



## Virtual Ed. 101: How and Why Online Classes Are Growing in Popularity

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By Judy Molland

Paul Cresanta is a gifted 12-year-old with advanced skills in math. He took Algebra 1 as a fifth-grader, and is now enrolled in geometry - just not in your typical classroom. He does the course work online.

"It was the only option available," says his mother, Ava. "By the end of fourth grade, he had already mastered the highest level of math, and he was bored. Finding these classes was a godsend."

Nationwide, one million elementary through high-school students are now enrolled in virtual courses, up from about 45,000 just six years ago, according to two California-based organizations: the Peak Group, a marketing- and technology-consulting firm, and WestEd, a nonprofit education and research group. Among public schools alone, 36 percent offered online learning courses in 2002-2003, enrolling more than 328,000 students, according to a 2005 report by the National Center for Education Statistics.

### Who Enrolls, and Why?

Carissa Roche wanted to study psychology, but the course wasn't taught at her high school. So she turned to her computer and took the class online through her school's affiliation with Virtual High School (VHS). VHS provides online courses to schools in more than 30 states and 25 international locations.

"I really enjoyed taking the online class," Roche says. "These classes are harder and more challenging than a regular class because you have to make your own schedule."

Students take online courses for a variety of reasons. Some are looking for advanced coursework; others are homeschooling. Some go online to make up credits or because they're homebound for medical or disciplinary reasons. Others are simply interested in a specific subject or the convenience of a class that's available to them 24/7.

High school student Zoë McNealy took environmental science with VHS to free up some out-of-school time to pursue a potential career in ice skating.

"It allowed her to skate at 10 a.m., on an ice surface that didn't have 20 children on it," explains her mother, Nancy Eddy.

Most schools sign up with virtual education programs because they don't have the

resources to offer a full range of classes. The programs charge course fees - starting at about \$100 per student per semester - to schools and school districts, which may or may not pass those fees on to parents.

"Schools use our courses to fill the gaps," says Julie Young, president of Florida Virtual School (FVS), the nation's largest and oldest online program. "Our rural districts have less access to a selection of classes, and [online learning](#) brings that to their doorstep."

Education experts also point out that the federal education law, No Child Left Behind, mandates that every student is taught by a "highly qualified" teacher - one who meets specific professional requirements. With the nationwide shortage of qualified math and science teachers, online technologies mean that any student, regardless of location, can enroll in a course taught by an NCLB-certified teacher.

And, of course, digital instruction works for today's students. "Today's kids are wired, and virtual learning is a perfect match for them," says Tim Snyder, Ed.D., executive director emeritus of Colorado Online Learning (COL).

### How They Work

Adriant Sanchez teaches math in a Los Angeles classroom. But he also teaches in cyberspace. It's a perfect way to reach today's more digitally connected kids, he says. And an extra benefit is that the classes prepare students for college, where more and more coursework is done online.

Online programs vary widely, but at the very least they require that the student understands how to get online, communicate and collaborate via email and discussion boards, and to access information via the Internet.

The best classes offer a range of possibilities for interaction with the teacher and other students, including email, phone and instant messaging.

Jodi Holzman, who teaches Fundamental Mathematics and Algebra 1 online with COL, explains that her students typically have a weekly schedule.

"Most courses use a textbook that is sent to students," she says. "Internet resources are incorporated when applicable, and a couple of courses use a video lecture format for supporting student learning."

Most students, she adds, participate in one or two threaded discussion questions weekly. Assignments, quizzes, tests and projects are all completed and submitted online. Final course grades are then sent to the student's school for academic records.

### The Pros ...

High school student Eric Gea learns in both a regular classroom and online. But, he notes, "I get more attention in my online Algebra 2 class than in the regular classroom, where my teacher has to pay attention to the entire 35-body class.

Teachers also appreciate the online course experience, mainly because of the close interaction with their students.

Caprice Woodburn, who teaches eighth-grade U.S. History with FVS, says that despite the lack of physical proximity, she still develops relationships with individual students. "A student called me the other night with a question about the Oregon Trail," she says. "I spent 20 minutes on the phone with her." She adds that shy students who may be reluctant to ask questions in a crowded classroom also flourish in this setting.

Flexibility was key for 11-year-old Dakota Fisher, who has already completed Algebra 1 and Geometry with COL. "I love being able to work when I want to throughout the week, and I can take more time on one assignment and less on another if I need to."

His mother, Carole, is equally enthusiastic: "This is an excellent platform to learn math at the level Dakota needs to be taught."

... And Cons

Evan Green, a 10th-grader who took an online health course, says online students need to be self-motivated and organized. "Students who don't work well independently tend to get behind," she says, "because there's no one there nagging them."

Indeed, for highly motivated, tech-savvy students, virtual learning is ideal, but online classes are not for everyone.

Susan Lowes, director of research and evaluation at the Institute for Learning Technologies at Columbia University in New York, points out that most of these classes are text-based, so students need to be skilled readers. "And those students who articulate better in writing also tend to prefer online classes," she adds.

Just how good are online classes? Liz Pape, CEO of VHS, defines success in these courses as the rate of students who complete a course with a D or better - in other words, success means a student with a passing grade. "We have a success rate of about 85 percent," Pape says. The rate is 90 percent for the Florida Virtual School, according to Young.

Virtual Schools

Success with online courses has led some states to offer the entire public school experience online. About 83,500 U.S. students are full-time e-learners, according to the North American Council for Online Learning. Twenty-two states have established a statewide virtual school, while 16 states have at least one cyber charter school, according to the 2006 Editorial Projects in Education, publishers of the Education Week newspaper and Teacher Magazine.

Some children are being homeschooled through a virtual school. Some live in rural areas where a local school is closing and the online option is the best alternative. Others, such as professional actors or competing athletes, need the flexibility an online school offers.

But whether these kinds of schools are giving kids an adequate education is still up for debate. In Colorado, home to several virtual schools, the programs received a low grade in 2006, when state auditors reported that students who get their entire education online had lower reading, writing and math scores on statewide tests than students in public schools. The audit team urged the state's Education Department to place a

moratorium on new public online schools until problems revealed in the audit are fixed.

## Looking Ahead

What can your child expect from virtual learning? The Internet has facilitated an exciting new world in education. Last year, Michigan state lawmakers passed a requirement that all students have an "online learning experience" prior to graduating high school.

But when it comes to virtual schools, Lowes, of Columbia University, says that she doesn't see an online diploma becoming routine: "I don't believe you can have a completely virtual education. I think the social environment of the school is an important environment."