

Virtual Schools Get Real

How online education is changing where, when and how kids learn.

by Claudia Graziano

IT'S A CHILLY WINTER MORNING, AND across the nation, thousands of kids are starting their school day—without actually leaving the house.

Instead, these students are logging on to the Internet to attend classes, chat with friends, conference with teachers and counselors, join online group activities, and even peruse digital yearbooks and school newspapers.

"The biggest difference between taking classes online and taking classes at a regular school is that you never actually see your classmates unless they go to your regular school," says 17-year-old Katie Batten, who enrolled in Florida Virtual School (FLVS) last year to accommodate her sometimes travel-intensive participation in Future Farmers of America. "But that can make classes easier because it removes a lot of distractions."

As an online institution that allows students to earn credits toward their high school diplomas, Florida Virtual School is not unique. In fact, virtual schools are becoming an integral part of public school systems nationwide. More than 200,000 students were expected to enroll in virtual schools for the 2003-2004 school year, according to a May 2003 *Education Week* special report. Actual enrollment numbers may be much higher. Nineteen states have statewide public virtual high schools in operation today, with several

other states operating virtual schools on a district level. In addition, countless private organizations are establishing their own online academies.

"Students enrolled in virtual schools represent a very small percentage of the total student population, but the reality is that their numbers have grown rapidly over the last three years, and will continue to grow just as rapidly," says Bill Thomas, director of educational technology for the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) in Atlanta. Thomas points to national education objectives such as reducing classroom sizes and broadening educational options for students in rural areas as key drivers of the virtual trend.

Classroom Supplement or Alternative Learning?

Often, state-funded and fully accredited virtual schools are largely viewed by administrators, parents and students as a way to supplement an existing school's curriculum. They give students—particularly those who attend smaller schools—access to a wide range of elective and advanced placement classes that might otherwise be unavailable to them. But, increasingly, virtual schools are positioning themselves as mainstream alternatives to both public and private schools, as well as alternatives to parent-led homeschooling.

Virtual schools, such as Monte Vista

Online Academy in Monte Vista, Colo., allow students to earn their diplomas at their own pace, without ever attending classes at a traditional brick-and-mortar school, adhering to a school-imposed schedule for completing coursework or "attending" virtual classes at an appointed time. Students earning diplomas from University of Nebraska-Lincoln Independent Study High School in Lincoln, Neb., must successfully complete at least 25 credit hours through its program regardless of the number of transfer credits accepted from other schools.

The advantages are clear: Virtual schools give students the opportunity to customize their education in ways that were previously impossible. Want to attend school in a different state without leaving home? Strike up friendships with classmates from other countries? Study American foreign policy, bioethics or business calculus? There are myriad virtual schools that can accommodate you. But virtual schooling isn't for everyone.

"Online schools aren't the best environment for every single student, but neither are traditional schools," says Bruce Friend, chief administrative officer for the Florida Virtual School, based in Orlando.

For starters, students have to be self-motivated. Students who don't do well in



PHOTOGRAPHY BY KVIN KOLCZYNSKI

Bruce Friend
Chief Administrative Officer,
Florida Virtual School,
Orlando, Fla.

traditional schools because they lack the discipline or desire to complete homework assignments aren't going to do well in virtual schools either. But for students who need more flexibility in choosing when they can complete their studies—such as students with illnesses, disabilities or other personal circumstances, like daytime jobs—virtual schools are an attractive option.

“The success of the student really depends on a variety of factors,” the SREB’s Thomas says. These factors include the quality and design of the course, the way the instructor conducts the course, and how much interaction there is among students and teachers. Each factor greatly influences whether a particular student will thrive in an online learning environment.

Whereas five years ago, virtual schools had drop-out rates of as much as 50 percent, completion rates are now relatively high, Thomas adds. “Schools have realized that students need a lot of contact and support, whether they’re being taught online or in person,” he says.

Technology, too, has made significant strides toward improving the virtual school experience. Today’s online courses feature self-instructional applets, groupware and collaboration features, and gaming-style interactive learning. Faster bandwidth and speedier PCs have also made a big difference. Students are less likely to lose patience with their online studies if they’re not waiting for pages to download, Thomas says.

Different Schools for Different Students

With hundreds of K-12 courses now offered through virtual schools across the nation, students as well as parents and administrators, can choose a curriculum based on a variety of work environments and learning styles. No single model has yet emerged for providing online K-12 courses or for integrating traditional and virtual schooling. Consequently, virtual



schools vary widely in their approaches to instruction, administration and technology.

A host of differences abound. Some schools, like the Ohio Virtual Academy in Maumee, Ohio, closely follow the homeschool model, serving students who complete their studies from home under a parent’s guidance. Other schools, such as the Plano Independent School District (ISD) eSchool in Plano, Texas, follow the traditional school model, serving students who regularly attend neighborhood schools but who elect to complete one or more courses virtually, either by working independently from home or from their school’s computer lab.

