

Online class popularity soars

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On the surface, English teacher Linda George's British literature class sounds like a 16-year-old's dream.

You can show up when you want, turn in assignments when you want and take breaks to watch videos of the Urban Ninja on YouTube.

You can eat, drink, listen to music, play video games and text message your friends without fear of punishment.

Clothing is optional.

And according to George, it's "the perfect atmosphere."

George is one of a handful of teachers in Palm Beach County who end their traditional school day - at Jupiter High, in her case - and continue teaching from their home computers as part of the Palm Beach Virtual Community School, a district program offering high school credits and GED courses completely online.

As part of her online English class, George chats with her students through e-mail and instant messaging, hosts conference calls and fields phone calls as late as 9 p.m. The 30 students work at their own pace. Many are trying to make up credits from a previously failed class.

"For many of these students, this is a last ditch effort," George said.

In the ever-expanding catalog of educational options available to students, the popularity of online learning has exploded.

Four years ago, about 800 Palm Beach County students enrolled in courses in the Florida Virtual School, a statewide online teaching program based in Orlando.

This year, that number is nearly 9,000, or about 10 percent of the program's total enrollment.

Martin and St. Lucie counties have shown similar growth.

"We really do emulate the environment of a classroom, just in an online situation," said Julie Young, president and chief executive officer of the program. "Each student really experiences almost a classroom of one."

That perception is due in large part to the requirement that teachers keep in close touch with students and parents and be available from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. every day, Young said.

The program is entering its 10th school year this fall and offers more than 90 courses for middle and high school students, including, most famously, an online gym class.

By law, the online option must be made available to all Florida high school students, and priority is given to students with otherwise limited access to a specific course.

Young said about 40 percent of the program's students are making up for a failed class, while another 40 percent are on an "accelerated" track, trying to earn more credits in a shorter time period.

An estimated 700,000 public school students were enrolled in courses that were either completely online or blended - part online, part traditional - in the 2005-2006 school year, according to a nationwide study published earlier this month by the New York City-based Sloan Consortium, which tracks online education.

About 63 percent of public school chief administrators surveyed in the study said their school districts offer at least one form of online learning. Another 20 percent expect to add online options within the next three years.

Statewide online education programs similar to Florida Virtual School are available in at least 20 states.

Administrators also predicted that the number of students taking online courses would grow an average of 19 percent in the next two years, according to the study.

The study also illustrates some of the challenges educators face. About two-thirds of respondents said students need more discipline to succeed in an online course compared with a traditional classroom setting.

The increased independence can help some succeed and others fail, Young said.

"It depends on the situation and the support the student has," said Young, adding that support from parents is important. "If you have a student that is not interested in learning and is not turning on the computer, then you have a challenge."

Joshua Izaak wouldn't recommend an online course to everybody.

"Since it's not structured, some students could slack off," he said.

The West Boca Raton High School senior made it a priority to work on his online advanced placement macroeconomics course through Florida Virtual School for a while every day last summer and into the fall. Taking the class online saved him from an honors economics course during his senior year.

"There weren't that many assignments," Izaak said. "It was only the essential things; it wasn't a lot of busy work."

While students must be fairly "self-directed," they are increasingly able to succeed in an online environment, said Christie Ragsdale, an administrator in secondary guidance who also serves as the Palm Beach County School District's liaison to Florida Virtual School.

"Many students are very comfortable with that kind of learning," said Ragsdale, adding that the popularity of online education will continue to grow. "Kids are growing up today with computers in hand."

Students' reliance and familiarity with emerging technology is why teacher Linda George said an online course is "the way that a classroom should be run."

"I love the online world," she said. "The traditional classroom is something that is not for everyone."

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