says "I like how Summit courses are set up in Brightspace. We do some interesting things; for example, we will often treat the quizzes as homework activities, not just as quizzes. I also like having all the textbook content online, accessible from the course."

On-campus curriculum opportunities. Achieve Online partners with other D11 schools encouraging students to participate in varsity sports, music, theater, as well as selected academic programs. For example, Sally Jergensen, head counselor, notes "Some of our world language students participate in classes at other D11 schools where they are with students speaking the language. We found that without this immersion, it was difficult to go beyond Spanish 1 or 2. With only the online experience, and no human feedback, students may be saying words incorrectly, and by the time a teacher hears them, it can be very difficult for students to correct their speech."

A nice advantage of residing in the large school facility is the ability to offer some courses and education experiences not usually associated with online programs, like face-to-face classes in music, art, and physical education.

Achieve Online also partners with nearby Pikes Peak Community College for dual enrollment courses.

Student Devices. For online activity away from school, students must provide their own internet access and have their own computers. When students are on campus, they use laptop computers provided by the school. They are not allowed to bring their own computer to school. Approximately 100 school-owned laptop computers are available for take-home check out for students who need them.

A Lifeline for At-risk Students Equals Success

Achieve Online measures success by helping students learn to love school and stay in school. Success means keeping students from dropping out under the pressures of challenging personal and family situations and preparing them for a meaningful next step in life.

Sally Jergensen, head counselor

"The best outcome is seeing students develop a love for school again. Most at first have a demonstrable negative attitude towards school in general. I hear students say, 'you believed in me when no one else did.' Over 90 percent of our students have some form of diagnosed or undiagnosed anxiety. Online learning helps give them the recharge they need, rather than attend a large school building environment five-days a week."

Josh Smit, PE teacher

"Our biggest impact is that we're able to capture students who weren't successful in a regular traditional brick-and-mortar school, or who may have filtered out of the educational system and see them thrive here."

Devra Allen, school social worker

"Achieve Online has been a success for countless students with medical issues. I work with a lot of these students and I've seen amazing successes."

Lisa Chantiny, math teacher

"A lot of students who would have dropped out were able to stay in school and graduate. That's our number one achievement. We tell kids we may not be your first choice, but we're often your best choice."

Sally Jergensen, head counselor

"We have the most fragile of students medically or emotionally. The thing I like about our online school model is that it is very individualized, which is a must-have for our many students on 504 Plans and IEPs."[3,4] These at-risk students may need to cut back on learning time, extend time needed to complete a course, or work while in a hospital, for example. Stride's online courses provide the location and time flexibility students need to fit these situations."

Annie Bammesberger, English teacher

"A female student originally came to Achieve Online after being expelled due to behavioral issues and fighting in another school district. She and her family were undocumented immigrants.[5] Achieve Online helped her get a computer and a part-time job to help support her family. What Achieve Online offered her was the ability to work at home, since she needed to be able to help provide for the family. She was very motivated, but I feel like without the Achieve Online option, she probably would have just dropped out of school all together. Access to her classes online allowed her to thrive and tune in, and she began to attend school and other events. As she progressed, she applied for scholarships. She graduated in the Spring of 2019 and has accepted an invitation to attend the University of Colorado main campus in Boulder through an undocumented college student program. And in the meantime, she has obtained her U.S. Citizenship."

Looking ahead – John Bailey, Principal

"D11 has declining enrollment but Achieve Online's enrollment is growing. In fact, there are over a hundred students on the waiting list to enroll. We do very little advertising; it's mainly word of mouth. This is significant in that several high-profile districts right around us do significant advertising and student recruitment."

Success by the numbers

2nd in SAT scores among Colorado's 100 AEC schools

One of the highest performing AEC's in the state for the last 3 years

3 Crystal Apple Winners on staff

$500,000+ awarded in scholarships to students the last 3 years

78 Spring 2019 graduates

evergreen education group
KEEPING PACE WITH DIGITAL LEARNING

Stride Learning Solutions

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Endnotes

[1] Achieve Online SAT score ranking information provided by D11 Achieve Online administrative staff.

[2] Colorado Alternate Education Campuses (AECs) are schools with specialized missions designed to serve high-risk student populations. https://www.cde.state.co.us/accountability/coloradoalternativeeducationcampusesppt

[3] 504 plans are formal plans that schools develop to give kids with disabilities the supports they need. These plans prevent discrimination and protect the rights of kids with disabilities in school. They're covered under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. This is a civil rights law.

[4] IEP plans are formal plans specifying that every child with a disability who attends public school and receives special education and related services must have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). An IEP is a document uniquely designed for one specific student, with the intention of improving educational results for that child.

[5] Undocumented youth are young people living in the United States without U.S. citizenship or other legal immigration status. As children, youth are granted access to public K–12 education and benefits regardless of citizenship or immigration status. Under Federal law, State and local educational agencies ("school districts") are required to provide all children with equal access to public education.