



# STATE LEGISLATURES

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## Clicking through classes (Cover Story)

By Jane Carroll Andrade  
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Moving can be stressful for any teenager. But when 15-year-old Kaitlyn Parrott began high school near her new home in Lee County, Fla., she was traumatized to the point of losing the will to live.

"It was a nightmare from day one," said her mother, Lynn Parrott.

The new school didn't measure up academically, it couldn't accommodate Kaitlyn's learning disorder along with her high IQ, and she was harassed by classmates.

Although Lynn Parrott had always been opposed to the "isolating" experience of home schooling, out of desperation she pulled Kaitie out of her new school and enrolled her in the Florida Virtual School. To her surprise, she found that although Kaitlyn takes all of her classes over the Internet from a home computer, she is getting "an entire educational experience."

Kaitlyn is one of thousands of students nationwide opting to take some or all of their courses online. A study released in March by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics estimates that there were 328,000 enrollments in distance education courses among students regularly enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools in 2002-03. (The study measured course enrollments as opposed to students, so students enrolled in multiple courses were counted for each course.)

According to Susan Patrick, director of the Office of Educational Technology for the U.S. Department of Education, 15 states provide virtual schools, "and that number is rising." Furthermore, she says, there is some sort of e-learning taking place in 25 percent of schools nationwide.

### ONLINE DEFINED

Online education--also referred to as e-learning and virtual learning--falls under the larger category of distance learning, meaning students and teachers are in different locations. Virtual or cyber schools refer to the entities that deliver instruction, often over the Internet, but also through two-way video conferencing. E-learning can be synchronous, where students work with a teacher and possibly other students in "real time," or asynchronous, where students work at their own pace on their own time.

"The virtual school world is a fast-growing new phenomenon," says Mickey Revenaugh, vice president of state relations for Connections Academy, a private company that contracts with public schools, charter schools and school districts in eight states to provide a full virtual curriculum for students in kindergarten through ninth grade.

Revenaugh attributes the increase in virtual learning to three trends: the increasing sophistication of technology, which helps personalize learning; the trend toward school choice and the popularity of charter schools; and the increase in the number of families choosing home schooling because they want a more individualized approach for their child.

Advocates of online education tout that individualized approach as a key reason many parents, students and schools are going the virtual route. A July 2004 Department of Education report on virtual schools cites enhanced communication between teachers and students and the ability to accommodate different learning styles as potential benefits to online learning.

"A virtual classroom meets the needs of individual students much more than in a traditional classroom," says Revenaugh.

Julie Young, executive director of Florida Virtual School--the largest statewide, publicly funded virtual school in the nation with 21,000 students agrees. She says that students, in essence, have a teacher to themselves. They can ask questions or discuss issues one on one with their teachers--via email, telephone and other means--without fear of embarrassment.

"We find that the student who sat in the back of the classroom and never said a word in class will come alive in the online environment," she says.

Another advantage, she adds, is that students can work when they're at their peak, whether that's at 6 a.m. or 10 p.m.

Kaitlyn Parrott, like many teenagers, is a night owl. She does most of her schoolwork at night, when the house is quiet. She finds her course work challenging, yet manageable, because she gets lots of help.

"I think it's harder material, but it's a lot easier to understand," she says. "I'm doing stuff in my algebra class right now that never would be taught in a regular school because they don't have enough time to explain it."

She says her teachers provide links to a variety of helpful Web sites. "They give a lot more examples than the textbooks do," she explains.

Kaitlyn's mother, Lynn, is amazed by the hands-on nature of the online program.

"My greatest fear as a parent was that I didn't want Kaitlyn interacting with a computer all day, because you miss life," she says.

But Kaitlyn takes everything from personal fitness to biology online. For her fitness course, she had to design and keep a log of an ongoing exercise program. In biology, she designed her own sports drink, using readily available ingredients.

And even though she's never met them in person, Kaitlyn feels she really knows her teachers. "They send me pictures of their children and vacations," she reports. "And every time I call, I don't have to say, 'Hi, this is Kaitlyn Parrot,' I just say, 'Hi, this is Kaitie,' and they know who it is."

