

Virtual-Reality School Is the Next Frontier of the School-Choice Movement

The conservative education activist Erika Donalds envisions a world where parents can opt out of traditional public school by putting their kids in a headset.

By [Emma Green](#) September 1, 2023

Illustration by Jackie Carlise

It's 6 A.M. A little girl, who looks to be about ten years old, hits the button on her alarm clock. She eats a bowl of cereal and brushes her teeth and hair before going to school. In class, she takes notes while her teacher, Mrs. Marty, gives a lesson. Then everyone puts on spacesuits and helmets, and the class relocates to outer space.

This is the vision for a new kind of education sold in a promotional video for Optima Academy Online, an all-virtual school that was launched in 2022. The little girl, like most of her classmates and teachers, spends a good part of her day in a Meta Quest 2 headset—a set of one-pound white goggles that extends in a single band across her eyes. She wears the headset on and off for about three hours, removing it to read a book, eat a sandwich, and hot-glue some sort of tinfoil art. Her classmates are scattered across different towns, and her teachers live all over the country. In the video, the little girl doesn't have a single in-person interaction.

The virtual school is part of OptimaEd, a company in Florida founded by Erika

Donalds, a forty-three-year-old conservative education activist. During the past school year, the academy enrolled more than a hundred and seventy full-time students up to eighth grade from all over Florida—a number that OptimaEd will roughly double this fall. Starting in third grade, full-time students wear a headset for thirty to forty minutes at a time, for four or five sessions, with built-in pauses so that the students don't experience visual fatigue. (Younger students do something closer to regular virtual school, using Microsoft Teams and Canvas.) In the afternoon, kids complete their coursework independently, with teachers available to answer questions digitally.

OptimaEd is possible because of Florida's distinctive education-policy landscape. The state was one of the pioneers of the school-choice movement. Ever since Jeb Bush was governor, in the early two-thousands, Florida has provided various kinds of vouchers to students from poor families, and later to those with disabilities, allowing them to purchase courses from companies like OptimaEd. Governor [Ron DeSantis](#) expanded that program by making all students eligible for education vouchers, funded with the money that would otherwise go toward their public-school education. This legislation has made it even easier for parents to use state dollars for OptimaEd's products. But the company is also quickly expanding beyond Florida. This fall, it's providing V.R. services to students in Arizona—another state that has embraced school choice—and parts of Michigan.

OptimaEd bills its education as classical, with an emphasis on the intellectual traditions of Western civilization and the liberal arts. Younger students learn phonics and diagram sentences. Older ones read the [great books](#) and the Constitution. Teachers talk a lot about virtues, such as courage and self-government. "It's a very traditional, back-to-basics education," Donalds said on a podcast recently.

Donalds comes from the world of Florida school-choice activism. She's well known in Florida political circles: a few of Donalds's closest activist allies founded the group [Moms for Liberty](#), which has become the leading conservative voice in the movement for parents' rights in education, and Donalds serves on the group's advisory board. She is also married to a congressman, Byron Donalds, a rising star in the Republican Party, who was briefly a contender for Speaker of the House in 2023. (A number of Republicans in Florida have encouraged him to run for governor once DeSantis is out of office.) The movements for school choice and [parental rights](#) sometimes dovetail with the classical-school movement, which has been experiencing a revival in America since the nineteen-eighties. Whereas the former often focusses on the shortcomings of public schools, the latter offers an alternative vision for education: a way of teaching students that calls back to the ancient wisdom and traditions of the Western world, instead of instructing them using progressive pedagogy and frameworks.

Erika Donalds has built an experiment in total parental control over education. "I see a huge and growing industry of à-la-carte education options—the ability to customize the experience both physically and geographically," Donalds said. "We've been told that only certified teachers in a traditional classroom environment can deliver instruction. And we know that's just not true." She believes that virtual-reality school hits many of the benefits of in-person learning—real-time instruction, classmates, field trips—while letting families build the schedules and communities they want. If parents aren't satisfied with whatever ideas their local public school is pushing, they can opt out by putting their kid in a headset. "If you entrust your child with us, you know that the curriculum is not going to be contrary to what you're teaching at home," she said.

