

'HOME' WORK: CITY BIDS FOR ONLINE HIGH SCHOOLS

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The city is working to clear the way for students to be able to earn credits toward high-school graduation online.

Department of Education officials said they're working with the state on getting a waiver of the requirement that students spend a certain amount of hours per year in a classroom - known as "seat time" - to get credits for a course.

That requirement has taken the online-course option off the table in New York high schools, even as nearly half of all school districts nationally offer their students some form of virtual education.

At the center of the city's push for the change is a new, high-tech school in Manhattan, the NYCiSchool, which for the first time is teaching its ninth-graders two online courses that conclude with a state Regents exam.

For now, the school is meeting the seat-time mandate by having students take the online courses - global history and living environment - while still in a classroom supervised by a teacher.

The iSchool "is looking to change the way business is done in New York City," Troy Fischer, senior director of the DOE's Office of Instructional Technology. "I think once they set the precedent for [online learning] and receive a waiver, then we can expand that option to lots of schools."

He said a waiver is not likely this year.

The co-principal of NYCiSchool, Alisa Berger, said she envisioned the online coursework eventually expanding outside the classroom - giving older students the option to take internships during the day and to study at night.

"We want 11th-graders to be able to take classes at 3 a.m. in their pajamas if they desire," she said.

Susan Patrick, president of the North American Council for Online Learning, said New York trails the rest of the country in virtual education largely because of a lack of initiative.

Lawmakers in Michigan, by contrast, became the first in the nation to require an online course for high-school graduation in 2006, while educators in Florida have created the Florida Virtual School, which is expected to serve more than 80,000 students this year.

"This isn't a new innovation anymore," said Patrick.

The state Education Department did not respond to questions, but state Board of Regents member Saul Cohen suggested that New York couldn't stay "silent" on the issue for much longer.

"It's something we certainly are going to delve into very seriously," he said.

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