## BRIDGING THE EDUCATION DIVIDE

Policyinakers are also looking to distance education to help fulfill some of the provisions of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, particularly those requiring school districts to provide highly qualified teachers and offer school choice. Virtual schools can provide an alternative for families like the Parrotts who are not satisfied with their local schools, and they can provide teachers and classes otherwise not available in local brick-and-mortar schools--all without the transportation headaches.

The NCES study found that 80 percent of public school districts said that offering courses not available at their schools is one of the most important reasons for having distance education. Half the respondents cited distance learning as very important in making advanced placement or college-level courses available to all students.

Indeed, some states are pushing distance learning as a solution for small school districts struggling to fill those gaps with qualified teachers, primarily in rural areas.

Mississippi and Kentucky are among states with state-run, tuition-based online schools. The Mississippi On Line Learning Institute was formed to offer advanced placement and foreign language classes after a state survey found that many districts were not offering such courses because of the limited number of students and difficulty hiring teachers, according to Dr. Susan Rucker, executive assistant to the state education superintendent for instructional programs and services.

The Kentucky Virtual High School opened in January of 2000 for much the same reason.

Representative Joe Pickens, chair of the Florida House Education Appropriations Committee, says Florida Virtual School exists largely to make a wide variety of course offerings available to students who otherwise would not have the opportunity to take them.

"I'm from a rural district, so obviously I am very interested in students in very small, rural districts having the same course offerings available to them as students in larger high schools," he says.

Texas and South Dakota are also among states ramping up efforts to use technology as an additional resource for educators and students.

Representative Kent Grusendorf, who chairs the Texas House Education Appropriations Committee, is spearheading a wide-ranging technology effort called the Texas e-

Learning Initiative. Among other things, he hopes to "provide a framework that allows any student in Texas to take advantage of any [online] program, full- or part-time, operating anywhere in the state."

South Dakota took a unique approach to providing the infrastructure needed for distance learning. In 1996, then-Governor Bill Janklow--recognizing the need to share resources because of the state's sparse population and limited educational resources--used prison inmates to wire every school in the state for two-way video conferencing and the Internet.

Because declining enrolment is a "huge issue" in South Dakota, according to Senator Ed Olson, chair of the Senate Education Committee, technology could be a way to consolidate schools, as well as to keep some schools alive.

"Having a virtual school will have the potential to address that ranch family who's 25 miles away from anybody," he says.

#### WHO ARE THESE CYBER STUDENTS?

According to the NCES study, most of the enrollments in distance education courses--68 percent--were high school students. Twenty-nine percent of enrollments were in combined or ungraded schools, 2 percent were in middle or junior high schools, and 1 percent were in elementary schools.

The DOE's Patrick says students enrolled in virtual schools tend to be high-performers who want to take advanced courses, or they may be students who are struggling with behavioral challenges, special needs or physical limitations.

"Online education is particularly helpful for students at both ends of the spectrum," she says.

Since these kids work largely over the computer, are they tempted to cheat?

"Everyone has the same question: How do you know that the child is doing the work?" says Pickens. "And the answer is, you know."

Pickens' wife Linda taught honors biology at Florida Virtual School, he says, and because of the one-on-one interaction with her students, she got to know them so well she could tell instantly whether the work was theirs.

Young concurs. Florida Virtual School has an extensive accountability system in which teachers are required to contact students and parents by phone once a month. They also give oral exams during phone calls to make sure the student is doing the work. In addition, every phone call and email is documented.

"Because you're in an electronically mediated environment, you actually see more one-on-one communication between student and teacher," she says. "It's almost easier to catch a student cheating in an online environment than in a classroom setting."

#### VIRTUAL CHALLENGES

Not everyone, however, embraces distance education wholeheartedly. Colorado Senator Sue Windels, chair of the Senate Education Committee, worries about at-risk students, districts that are losing students and online accountability.

She fears that online schools could be "a stepping stone to dropping out," especially for high schoolers. She is wary of glossy brochures asking students if they're tired of getting up early and whether they'd like to work at their own pace.

"Then they get online and find it's not that easy," she says. "To be successful in an online program, you have to have 'the morn factor,'--a very dedicated parent willing to oversee your work."