Donalds is a certified public accountant, so it's fitting that her [radicalization](#) began with something called "new math." The Common Core, an effort to

standardize grade-level learning across the country, was being rolled out in 2010. The bipartisan Common Core initiative was led by policy wonks who wanted to make American students more globally competitive, partly in response to George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind legislation, which had created a patchwork of different standards across the states. Common Core leaders adopted techniques used in other industrialized countries, such as new strategies of mathematical reasoning—students, for example, might be required to draw out a multi-step number line in order to complete a simple subtraction problem. The oldest of the Donaldses' three sons was in elementary school at the time, and, like many others, he found the new process confusing. Donalds started attending anti-Common Core rallies, wearing a T-shirt that read "Stop Common Core," featuring a stop sign and an apple with a worm inside. Critics on the left objected to the initiative's emphasis on standardized testing; those on the right saw it as an example of federal overreach into local schools, led by faraway bureaucrats in Washington. Parts of the anti-Common Core movement were associated with the Tea Party, which eventually helped launch Byron's political career.

Erika Donalds ran for her local school board in 2014 and served for four years. But, during that time, she discovered a more wide-reaching way to change the education landscape in Florida. Her husband had received an invitation to join the board of a new classical charter school, Mason Classical Academy, that was opening in Naples. The family was interested in the educational model, which they saw as an improvement over their public-school experience because of its rigor and focus on direct encounters with original texts. Byron Donalds joined Mason's board, and Erika Donalds took on an unpaid position doing accounting and administrative work to get the school launched. All three of their sons eventually enrolled. Their activism became more focussed. They weren't just advocating school choice. They wanted to expand the classical model across America.

Throughout the next few years, conflicts started emerging at Mason. Erika and Byron thought the school lacked proper oversight and planning. In 2019, a special counsel from the county school district found mismanagement and asked for two of Mason's board members to step down. (Mason has called this report a "sham," and another review, conducted by a law firm that the school hired, found no mismanagement.) Mason sued Erika Donalds and various others, alleging a conspiracy to take over Mason; Donalds filed a motion to dismiss the suit, which she's called frivolous. By then, the couple had pulled their kids out of the school—and Erika Donalds had started laying the groundwork for Optima. "I hate to see poor decision-making by a few bad actors damage our movement," she wrote in a letter to "Friends and Colleagues."

Donalds wanted to found and run classical charter schools, using the curriculum provided by [Hillsdale College](#), a small liberal-arts school in Michigan. (The virtual academy, which was founded later, does not use Hillsdale's curriculum.) So far, Optima has launched five brick-and-mortar schools, providing them with administrative services. (Two of the schools have since decided to become independent.) "These organizations are like multimillion-dollar businesses," Donalds told me. "I saw an opportunity to bring my skills into that industry." Today, Optima has figured out a number of ways to advance its ideas beyond its charter schools. It recently started doing professional-development training for the Tennessee Department of Education as a subcontractor, and hopes to consult with more state and local governments.

The open marketplace created by school-choice policies can occasionally blur the purpose of public money. The state of Mississippi is suing a virtual-reality company called Lobaki for using funds allocated to welfare to create a virtual-reality school. (Lobaki denies that it misused state welfare funds.) This is one piece of a dizzying corruption case embroiling a former governor,

a retired pro-wrestler, and the football Hall of Famer Brett Favre. One of Lobaki's co-founders, Vince Jordan, is now OptimaEd's chief technology officer. (Jordan denied all wrongdoing and emphasized that he is no longer involved with Lobaki.) When I brought this up to Donalds, she said that she had no knowledge of the lawsuit. The laws regulating charter schools can also be complicated. This summer, the Florida Department of Education wrote to Optima Academy, saying that the virtual school had over-enrolled non-local students and would have to pay a penalty of some four hundred and seventy thousand dollars. Donalds countered that the law doesn't apply to charter schools, and said that they haven't yet had to pay any fines.

In Florida, school choice was given a huge boost by the pandemic. Many families came away dissatisfied with the country's forced experiment in remote learning, but some found that they liked the model. OptimaEd has capitalized on that interest, pitching itself directly to homeschooling families and to churches. "Pastors, are you ready to take a more active role in providing quality school choice options to your congregation and community?" one flyer reads.

Support for school choice does not necessarily follow predictable racial and political lines. Black families tend to be [more supportive](#) of charter schools, education savings accounts, and vouchers and scholarships for private school than other racial groups, according to the journal *Education Next*. "Lots of Black families and Latino families are happy to send their kids to charter schools, because, in general, they want their kids to go to what they think is the best school, and they're going to leverage the options that are available to them," Liz Cohen, the policy director of FutureEd, a think tank at Georgetown, said. Optima's online academy reflects this diversity: last year, forty-six per cent of its students were nonwhite, and a fifth were economically disadvantaged. Erika Donalds's own family is mixed race: her husband is Black, and she is white. She says that she often gets stereotyped

in ways that don't reflect her family life. "The race card is played against people who espouse conservative values," she told me. "People who oppose our ideas try to discredit us by questioning our motives."