Virtual schools also differ in the grade levels they teach, the curriculum and services they offer, and how they are funded. The Plano ISD eSchool and Florida Virtual School, for example, cater primarily to middle and high school students, while the Ohio Virtual Academy caters primarily to elementary school students. Both the Plano ISD eSchool and FLVS rely on state-credentialed instructors to develop their own curriculum, while

the Ohio Virtual Academy uses a standards-driven national curriculum.

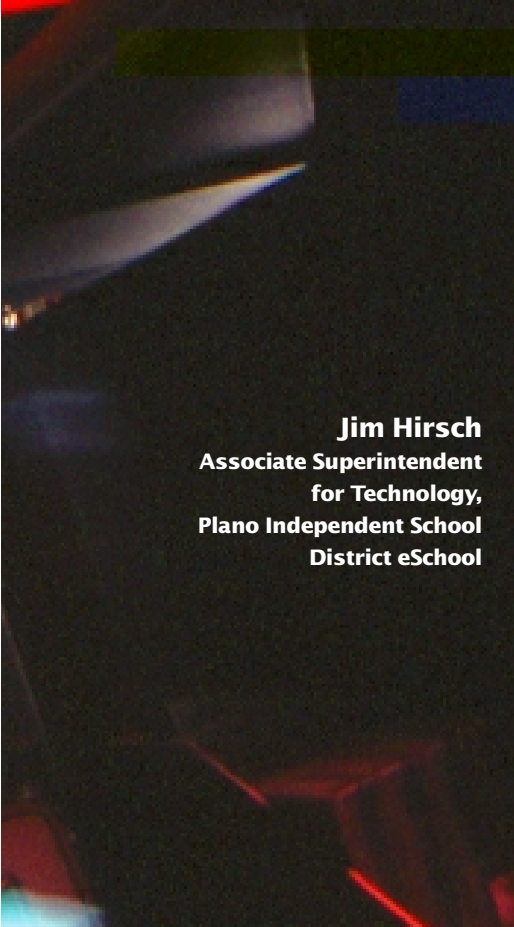
Ohio’s Virtual Academy

When it comes to virtually schooling K-8 students, it’s *how* students are learning—as opposed to *what* they are learning—that tends to raise eyebrows.

“It’s a myth that these kids are sitting in front of a computer all day,” says Susan Stagner, head of school for the Ohio Virtual Academy. “Only about 20 percent of student work is done online during the ‘foundation years,’” Stagner explains, addressing one of the key concerns many parents have about virtual schools. In grades five and higher, the percentage of online versus offline work is never more than 50 percent—something Stagner says sets Ohio Virtual Academy apart from other virtual schools.

Among other key differentiators is the fact that Ohio Virtual Academy, a public charter school, provides its more than 2,200 students with books, study materials and all necessary computing equipment, including a desktop PC, printer, monitor and software. “In addition

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CRAIG BUCK



Jim Hirsch
Associate Superintendent
for Technology,
Plano Independent School
District eSchool

Academy's students previously schooled at home, most students take the social transition in stride. For students transferring in from traditional schools, the initial transition may be difficult.

"The first year was a big adjustment for my daughter," says Deborah Pittman, a Toledo parent whose sixth grader is currently completing her second year at the Ohio Virtual Academy. "I think she initially thought this was going to be a vacation."

In actuality, many of eSchool's 813 students complete their virtual studies on school campuses, either during designated study periods or before and after school from the school library or computer lab. However, students are free to complete their virtual coursework wherever and whenever they like. "Our design is to deliver anytime, anywhere instruction," Hirsch says.

Now in its third year of operation, eSchool's student population has

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—Jim Hirsch, Plano ISD eSchool

to the computing equipment, we probably send close to 90 pounds of instructional material per student," Stagner says.

Students may keep their computing equipment during the summer months provided they're enrolled for the fall term. The school even provides reimbursement for dial-up Internet service. (Students' families must pay for broadband connectivity.)

Further, Ohio Virtual Academy students must report in-person for statewide annual assessment tests and must conference with teachers by phone on a biweekly basis. During the month of August, parents are encouraged to attend training and orientation meetings at one of 43 statewide locations. Optional monthly outings give students a chance to meet their virtual classmates and help facilitate structured social development.

"Many of our students are involved in external social structures—sports, clubs and community activities—so, without a doubt, they receive plenty of peer interaction," Stagner says. With approximately 40 percent of Ohio Virtual

However, Pittman says her daughter is now excelling as a student in ways that far exceed her performance in the traditional public school system. "We had real concerns about the school she was attending," she recalls. "We're not in a position financially to put our kids in private school, so until something better comes along, this is it."

Plano's eSchool for Independent Study

Unlike Ohio's Virtual Academy, which prohibits students from enrolling in both its virtual school and another school, Plano ISD's eSchool encourages it. Virtual courses offered through the eSchool are an integral part of the Plano Independent School District learning curriculum, intended to supplement students' traditional classroom learning, as well as provide supplementary curriculum for public schools throughout the state of Texas.

