

High school, without the high school All-online Virtual Learning Academy to launch in Jan.

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Tuesday, September 18, 2007

EXETER – Students will soon be able to earn their high school diplomas without ever setting foot inside a school building.

The Virtual Learning Academy, a charter school approved by the state Board of Education in May, will be unlike any other school in the state – no walls, no buildings and based completely in cyberspace. Enrollment begins in October, and it is scheduled for a limited "opening," or Internet launch in January, with about 700 students who can select from 28 different courses.

For no charge, New Hampshire students will be able to take online courses like Advanced Placement calculus, Spanish and marine science, in addition to their regular high school course-load.

In September 2008, the school will expand its course offerings, staff and enrollment, and students could then attend on a full-time basis. Students could potentially take all of their high school courses online and earn their diploma from the school, said Stephen Kossakoski, chief executive officer of the charter school.

Yet full-time students at the Virtual Learning Academy could still experience the social interaction that comes with being a traditional high school student, Kossakoski said.

"Students are not going to be in a black room with the door shut sitting in a front of a computer," said Kossakoski, who held a press conference at the Tuck Learning Center in Exeter on Monday morning along with other organizers of the school.

Students will have projects and internships that get them out into the community, Kossakoski said. There will also be occasional field trips with other students enrolled with the school, he said. "They'll still be out and about," he said.

Students taking courses in areas like science will be sent science experiments and simulations they can do at home, he said. "There still will be a hands-on component," he

said.

The school was initiated by School Administrative Unit 16, which covers Exeter and the surrounding area. Superintendent Arthur Hanson said he envisions the school helping students who have full-time jobs or are trying to make up extra credits.

Kossakoski said the school's teachers would be state certified and highly qualified. The school will start out as a high school, but could expand to the middle school or even elementary level, he said.

Roberta Tenney, who oversees the charter school program for the state, said the school could create opportunities for students who go to smaller schools in the state and don't have access to the same classes.

"Hopefully, it will level the playing field a little," she said. "If you have a bright student somewhere and they want to take Latin, but the school doesn't have enough students to offer a Latin class, they could take it at the virtual school."

Students who have dropped out and want to get back on track could also benefit from it, she said. The virtual academy is one of 15 charter schools that have been approved by the state Board of Education. Charter schools get an initial start-up grant, paid for with federal funding, and also receive \$3,706 per student, said Tenney.

Kossakoski said the school received \$500,000 in start-up funding, which will go toward salaries and purchasing the course curriculum. The courses were bought from Florida Virtual School, he said.

While some charter schools have struggled with funding once their start-up grant runs out, Kossakoski said the advantage of the virtual charter school is it would lack some of the other costs that come with running a regular school. "There's no building, there's no buses, there's no lunch program," he said. "We can be successful without any additional revenue."

Kossakoski said the board of trustees would still seek out additional funding and donors, which could help provide computers where students may not have access to the Internet, either at their school, at a library or at home. The school does not plan on providing computers to all students, he said.

In 2000, 10 percent of school-aged children had no access to computers, either at home or at school, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. With students taking their courses over the computer, Kossakoski said the school would do what it can to prevent cheating and academic integrity. Students have to sign a pledge of academic honesty. "We do start with the assumption that most people are going to be honest and put forth their

best effort," he said.

Final exams for the courses are proctored, meaning there will be someone making sure that the person taking the exam is the student, he said. Tenney said she's confident there are oversight procedures in place to ensure students are actually doing the work.

Students enrolled with the virtual academy would be required to take part in statewide accountability testing, said Kossakoski. Testing sites would be established around the state to accommodate them, he said.

Though the school would be free for students living in New Hampshire, there would be a \$700 fee for each course for students living outside the state, said Kossakoski.

Students will be able to speak to their teachers and see one another through the software, he said. Most importantly, it offers flexibility to the students, said Kossakoski.

Debbie Woelflein, assistant superintendent in Merrimack, said she hadn't heard of the new charter school. Her district has had some experience with offering online courses to students.

Each semester, 25 students can take courses with Virtual High School, a different online program. She said the interest level is high for online courses and there's always a waiting list. The school selects students who have demonstrated they can work independently, she said. "I anticipate we'll be using it even more down the road," she said.