



Students pick up pace with online classes

By Phuong Le
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CHICAGO -- Joelle Contorno wanted to do it all in her last year of high school -- drama club, band, student council, part-time work -- and still take the classes she needed to graduate.

Juggling a packed schedule, the 17-year-old turned to cyberspace, joining a growing number of students nationwide logging into classes from the comforts of home.

Contorno worked at her own pace, sometimes in pajamas or late at night, when she took her first civics class with the state-run Illinois Virtual High School. Now she's enrolled in an advanced history class that her high school in the Chicago suburbs doesn't offer.

Illinois' Internet school was started in 2001 to give students from rural, small or low-performing schools a chance to take economics, oceanography or other courses not offered at their own schools. Enrollments in the cyberschool tripled this year, from 410 to 1,230.

Increasingly, such online schools are being embraced by students not as a replacement for their local brick-and-mortar academy but as a valuable adjunct. Nationwide, about 40,000 to 50,000 kindergarten-through-12th grade students were enrolled in online courses in 2001, according to a study by WestEd, an educational research group.

Those numbers may have since doubled, though tracking all such activity in local districts is difficult, said Raymond Rose, vice president of the Concord Consortium, an education research and development group. He estimates that more than half of the states now offer some form of virtual education.

Beyond that, 67 virtual charter schools in 17 states served 21,000 students last year, according to the Center for Education Reform, a charter school advocacy group in Washington.

In Florida's Virtual School, which has mushroomed from just a few dozen students seven years ago to an expected 14,000 this year -- including hundreds from across the nation and several foreign countries who pay tuition -- the motto is "any time, any place, any path, any pace.

" "The 'pace' part really caught my attention," said Jasmine Buckhannon, a 15-year-old student of English and chemistry in the Florida Internet school who also attends a

regular brick-and-mortar school by day. "In the regular public school you didn't have any time that you could spend. You had to have it then, there, right there."

Buckhannon was assigned "Of Mice and Men" by John Steinbeck and "Great Expectations" by Charles Dickens for her English class and was mailed a chemistry kit with goggles, beakers and test tubes so she could do experiments in her kitchen.

The challenge at the Florida Virtual School is to find enough certified teachers to keep up with demand. The 60 teachers hired this summer give the school a faculty of 150 who work from home.

In Illinois, students use the Internet school to make up classes, take advanced courses such as calculus that are not available at their school or to juggle school with sports and work. Contorno took her online civics course because she didn't want to drive to a nearby town this summer.

Jon Kilgore taught the class while 90 miles away in Chenoa, Ill. -- using a laptop computer and wireless Internet connection from his front porch or kitchen. On a typical day, he pored over e-mail from students, helped one with a computer question and downloaded assignments that students e-mailed him.

Most communication is electronic, but Kilgore also called Contorno and her father several times during the summer class. She e-mailed him every other week. Contorno said she's still trying to adjust to writing out her responses rather than saying what she thinks. And it's hard not knowing who her classmates are, since they live throughout the state.

"It's good and bad. I miss that I can't talk to my friends, but I'm still learning the same material," she said. Gail Purkey, a spokeswoman for the Illinois Federation of Teachers, said she worries that the personal connection between teacher and student gets lost in cyberspace.

And indeed, spontaneity sometimes suffers online. But discussions are just as lively and sharp, said Susan Thetard, who teaches at University High School in Bloomington, Ill., and runs an online introduction-to-theater course. Being online can encourage shy students to participate, and "you can see them open up more," she said.

Doris McManus, an English teacher in Fort Pierce, Fla., with 20 years experience, has become a big fan of online teaching since she started doing it a couple of years ago. She doesn't worry about discipline problems and gets to know her students better, even without face-to-face communication. "We have more time to get one on one with the student," she said.

Still, cyberclasses aren't for everyone, said Jill Fearday, guidance director at Barrington High School in the Chicago suburb. "Anytime students think of online, they think, 'I'm going to sit at home, in front of the computer and cruise through this,' " Fearday said. "It's not. It's difficult."