"Our goal is not to replace students' experiences during the school day," says Jim Hirsch, Plano ISD eSchool's associate superintendent for technology. "Our goal is to give students other educational options that work within the traditional school system."

more than tripled in size, attracting high school students as far away as Tanzania. However, the vast majority of eSchool students reside in Texas, as transferring course credits to more distant schools can become tricky.

"High schools within Texas are obliged to accept credits from other schools," Hirsch explains. "Once you get out of state, it's really up to the individual school whether or not to accept the credits."

Courses are offered year-round and must be completed within 6- or 18-week semesters. Students are not required to meet at a particular time or conference with teachers on a regular basis. The completion rate for students is roughly 80 percent—comparatively high, according to Hirsch.

"Offering courses is always a numbers game," he explains. "If you have only five students interested in taking AP German, you're not going to be able to hire a teacher to teach this course. You could send the student to another school for the course, but then transportation becomes a factor." For many schools, virtual courses represent a less expensive alternative to offering certain electives, says Hirsch.

Florida Virtual School

In fact, the economics surrounding virtual schools—particularly those meant to supplement existing educational models—represent key differences among such schools.

By far the nation's largest virtual school with 18,000 students projected to enroll for the 2003-2004 school year, Florida Virtual School has become an archetype for public funding as well as online learning. Last summer FLVS was officially recognized as an integral part of Florida's K-12 school system, allowing it to receive its funding based on a formula for educational accountability similar to that of traditional schools.

Begun as a pilot project in 1997, FLVS used to rely on line-item appropriation in the state's annual budget. Now, "We're truly here to stay as a statewide program," Friend explains.

To date FLVS has received numerous

awards for its curriculum and staff, including the United States Distance Learning Association's Excellence in Distance Learning Programming award for the past two years.


The school, which receives roughly \$8 million annually in funding, offers more than 75 courses to middle and high school students. Florida residents enroll for free, while out-of-state and international students must pay about \$800 per credit to enroll. Regardless of the tuition, FLVS attracts students from as far away as China and Venezuela.

"Our mission is to provide the best courses and the highest quality instruction," Friend says. He adds that, unlike some other virtual schools, all of FLVS' instructors are state certified in their subject areas. Another point of differentiation: "Our instructors develop their own curriculum—we don't teach canned courses," he adds.

Students seem to respond well to

FLVS's methodology: Fewer than five percent drop out, according to the school.

"I think virtual school is actually easier than regular school," says Katie Batten, an 11th grader currently taking five courses through FLVS and two through her regular high school in Palm Coast, Fla. "For most of my classes, I can turn in the same assignment up to three times to get a better grade, and the teacher usually gives me feedback on how to make it better."

Plano ISD's Hirsch says his students also respond well to virtual schooling's one-on-one approach to learning. "What we hear most often is that students feel the quality of teaching is much higher [than teaching at traditional schools] because of the significant amount of time that gets devoted to each student," he says. While virtual schools may not be for everyone, they're likely to become permanent fixtures in many students' lives. 

The Virtual Downside

Despite the promise of broader course selection and more flexible learning options, virtual schools have their drawbacks. For one, critics allege that virtual schools—many of which charge enrollment fees—may be widening the nation's "digital divide."

"Schools that are making online courses available to their students tend to be schools in wealthier suburban districts," says Bill Thomas, director of educational technology at the Southern Regional Education Board in Atlanta. Additionally, many administrators are concerned that public funding for virtual schools may divert tax dollars away from existing brick-and-mortar schools. Perhaps more worrisome, Thomas says, is the possibility that public funds may end up in the hands of private for-profit companies offering online courses. "The [virtual school] trend is still in its infancy," he notes. "Funding issues have yet to be addressed successfully."

Another concern surrounding virtual schools is the difficulty they present to kids who concurrently attend traditional schools.

"One of the biggest challenges for students who take virtual classes in addition to their regular classes is keeping up with their studies," says Dr. Robert Kozma, emeritus director

and principal scientist at SRI International's Center for Technology in Learning in Menlo Park, Calif. "The immediacy of their regular courses tends to make those courses a priority, so staying on track with the virtual classes can be a struggle."

Kozma, who authored *The Virtual High School: Teaching Generation V* based on his participation in a five-year study of a national virtual high school pilot project, points out another challenge: While student-teacher interactions tend to be much more frequent and meaningful, student-peer interactions tend to be far less so. "It's a solitary self-study experience," Kozma says. Despite online study groups, chat rooms, and occasional field trips and other outings, "You're just not going to get to know your fellow students very well," he notes. Still, for many students and their parents, the positive benefits of virtual schooling far outweigh the drawbacks.

Kozma's study, which compared students taking the same courses in virtual and traditional school settings, found no statistical differences between students' test scores and course grades. However, virtual school students often scored higher in "information management," an assessment that measures how students find and use subject material.