

ONLINE COURSES CLICKING AS HOT TREND FOR STUDENTS

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19 July 2005

The road to Tel Aviv borders on desolation, bleak desert terrain traversed by ungodly reptiles in the Holy Land.

But Elon Richman, a 16-year-old junior at Miami Beach Senior High, didn't have time for exploring. He was hurrying to get to a relative's house in the city - because his Spanish homework was due in Coral Gables in a few hours.

"If someone at the house has Internet access, I can do my assignment for my instructor to grade in the morning," he said.

Elon is one of about 200 high school students in the district who are taking online courses this summer through the Miami-Dade Virtual School, a franchise of the state-funded program. Virtual school allows students to take more than 80 classes - including advanced placement courses - while on summer vacation or during the regular school year.

Florida Virtual School, which started in 1997 and enrolled about 33,000 students statewide in 2004-05, mirrors a national trend in which a growing number of students are plugging into cyberlearning. According to a March report by the National Center for Educational Statistics, an estimated 328,000 students around the country took distance-learning classes in the 2002-03 school year, the most current data given.

In Miami-Dade, the program has increased steadily in popularity from 120 students since its inception in 2000 to an expected 1,200 at the end of this year. Middle and high schoolers can take classes such as AP calculus, geography and even physical education from home or abroad, instead of sitting in a classroom.

"We've expanded from six to 12 teachers," said Joann Hampton of the Miami-Dade Virtual School. "Every year there is a flood of more enrollments."

For the past five weeks, Maria Cruz has logged on to a computer from her Coral Gables home to cyberteach Elon and grade his Spanish assignments. She also works with 19 other students through the virtual school.

'A NEW CHALLENGE'

"I grew up when there weren't computers around," said Cruz, who recently retired after 37 years in Miami-Dade classrooms. "I was looking for a new challenge."

So she signed up and is paid to teach online.

Educators in other Florida districts are utilizing the online program, mainly to replace traditional summer school classes.

In Broward County, where summer school was eliminated several years ago, about 1,500 students are now enrolled in online courses offered by the Broward Virtual School, said school official Anne O'Connell.

In Tampa, officials began using a summer online curriculum five years ago after the traditional program was cut back.

Proponents say the virtual schools provide students with a more varied and personally tailored curriculum than traditional classroom offerings. And, they added, it is a cost-efficient teaching alternative.

“Virtual schools give students a wider range of courses and more flexibility to complete their assignments,” said Ann Flynn, director of education technology at the National School Boards Association. “Not every student is able to be present in a classroom.”

That includes world travelers like Elon, who is taking his third online course. He says the program allows him to get a jump on finishing some core requirements.

“Since I’m getting this out of the way, I can take my second Spanish course next year,” he said in a phone interview from Israel, where he is visiting his mother.

But the cyberlink between Elon and Cruz sends jolts through some traditional educators who question the effectiveness of online learning, as well as its accessibility to underserved students in rural and lower-income school districts.

Most of the students enrolled in Miami-Dade’s program attend some of the county’s higher-performing schools. Among the most popular cyberclasses: physical education and health.

“A majority of our students are probably upper-middle class,” said Miami-Dade program coordinator Diane Kamenz. “We’ve started a campaign to get students from lower-income schools involved in the virtual school, but many of [their home] schools are simply not aware of the program.”

Only about 25 percent of virtual school students statewide attend rural and low-performing schools, according to officials at the Florida Virtual School.

They also say minority enrollment is increasing. This year, about 10,600 minority students are in the state’s online program.

Meanwhile, Elon says some people may have a misconception about virtual school courses.

“People automatically assume the classes are easy,” Elon said. “But that’s the furthest thing from the truth.”

The self-paced courses allow students to frame their schedule and completion date. Most of them can be repeated up to three times, Cruz said. Educators believe by allowing online assignments to be repeated, students gain a better understanding of the material.

SOME DOUBTERS

Not everyone is convinced, though. Officials at the American Federation of Teachers union have launched a review of distance-education courses.

“These courses can definitely provide content beyond the scope of what students usually encounter, but we want to make sure they meet the same standard as traditional classes,” said Kathy McGuigan, the union's assistant director of educational issues.

Joretta Hawkins, who began teaching English on the Internet two years ago, questions whether cyberlearning can provide the same social education that can be found in brick-and-mortar classrooms.

“Students don't get to interact online,” Hawkins said. “As far as replacing people gathering in the classroom, that should never happen.”

Bruce Friend, the Florida Virtual School's chief administrative officer, says the program is not trying to replace traditional school settings.

“We have a more blended approach to combine online and traditional learning to enhance the educational environment,” he said.

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