

Online Courses Aren't Just for Homeschoolers Anymore

by Kate Moser

If high school student Kelsey Speaks had taken all of her classes at her bricks-and-mortar school, she wouldn't now be three years into her Latin studies. Since junior high, Kelsey has enrolled in eight courses in a virtual classroom through Colorado Online Learning, a state-funded program. The junior at tiny La Veta High School in southern Colorado says taking courses online is a great choice. "It's allowed me to do things I wouldn't otherwise have been able to do," she says.

In addition to letting her take courses (for free) that her school doesn't offer, online learning has made her schedule flexible enough that she can captain the debate team, edit the yearbook, and do volunteer work as well. She also gets to study independently, which she enjoys.

Once considered the domain of home-schooled students, K-12 online learning is a fast-growing option for public school students in rural, urban, and suburban areas. Michigan lawmakers are likely to pass legislation soon that will require high school students to take one course online before they graduate.

"What happened is Michigan beat everyone to the punch," says Susan Patrick, president and CEO of the North American Council for Online Learning, a nonprofit based in Alexandria, Va. Ms. Patrick says more states will follow Michigan's lead as they realize the importance of online literacy in the 21st century.

Enrollment in online programs has been growing for about the past five years, says Bob Blomeyer, a researcher at Midwestern Regional Educational Laboratory (MREL), a nonprofit research center in Naperville, Ill. "The trend line is turning up at a really sharp angle, and that's why this way of teaching and learning needs to be taken a lot more seriously," Mr. Blomeyer says.

As of July 2005, 21 states had K-12 online learning programs, according to a large study by Learning Point Associates, of which MREL is a part. The programs report rapid growth, some by double-digit percentages every year. Utah and Florida have by far the biggest statewide online learning programs, with more than 35,000 students enrolled in Utah and 21,000 in Florida.

Students have a variety of reasons for taking courses online. Some need flexible schedules or can't come to school for medical or disciplinary reasons. Others retake classes they failed or enroll in specialized or advanced courses their schools don't offer.

In the 2002-03 school year, 9 percent of the nation's public schools reported having students enrolled in "distance education courses," which include classes on TV, says the National Center for Educational Statistics. Almost 70 percent of these school districts had online classes.

"The need just seems to be there," says Julie Young, president and CEO of Florida Virtual School, a state-funded program that she expects to grow by 40 to 60 percent next school year, based on past performance dating to 1997. One reason for Florida's need might be classroom size, Ms. Young says. "We have fairly overcrowded classrooms in Florida," she says. "It's not unusual to find math classes of 35 to 40 in some of the larger schools."

The current national emphasis on math and science in schools might also create a new relevance for online learning, says Tim Snyder, director of Colorado Online Learning. Virtual teachers could help ease the nationwide shortage of math and science teachers, he says.

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What Alex Keller likes most about taking all of his classes online is that there's no homework, really. He works on his classes at least four hours a day in his home south of Knoxville, Tenn., then does his chores and goes out to play with his border collie puppy.

Alex is completing seventh grade through Florida Virtual School because his family moved to Tennessee soon after the school year began. This way his studies have been uninterrupted, says his mom, Mindy Keller, who teaches an AP composition class for Florida Virtual School. But Alex is looking forward to next fall. "I'd like to make some friends for once," he says.

Online learning programs vary widely. Some are like old-fashioned correspondence courses, where the student rarely interacts with teacher or classmates. Others are highly interactive and include online discussions and frequent e-mail communication between teachers and students. For state-sponsored programs, the cost is free to those in state. Tuitions for out-of-state students, and for students at for-profit virtual schools, cost hundreds per course.

Many advocates say it makes sense to provide education to the millennial generation in a format they've grown up using. "They're very much accustomed to using it for recreation, for communication," says Liz Pape, CEO of Virtual High School, a Massachusetts nonprofit that provides online courses to K-12 schools around the world. "So now, if we train our teachers properly, they can use technology as a tool for delivering engaging education."

Proponents of K-12 online learning also say students can interact more with each other and experience deeper relationships with teachers in such classes. Some students have formed statewide poetry or world language clubs online. Florida Virtual School students produce an online newspaper.

From a small public high school in Forks, Wash., Liz Sanchez teaches a poetry-writing course to students all over the country as well as in Paraguay and China. Ms. Sanchez says her students communicate with each other about what's going on in their lives and cultures.

"There's a depth to it that doesn't always happen in the face-to-face class," Sanchez says. "Here they are in different time zones and different regions. I'm so continually moved by their ability to connect with each other. They do so quite honestly and respectfully."

"Choice" is another refrain online educators frequently use. "Why shouldn't a kid be able to take a class in contemporary Irish literature?" Sanchez says. "With the choices of technology, why shouldn't one of my students have that same opportunity?"

But the quality of K-12 online education varies just as its traditional equivalent does, says Parker of the North American Council for Online Learning. "We must ensure that our online offerings are the highest quality," she says. "We don't want to take the same old musty textbook, scan it, and put it up as an online course."

Funding online programs has caused controversy in some parts of the country in the past few years, especially in places where online enrollment siphons money from school districts.

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In Colorado, for example, the state is currently auditing one school district's online program that has grown rapidly since it opened this school year. Critics are concerned that a few fast-growing online programs are unmonitored and that some districts are taking state money away from others by attracting students with online courses. Jane Urschel, a director of the Colorado Association of School Boards, calls the growth a "cyber land grab" and says the entrepreneurial impulse of smaller, struggling school districts is understandable but needs regulation.

"The cause of these little school districts is really a noble one," Ms. Urschel says. "Many of them are dying on the vine because of numerous economic reasons. It's just that without a quality control process that gives us parameters, the student may not be getting what they need, and the tax dollars might not be being used in the best way."

Education researchers are just beginning to seriously study K-12 online learning, says Susan Lowes, director of research and evaluation at the Institute for Learning Technologies at Columbia University's Teachers College. She says existing research typically focuses on whether online learning is as good as classroom learning. "I think we now have gone way beyond that, or should have gone beyond that, to try to understand how it's different, both positively and negatively."

Most educational technology experts say what's most promising is a collaboration of traditional and online classes. "The future is a blended model," Patrick says.

A sampling of online learners and courses

Students' busy schedules are a top reason they choose to take online courses. "Being able to manage my own time and the fact that I can work around my schedule is a huge help," says Deborah Lynn, a high school junior who has taken AP macroeconomics through Florida Virtual School.

Originally from New York, Deborah lives with a host family in Florida so she can play ice hockey at a training facility. When she travels for games, she often misses school on Fridays or Mondays, which are big test-taking days, so she says it's easier to keep up in online courses than classroom courses.

Other students take online courses because their schools don't offer the courses they want to take. Kayla Clark, a junior at Brattleboro Union High School in Vermont, says she's wanted to be a veterinarian since she was 10 years old, growing up on her family's dairy farm. Now she's taking pre-veterinary medicine online through her school's membership in Virtual High School, a Massachusetts nonprofit that provides online courses to K-12 schools around the world.

Online teachers say they learn from students and adapt their curriculum when they need to. Also from Kayla's high school in Brattleboro, Steve Perrin teaches a course on the history of chemistry for Virtual High School. One of his students, a surfing enthusiast in Brazil, complained that the course was too Eurocentric. So Mr. Perrin is adding some material about Chinese explorers. "The kids do have an effect on the teachers," he says.

<http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0330/p14s02-legn.html>