

85 percent of students in online school pass

Friday, May 25, 2007

BY BENJAMIN DUER

PERRY TWP. Michael Graham was a struggling student until he took an online computer course at Perry High School.

Now he is a star pupil.

"He's awesome," said Jennifer Fischer, Perry's e-learning coordinator. "He's committed."

Electronic learning involves taking courses via computer using the Internet.

By his own admission, Graham, 18, used to "screw around" in high school before enrolling at Perry High.

As a freshman, he got expelled for pulling a fire alarm at McKinley High School in Canton. His sophomore grades were "terrible," he admitted.

Last October, Graham moved here with his family and the picture began to change.

Graham needed extra credits to qualify as a Perry High junior, so he signed up for online courses and quickly fell in love with them.

He spends two hours almost every day in the computer lab doing course work.

"If you get fed up with one (course), you can switch and do another," he said.

Fischer's star pupil is a testimony to Perry's revamped online school.

BETTER GRADE

A year ago, not a single student passed a course at Perry's old digital academy. Zilch.

Looking for improvement, school officials shut down the academy last May. The online program re-emerged under a new format last fall.

Independent lesson plans offered by Tri-Rivers Educational Computer Association (TRECA) were replaced with Florida Virtual - a curriculum program that gives school districts more local control.

Florida Virtual allows local teachers to give input and control everyday instruction of online students.

Also, Fischer was brought into the district to coordinate the revamped online school. She had experience with Florida Virtual, as supervisor at East Canton High School's digital academy.

The result this year has been success - 85 percent of students enrolled in Perry's online school have passed their courses.

Florida Virtual gets a chunk of the credit, school officials say.

Curriculum Director Mike Schreffler said Florida Virtual is "incredibly sound" and has decades of research behind it for support.

Fischer said the program allows her to keep track of students' online progress better because there is more local control. TRECA had its own, "watchdogs," she said.

"This is something our kids want," Schreffler said. Half of Perry's online school population includes honor-roll students, according to Fischer.

Perry's online school now offers three sets of curriculum, Florida Virtual, NovaNet and Learning Springs. NovaNet is meant for class credit recovery. Learning Springs provides online curriculum for students in kindergarten through seventh-grade.

STEERING A PLANE

Fischer said in the fall, her online students will participate in a state pilot program. Results of the two-year experiment will determine if the program should be offered statewide.

Through the Stark-Portage Area Computer Consortium Perry is working with eTech Ohio, a state agency dedicated to developing education through technology, on the experiment.

The program tests the effectiveness of a copyright-free computer software called Sakai.

Sakai is an online learning management system. It allows a school district to run its online curriculum and local teachers can upload additional lesson plans for students.

Perry might be joined by Canton Local, Sandy Valley, Alliance, North Canton and Canton City schools as pilot program participants, said Jim Vincent, SPARCC's head of technology integration. Sakai's cost is minimal to free, he said.