

School Just a Click Away

by Pauline Vu

For most high school students, physical education classes mean crowded locker rooms, group showers and a P.E. teacher barking out orders.

For others, it's as simple and solitary as flipping on their home computer and logging on to the Internet.

Today's high school is being transformed by online learning, in which the equivalent of raising your hand in a class discussion might be posting a comment to the class' message board.

More courses are being offered online and in surprising varieties. In addition to digitally earning P.E. credits (by exercising on their own and having parents sign off on their exercise log), high school students can study horse management in Utah, calligraphy in Wisconsin and public speaking in Washington state.

The majority of statewide virtual schools, which mostly are geared toward high school students, offer courses that supplement traditional brick-and-mortar schools. But a growing number of virtual charter schools are offering high schoolers the option of earning their diploma the digital way, without ever stepping foot in a classroom.

There are now 24 states with statewide programs that offer credit for online courses, according to John Watson, researcher for the annual Keeping Pace report that tracks virtual programs.

And more states are hopping on the virtual bandwagon. This year, Missouri and South Dakota enacted laws paving the way for a statewide virtual learning program. In April, Michigan made an online class a high school requirement, starting with the class of 2011. Georgia, which had its inaugural virtual education program in the last school year, enacted a new law to allow for cyber charter schools, while Illinois will open its first public virtual elementary school this fall.

In the past, distance learning involved textbooks and videos. Some of today's virtual courses aren't too different, with whole classes logging in at the same time and using video and audio to watch a teacher presentation. But those programs are rare. The more common programs allow student to work at their own pace and time, whether that's 8 a.m. or 8 p.m.

The largest state programs are Utah's Electronic High School, which opened in 1993 and taught a course to about a third of the state's recent graduating class, and Florida Virtual School, which serves grades 6-12 and opened in 1997.

Utah's program has more than 52,000 students. Florida's program has 31,000 students and 65,000 course enrollments, the most in the country.

Many of the schools' students are making up credits, trying to graduate early, or taking classes their schools don't offer. Students in rural districts that don't offer Advanced Placement (AP) courses, for example, can take those classes online.

Other students are athletes or actors who don't have regular schedules. Some have medical problems that stop them from going to a regular school. Some are students displaced by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

School Just a Click Away (cont.)

by Pauline Vu

One of the most popular classes at Utah's and Florida's virtual schools is P.E. Florida students who would rather spend their in-class time in an AP course with a teacher in the flesh have flocked to the Florida Virtual School, where they study fitness online and follow an exercise regimen on their own, with their parents signing off to verify some sweating took place.

Cyber high schools that offer diplomas are also on the rise. According to the Center for Education Reform, an organization that promotes school choice, there are 148 cyber charter schools in 18 states. The schools have to test their students, as required by the federal No Child Left Behind law, and demonstrate gains in test scores.

In 2005, cyber charter schools BlueSky Charter School in Minnesota and the Monroe Virtual School in Wisconsin graduated their first classes. Monroe's class included a student who completed all four years by taking classes online.

This fall, the Insight School, an alternative school, will become Washington state's first fully virtual public school to offer a high school diploma.

Some programs, such as Utah's Electronic School, Florida Virtual School and BlueSky, develop their own curriculum. Monroe's classes are offered through online university programs, while the Insight School will buy its curriculum from private companies.

Virtual schools offer an eclectic array of electives. The Insight School will have classes in robotics and public speaking. BlueSky offers courses in baking and world cooking, which require critiques by family and friends and a digital camera to send pictures of the food to teachers.

Monroe students who take the piano class have to perform a recital for family and friends. Students who take the small engine repair class must have access to a small engine, such as a lawn mower. And students considering the calligraphy class shouldn't do it to improve their handwriting, the course description warns – there's an online handwriting class to take care of that.

Monroe principal Dan Bauer said online classes rely on motivated students with high reading skills. In some Monroe classes students receive textbooks in addition to working online, but they also have two teachers, one from the university and one from Monroe, with whom they are in constant contact via e-mail should they have questions.

The horse management class at Utah's Electronic High School works much the same way. Principal Richard Siddoway said districts couldn't offer a horse management class before the virtual school opened because there wasn't enough demand in one district. The day enrollment opened for the class, 37 Utah students enrolled. The next day, another 37 students from out-of-state enrolled. Now the class includes international students.

In the first semester, students learn basic horse management, such as feeding and grooming. In the second semester, they design a facility to house the horse.

Siddoway is bemused by the course's popularity. "We thought it was a little funny the class even existed," he said, but since its inception he has met students from all over the state who have taken the course and helped their parents design barns or stables.

School Just a Click Away (cont.)

by **Pauline Vu**

The cyber charter schools get their funding from the school district, receiving about the same amount of taxpayer support per pupil as traditional public schools. Most statewide programs are funded by the legislature, although the Florida Virtual School only receives state money when students pass their courses.

Not everyone finds the growth of online programs appealing. Virtual school programs in Wisconsin and Minnesota withstood lawsuits from those states' largest teachers unions, with the Wisconsin Education Association Council charging that Wisconsin Virtual Academy used parents instead of state-certified teachers as the primary educators. Judges ruled against the union.

Virtual school defenders say they're not trying to replace brick-and-mortar schools, and point out that virtual schooling is not for everyone. They also say students get just as much attention from teachers as they do at a traditional school through e-mail and telephone calls.

"It's high-tech but also very high-touch, is how we would describe it," said Julie Young, the president and CEO of Florida Virtual School. "It's as engaging, if not more engaging, than a traditional school."

<http://www.stateline.org/live/ViewPage.action?siteNodId=136&languageId=1&contentId=126973>