Windels supports Colorado's supplemental, or part-time, online school, but there are at least 15 full-time cyber schools operating in the state, some run by school districts, others by private companies. Full-time attendance in online schools in the state jumped from 166 students in 2000-01 to nearly 4,000 in 2004-05, according to the state Department of Education. The state pays for students attending virtual schools, spending \$20 million in 2004-05. Windels and others are concerned that school districts are losing students to online schools--and the state funds that go with them. Some superintendents have responded by creating their own online programs in order to keep students-and money--in their districts.

Accountability is another concern. Windels became alarmed after reading an Education Week article listing Colorado as one of the states with the least amount of online oversight, and studies showed that the state's cyber students were repeating grades more often and scoring significantly lower in math than their brick-and-mortar counterparts. She introduced a bill that would have, among other things, established a division of online learning within the state DOE, but ran into "huge opposition" from for-profit vendors because she proposed financing the division with up to 3 percent of per pupil expenditures. She took the language out of the bill, but feels she did raise awareness with the DOE, which has since provided criteria for school districts to address when offering online programs. She also asked the state auditor to perform a full-program audit of the state's online schools.

Florida answered the accountability question in part by operating Florida Virtual School under a performance-based funding model. Rather than receive funds based solely on attendance, the online school receives funds only for those students who successfully complete a given course.

Florida Virtual School has also worked to avoid competing with traditional schools. For one, the online school does not grant diplomas, according to Young. The school primarily attracts students who are supplementing their education with a class here and there.

"FLVS is designed to fill gaps [in education]," she says. "We wanted to create a cooperative angle rather than a competitive one."

Although some kinks remain to be worked out, it's clear that distance learning is gaining ground.

"I think that virtual learning is something that every legislature owes their constituents," says Pickens. "If they haven't started investigating and planning for a public virtual school in their state, they need to start yesterday, because the possibilities are endless."

Policymakers should think outside their own experiential boxes, advises Patrick.

"Our biggest barrier is our own memory of what school was like when we went," she says. "We expect to see rows of desks lined up with a teacher standing in front of the room. If you walk into a business--a doctor's office or a hardware store--they look a lot different than they did in 1950. If you walk into a classroom, it looks a lot like it did in 1950-even 1850."

For Lynn Parrott, the once skeptical but now huge fan of online education, Florida Virtual School has opened up a whole new world for her daughter, and for others like her who have difficulty in certain traditional schools.

"Basically, they had little squares and either you fit in that little square or you didn't. And I believe children don't fit neatly into little squares," she says.

"I found that FLVS is designed for students who don't fit into perfect little squares, yet still enables them to have a wonderful educational experience, which is what the state guarantees us."

#### A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A CYBER STUDENT

One of the advantages of going to school online, say proponents, is the flexibility it offers. Some students, like Emily, an elementary school student who attends Connections Academy, a private company that provides online learning, structure their course work during the day. Others, like Kaitlyn, a high school sophomore at the Florida Virtual School, do most of their work at night.

A typical day for Emily starts in the morning, when she works with her "learning coach"--her morn, Sarah--on online fraction problems. After a spelling lesson, which includes taking a quiz on the computer, and a lesson in keyboarding skills, she heads out for a half-mile run with her friend Hannah and their morns. The run is part of her physical education lesson as well as preparation for the Presidential Physical Fitness Award.

Meanwhile, Kaitlyn's morning is spent walking her dog. If it's Monday, she'll work on biology. In the afternoon, Kaitlyn usually joins her morn on an errand or "field trip," or she babysits neighborhood kids. She also works a few hours a week at the Publix super market. After work, she feeds her pets. Kaitlyn does most of her schoolwork in the evenings, often working until midnight. "I am definitely a night person," she says.

Emily's afternoons, on the other hand, are spent on schoolwork. For lunch, she helps her morn make soup as part of her Home Life course. Then she logs onto the Science Forum, where she counts four responses to her post about favorite rocks and minerals. After curling up on the couch and reading, she prepares for tomorrow's field trip to the history museum.

Field trips and Girl Scouts are among the ways Emily socializes, something Kaitlyn's mom, Lynn, worried about when Kaitlyn enrolled in Florida Virtual School last year.

But Kaitlyn says she makes plenty of friends through skateboarding and working at Publix. With all that flexibility, is there temptation to procrastinate?

"I have," admits Kaitlyn, "but getting caught back up isn't a lot of fun, so I pretty much usually stay on pace."