Donalds is deeply involved in the flourishing classical-education world. She's closely connected to Hillsdale, which has led a significant expansion of K-12 classical schools. She's on the board of the Classic Learning Test, a standardized exam that students can take instead of the SAT or ACT, mostly when applying to religious colleges or certain small liberal-arts schools—and, if they live in Florida, when applying for a state-funded college scholarship. Along with her husband, she has also helped raise the profile of classical education with right-wing figures who have significant public platforms. She has given tours of the virtual academy to the Fox News commentator Greg Gutfeld, the former Secretary of Education [Betsy DeVos](#), and the former Florida Governor Jeb Bush. The Donaldses hosted a 2022 winter fund-raiser called A Classical Christmas, featuring Donald and Melania Trump as the star guests; all tickets came with a photo op with the former President and First Lady.

And yet Donalds has also discovered that V.R. education, in particular, can be a hard sell in the classical-ed world, whose members generally pride themselves on preserving tradition, both in terms of curriculum and form. She agrees that in-person classical schooling is still the best option for kids. But, she says, "We cannot scale in-person, classical-style schools as quickly as the demand would like us to." (Great Hearts, a prominent network of classical schools, reported that nearly eighteen thousand students were on wait lists for its schools in the 2019-20 school year, for example.) Allergies to new technologies are not new: Donalds said that Adam Mangana, her co-founder, often talks about how Socrates was skeptical of writing because he thought it was inferior to oration. "Yes, this is an innovation," she said, of the virtual academy. "But it will allow more people to access what we believe is

the greatest type of education that's ever been offered."

There are about two hundred and fifty custom environments in which Optima Academy Online students and teachers can gather for lessons. These places do not exist in real life; they were built by OptimaEd's staff using virtual furniture, buildings, and natural elements. (This is one of the things OptimaEd sells: independent schools, for example, can pay to have access to these custom-built environments.) According to Donalds, Jeb Bush, the former governor of Florida and an early school-choice promoter, was wowed by his virtual-school demo, asking with wonder, "Where is this?" Nowhere, Jeb. It's nowhere.

This being a classical virtual-reality school, Optima's environments include settings in ancient Greece and Rome. Recently, the head of the online academy, Dan Sturdevant, and its academic dean, Kim Abel, took me on a tour of an "early Roman outpost." The images were closer to an animated video game than to documentary footage. We teleported past a Roman official's house, decked out with red-clay roof tiling, up some stairs to an open patio of black-and-white-checked marble floors, surrounded by Ionic columns and an ivy-covered railing. Here, a teacher might spawn a set of bleachers for students to sit during a lecture on a subject such as history or Latin. The head of the virtual school's history department, Jonathan Olson, has a Ph.D. in American religious history, and is responsible for verifying the historical fidelity of the ancient sites, bleachers notwithstanding.

Toward the end of the school year, I joined a sixth-grade science class on a field trip to an Everest base camp. The scene was elaborately staged: our group was surrounded by gray tents held up by bright orange poles; a sleeping bag was carefully tucked inside each tent, even though the students wouldn't actually be sleeping there. A whiteboard stood to our left in the snow, covered with colorful Post-its bearing scientific terms. The

teacher had taken a selfie of his avatar wearing an orange mountain-explorer jumpsuit and put it on the board. Wind whistled quietly somewhere in the background of my headset.

The teachers had set up weather-station equipment that a researcher might use, such as a compass and a barometer. The kids struggled with the lesson. When a teacher asked them where air pressure would be greatest—on the beach or at the top of a mountain—they weren't certain how to answer. The session was chaotic. On a normal day, teachers might press a button and forcibly "seat" the students to prevent them from moving around during a lesson. But, since this was supposed to be an interactive field trip, the kids were free to zoom around at will, which they did; one of them, who had styled his avatar with a helmet, walked right through me. Roughly a dozen sixth-graders were there, but it was hard to keep track of them with all the fidgeting.

In the next activity, we attempted to scale the Khumbu Icefall, which in real life is a deadly stretch on one route up Everest. The format was a cross between a quiz show and a video game. Using the teleport function on our handheld controllers, we moved along a line of chairs set up along the icefall, occasionally passing a floating notecard with a review question. But there was also a physical rule put in place: no one could move the controller in their left hand. Otherwise, they'd fall from the mountain and force the whole group back to base camp, where we'd have to start all over again.

