

Education Week

To Tailor Schedules, Students Log In to Online Classes

BY SEAN CAVENAGH

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Some students crave a class that their school doesn't offer. Others want to fortify their high school transcripts before college-admissions officers review those records.

Jessica B. Byerly, 17, had her own reasons for signing up for an online course as a junior: Her schedule was so packed with academic classes the previous year, she was forced to give up her lunch period. She wanted it back.

"I was stressed out all the time," recalled Ms. Byerly, now a senior at University High School in Normal, Ill. Taking an online Advanced Placement literature and composition course outside the traditional school day "gave me a lot of options," she said. "I liked the flexible scheduling of it."

Interest in online school courses is surging nationwide, especially at the high school level, according to those who follow trends in educational technology. Much of that demand is coming not from home-school students or students seeking to take all their courses online, but from those, like Ms. Byerly, who enroll in just one or two classes a year to meet a particular academic need or resolve a scheduling hang-up.

"They're filling in the blanks," William R. Thomas, the director of educational technology for the Southern Regional Education Board, said of students' interests in online learning. The SREB, a research and policy organization in Atlanta, supports online education ventures in its 16 member states.

"We've got an alternative way to deliver high-quality courses and teachers," Mr. Thomas said. "This is an effort that can and should grow."

Online courses have become so popular, in fact, that students simply regard them as another part of their school day—rather than as work to be performed primarily at home. Many students do online assignments at school—with the encouragement of school administrators—in a computer lab or library, before or after school, or between classes.

More students are also signing up for summer courses online, in areas like foreign languages or physical education, sometimes to get state- or district-required classes out of the way before school starts.

But the demand for online education has also brought calls for greater oversight. The University of California system announced this month it was requiring online providers to submit more information to the university for those classes to be approved on students' applications.

Diverse Student Body

At least one-third of all public school districts have students who are enrolled in online courses, and nationwide there are at least 330,000 course enrollments annually, according to the federal government. That estimate, from the 2002-03 academic year, is widely regarded as low. High school courses account for nearly 70 percent of online K-12 offerings, and "dual enrollment" high school and college programs are also relatively popular; elementary and middle school programs make up only a fraction of the total.

Twenty-four states have set up their own online programs, and several have launched "virtual" high schools, which offer their own courses, curricula, and teachers. Enrollment in those state programs is rising by 20 percent to 50 percent a year, said John F. Watson, a consultant with Evergreen Consulting Associates, an Evergreen, Colo.-based company, who has studied online programs.

Many students heading online have college admission firmly in mind. Students attending schools that lack Advanced Placement and other top-flight courses-many of them in poor or rural districts-are looking to Internet programs to meet their needs.

Others choose online courses in an attempt to pass a required course they've failed. Struggling students can benefit from taking a familiar subject taught with a different curriculum and approach, some educators say. Working online, Mr. Thomas said, is an alternative to having to "go back and have the same course, with the same teacher, all over again."

State-supported online programs, like the Illinois Virtual High School, serve students with many academic needs. Launched in 2001, the school's offices are housed at the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, in Aurora, a state-supported school for gifted students.

All the virtual school's teachers are state-certified. Most are either retired K-12 teachers or currently teaching and working at the virtual school on the side.

Illinois schools that participate are expected to provide some level of computer access to their students, said Illinois Virtual's associate director, Matthew Wicks. Students rely heavily on those in-school resources, he said. An Illinois Virtual survey found that 75 percent of the program's students do their work primarily at school.

Required Classes

The vast majority of students at the Florida Virtual School, the nation's largest online K-12 state program, do their work both at home and school, said Julie Young, its president. But the heaviest period of online activity for her program's students is still between 9 p.m. and midnight-when, Ms. Young believes, they are freed from in-school distractions.

The Florida Virtual School, in Orlando, offers a wide variety of academic courses, but its two most-popular classes are Personal Fitness and Life Management-both state graduation requirements. Those courses are especially popular among students who have just moved to Florida and need to catch up on such requisites, Ms. Young said,

Students' regular schools typically award credit for online courses. When those students apply to college, their transcripts usually do not indicate whether courses were taken online or in traditional settings, said Mr. Thomas of the SREB. He does not believe that designation is necessary, because online courses have a record of academic rigor. "Why should that matter?" he said.

In California, however, UC system officials say the rising popularity of online courses makes it necessary for them to know more about them. A policy approved this month will require online providers to submit information to the university for approval-a process that is likely to be phased in over time, Admissions Director Susan A. Wilbur said. University officials are also working on setting standards for high-quality online courses, she said.

For students, online courses "expand access-that's a good thing," Ms. Wilbur said. "Since we want to accept more of these courses, we wanted to have a policy in place."

In addition, the New York Citybased College Board, which sponsors the AP testing program, is conducting a review of courses bearing the AP designation, which will include online classes and those taught in traditional schools.

Students enrolling in Illinois' virtual school face high expectations, said Jim Kinsella, the program's coordinator of instructors. Mr. Kinsella, a history teacher at University High School, in Normal, is currently teaching an online class in AP European History with eight students from across the state.

Students are given assignments at a link on the virtual school's Web site. Some online teachers have students submit their work by e-mail or fax; Mr. Kinsella prefers to have them send it via an electronic "drop box" on the virtual school's Web site. He communicates by phone and e-mail with students. (All Illinois Virtual High teachers are required to make regular contact.) He also encourages students to communicate with him via instant messenger, though he does not require it.

Many students at University High School use the school's computer labs and library to conduct their work, the history teacher said. But Mr. Kinsella has taught students online who did not have those resources. Some have told him they work from public libraries, or even local churches.

All Over the Map

Mr. Kinsella, whose own school is in central Illinois, notes with satisfaction that students from different parts of the state bring different political and social perspectives to classroom topics-a diversity of opinion the history teacher can't always find in a traditional class setting.

Sometimes, "a student from southern Illinois will respond much differently than a student from northern Illinois," he said. "It's one of those regional differences that students don't usually become aware of until college."

When Ms. Byerly took her online AP literature course last year, she was taught by Sharon LaDage, who spent more than 30 years as a high school English teacher before

retiring four years ago. Ms. LaDage taught the course from her home in Vandalia, Ill., 70 miles east of St. Louis. She guided students through online discussions of numerous works, including James Joyce's short stories and Tennessee Williams' play "A Streetcar Named Desire."

Although she enjoys those AP classes, Ms. LaDage said she has received special satisfaction from working online with underprivileged students, who are taking standard English courses they need to graduate.

Students who are shy or socially awkward excel when removed from the pressures of the classroom, she said. Others who struggle with group discussions thrive when they produce written work online.

"It levels the playing field for a kid," Ms. LaDage said. "Everybody's equal online. It's easier for some kids to take part in a discussion. Online, they're respected immediately."

Top Choices

Many students who take courses from the Florida Virtual School, considered the largest state-sponsored online school in the country, select those required by their states or schools to free up space during the school day for other classes.

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