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Pasco eSchool offers online learning

By RONNIE BLAIR | The Tampa Tribune
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Megan Hotzler encountered skepticism from her parents the first time she made the pitch to take high school classes online.

It was a year ago. The family had just moved to Land O' Lakes from Sarasota and Megan, a junior, arrived at Sunlake High feeling out of place as she tried to adjust to new surroundings and new classmates.

By the end of the first day, she had a solution.

"I came home and said I wanted to do classes online," Megan said.

That plan fizzled quickly. Her parents, Celeste and Jim Hotzler, said no. They worried their daughter would cut herself off from the friendships she might cultivate at her new school.

So Megan finished her junior year the traditional way despite an early setback. She missed the second week of school when doctors removed her appendix. Week 1 she was the new girl. Week 2 she spent in the hospital. So that meant Week 3 she was the new girl all over again.

Megan didn't give up on the idea of online classes. One day she decided the mood was right, and she broached the subject with her mother again.

Her parents still had concerns, but they gave her the go-ahead to spend her senior year of high school strictly online. Now Megan is one of the first students to enroll in the new Pasco eSchool, which is beginning classes this month.

"I'm excited about it," Megan said. "I just think it's a better option for me."

The Pasco County School Board approved plans for Pasco eSchool this summer after the state Legislature required that every school district in the state offer an online school in 2009-10.

Elementary school students can enroll in a full-time program if they were enrolled in public or approved virtual schools during the 2008-09 academic year. The school district has contracted with the Florida Virtual Academy and

the Florida Virtual School's Connections Academy to provide the elementary school courses.

Middle and high school students have part-time and full-time options. Those classes are available to all Pasco residents in sixth through 12th grade, including public, private, charter and home education students, and students new to Pasco.

JoAnne Glenn, the assistant principal who oversees Pasco eSchool, said the district has hired 26 part-time instructors to provide the online instruction for middle and high school. They begin training Thursday. Glenn is still registering students, so just how many teachers are needed for each subject is a bit fuzzy.

"I like to think of them as being on the bench waiting to get in the game," Glenn said.

The Hotzlers' concerns about how virtual school might affect Megan's social life are understandable and valid, Glenn said. But Pasco eSchool students can still participate in sports and organizations at their zoned schools. Also, young people these days do much of their socializing online anyway, she said.

Virtual school appeals to a wide cross-section of students, Glenn said, but there are certain student-personality types that mesh especially well with online learning.

They include:

- Students who are willing and able to take more responsibility for their own learning. They possess good time management skills and are goal oriented.
- Students who have a comfort level with basic computer skills and Internet searches. They see the Internet as a way to communicate and collaborate. They probably spend a lot of time on Facebook and Twitter.

Online learning isn't strictly for the high-achieving and tech savvy, though, Glenn said.

"We've also seen a surprising trend for students that fall in the at-risk category," she said.

Students in the juvenile justice system often like online learning because it's a safe environment for them where they can answer a question without fear of ridicule from their peers if they are wrong.

Many people still don't know about Pasco eSchool, so Glenn wants to get the word out. The school district plans a series of information nights this month for students and parents. The first session was Tuesday night at Mitchell High.

The next two are Aug. 11 at Sunlake High and Aug. 13 at Wiregrass Ranch High. Both events are in the school media centers from 6 to 7 p.m.

Glenn also plans a meeting next week with guidance counselors to fill them in on how Pasco eSchool works.

Online education isn't completely new to the state. Florida Virtual School began offering online classes about a decade ago.

Megan Hotzler already takes two online courses -- marine science and Earth-space science -- through Florida Virtual School. One advantage, she said, is there's more of a one-on-one relationship with teachers.

"In class, I'm too shy to speak up," Megan said. "Now I can just call my teacher."

Online students set their own hours. Theoretically, Megan could sleep late each morning. She works part-time at Publix, though, so she plans to set her clock for 7 or 7:30 a.m. and spend her morning hours on school work.

"It's not going to be rainbows and butterflies for the next year," she said.

She has an incentive to work hard. Her parents essentially agreed to a trial period for the online classes. If by December her grades start to falter, they will send her back to Sunlake High.

Megan admits to some nervousness about her online plunge, but largely she is confident. This, after all, is a girl who dealt with tough circumstances right from the start.

Megan was still in the womb when an ultrasound technician noticed a disturbing dark spot.

After she was born, doctors broke the news to her parents. Megan had cancer. Three weeks later, a surgeon removed one of her kidneys. Then the chemotherapy began. Doctors told her parents they were unsure what the long-term effects of the treatment might be.

"She was in and out of the hospital for a year," Celeste Hotzler said.

Megan shows no apparent ill effects from that difficult first year. The knowledge of how life began for her, though, affected her career choice, she said. She wants to become a nurse.

Like most high school seniors, Megan also looks forward to her graduation ceremony at Sunlake High.

Classes might work fine online, but tossing a mortarboard in the air is the kind of celebration that needs to happen in person.

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