At first, the students discussed the various dangers of the mountain. One suggested that we should all be quiet to prevent an avalanche, and then started screaming to demonstrate what not to do; a teacher quickly muted him. As the exercise got under way, the kids grew increasingly frustrated. "My teleport's broken!" one of them shouted. Another couldn't find the next chair in the line up the mountain. People must have been using their left-

hand controllers, because the whole group kept falling and getting reset to the beginning of the activity. Every time, a prerecorded message from one of the teachers would say, "Oh, man! Well, hopefully we won't make that mistake again." Several kids sped ahead of the rest of the group; it wasn't clear who was actually looking at the review questions.

Afterward, when I asked Sturdevant about what happened on the mountain, he described it as an opportunity for "virtue development." "There's a virtue in serving your peers well by not being a distraction," Sturdevant said. "There's a virtue in having self-discipline and being able to control your emotions. Those are the follow-up conversations that we will have with the students." Mangana, the virtual academy's chief innovation officer, acknowledged that the gaming aspect of the lesson may have overtaken the content. "Struggle is O.K.," he said. "Distraction is not. If there are ways in which the technology gets in the way, we'll correct those things."

If the lesson wasn't exactly polished, that may be because there are few schools trying to do what OptimaEd is doing. "If you look at V.R. in the classroom, it is very much still the Wild West," Aditya Vishwanath, the co-founder and C.E.O. of Inspirit, another V.R. education company, told me. In our conversation, Mangana and Sturdevant argued that the students would remember much more of the material after reviewing it in a context like the Everest field trip, where they were moving their bodies through a distinctive landscape. It's true that the students' ability to move around in a V.R. lesson could possibly offer a learning advantage over traditional school. "A lot of people think what makes V.R. incredibly special as a medium is the fidelity of the visuals," Jeremy Bailenson, the director of Stanford's Virtual Human Interaction Lab, told me. "Really, what makes V.R. special is the fact that the scene responds naturally to your body." And in specific circumstances—like when an in-person experience would be dangerous, impossible, counterproductive, or wildly expensive—V.R. can be great, he says.

Still, there are clear downsides. Bailenson, who has taught courses in V.R. to hundreds of college students, said that “it’s hard to fathom a world in which V.R. is the all-the-time medium of teaching just yet.” In the K-12 setting, he added, “Nobody has any idea, scientifically, about what happens when a child wears a V.R. headset for hours per day, over weeks and months on end.” In his lab, where adult researchers study V.R., there is a thirty-minute rule: everyone is required to take a break after thirty minutes in the headset, to take a drink or talk to a friend. V.R. use can cause simulator sickness, a kind of motion sickness that gives some people a nauseous, headachy feeling, like they might get when they’re riding in a car. Long-term V.R. use can also lead to something called reality blurring; Bailenson told me that, in some studies, when people stay in headsets for long periods, they have trouble distinguishing between real life and V.R. Olson, the virtual school’s history expert, told me as much, describing his attempts to move furniture around with a wave of his hand after a full eight-hour workday building environments for the academy. “If anything, I sometimes forget the laws of physics!” he said.

The other potential issue with V.R. school is the lack of community. Optima tries to foster school spirit: kids can decorate their avatar’s clothing with Optima’s logo and mascot (an owl), and they’re sorted into houses, Harry Potter-style. They also have a weekly virtual social hour. But, with the students scattered across Florida, they’re not going to make friends in the way they would at a traditional school; they can’t hang out after class, go to one another’s birthday parties, or host their classmates for sleepovers on the weekends.

Reducing the social importance of school in kids’ lives is perhaps a feature of the virtual school, not a bug. Several people I spoke with mentioned that many of the students had previously been bullied, and that V.R. school can be a haven for children with social anxiety. Diana Hill, a mom in the Orlando

area whose son Rylan was a sixth-grader at the virtual school last year, said that he struggled to make friends in traditional public school: "Not one time did he ask to invite someone to a birthday party." At Optima's virtual school, Rylan has thrived, his mom said. His parents work from home, and they like having him around, especially because Rylan used to be so anxious about the school day. "He doesn't have to worry about a school shooter coming in," Hill said. "He doesn't even have to worry about the drills anymore."

Hill told me that Rylan has plenty of in-person friends—but he met them at golf, or church, or in their neighborhood, rather than at school. As Mangana told me, "The schoolhouse is expected to provide so much. A good life for a student is more decentralized." ♦