

SEPTEMBER 24, 2009

Online High Schools Test Students' Social Skills

As Digital Learning Programs Grow, Educators Hope to Prevent Teens From Feeling Isolated; Student Government Via the Web

By PAUL GLADER

PALO ALTO, Calif. -- Tatyana Ray has more than 1,200 Facebook friends, sends 600 texts a month and participated in four student clubs during the year and a half she attended high school online, through a program affiliated with Stanford University.

Although top public and private high schools abound in her affluent area of Palo Alto, the 17-year-old originally applied to the online school because she and her parents thought it looked both interesting and challenging. She enjoyed the academics but eventually found she was lonely. She missed the human connection of proms, football games and in-person, rather than online, gossip. The digital clubs for fashion, books and cooking involved Web cams and blogs and felt more like work than fun. Last winter, Ms. Ray left the online school and enrolled at a local community college for a semester.

[Tatyana photo] Paul Glader/The Wall Street Journal

Tatyana Ray has spent most of her high school career in online school.

"Socially, it wasn't working," she says. "I felt I was missing out."

As online high schools spread, educators are ramping up efforts to counter the social isolation that some students experience. At the same time, sociologists and child psychologists are examining how online schooling might hinder, or help, the development of social skills.

"For online high schools, the biggest obstacle is addressing the social interaction for the students," said Raymond Ravaglia, deputy director of Stanford's Educational Program for Gifted Youth, which Ms. Ray attended. "At that age, people really crave social interaction."

Elizabeth Birr Moje, a professor of education at the University of Michigan who has studied online learning, says "there are some huge advantages" to online high schools, including an individualized pace and better access to multimedia content. "The disadvantage is that you may not learn to work with other people quite as well," she adds.

Other education researchers believe online students will be better prepared to interact in an increasingly digital world. "What they learn while in the online high school will make them more adaptable thinkers," says Rand Spiro, a professor in education psychology at Michigan State University. Online learning, he says, takes students deeper into academic subjects more quickly.

Online high schools are growing more popular. Roughly 100,000 of the 12 million high-school-age students in the U.S. attend 438 online schools full-time, up from 30,000 five years ago, according to the International Association for K-12 Learning Online, a Washington nonprofit representing online schools. Many more students take some classes online, while attending traditional schools. The National Center for Education Statistics, part of the U.S. Department of Education, says 1.5 million K-12 students were home-schooled in 2007, a figure that includes some who attended online schools. That is a 36% increase from the 1.1 million in 2003.
[Studying] Paul Glader/The Wall Street Journal

Livingston Martin and Sara Ehlert, right, do homework.

Most online high schools are relatively young, and there has been little research on cyber students' academic performance or social adaptation. But education experts say that studies looking at home-schooling suggest that students educated in nontraditional environments perform as well academically as their peers at conventional schools.

"When you look at home-school students compared to public or private school students, we have some reliable evidence to show that students are doing about the same but not better [in home school]," said Luis Huerta, a professor of public policy and education at Teachers College at Columbia University.

Researchers affiliated with home-schooling cite their own studies showing that home schoolers outperform their conventionally educated counterparts on standardized tests.

Some online schools let students tackle the curriculum on their own schedule; others create a virtual classroom of students and teachers using video feeds, online chat and PowerPoint presentations. Online schools appeal to gifted students who want to work at their own pace, students who dropped out of traditional high schools or who are taught at home by their families, students who travel with globe-trotting parents and teens with competitive outside pursuits like ballet, tennis or gymnastics.

School operators include for-profit companies such as the Kaplan Inc. unit of Washington Post Co., state-run entities such as the Florida Virtual School, as well as churches, universities and other nonprofits. Students graduating from accredited high schools receive a diploma, others typically earn GED certificates.

In June, the prestigious all-girls Holton-Arms School in Bethesda, Md., announced an Online School for Girls in conjunction with four other girls' schools. This fall, it is testing classes for 100 students. "We realized no one was out there doing single-gender education online," said Brad Rathgeber, a teacher at Holton-Arms and president of the online school.

St. Andrew Catholic School in Coral Springs, Fla., in July said it would launch a K-12 virtual school designed to help the Catholic Church combat flagging school enrollment. "If Catholic schools don't try to engage this change in culture and with our young people and families, Catholic schools will become obsolete," says Trina Trimm, director of e-learning for the National Catholic Schools K12 Virtual.

Schools try multiple approaches to overcome social challenges. The Florida Virtual School has a model U.N., an online Latin club and a Science Olympiad team that practices online and meets in person before big tournaments. Michigan Virtual University, which has an online K-12 school, offers summer math and science camps.

Stanford's EPGY program dates to the 1960s, when computer-science professors at Stanford began experimenting with ways to teach math using computers. It expanded to offer online classes and summer camps and, in 2006, launched an experimental online school for gifted youth.

The school is a good fit for children of far-flung executives such as 16-year-old Josh Singh, who lives with his parents in China. (The school has software that coordinates schedules to select class time with the fewest conflicts.) He said the online school has expanded his social life beyond China. "I have friends all over the place now," he says.

But the school's leaders say they have been surprised by some of the challenges they have faced. Headmaster Jan Keating says the school is trying to reduce its attrition rate, which she calls high, but declines to disclose specifics. Administrators say students without discipline or parental supervision sometimes withdraw emotionally and socially.

Calvin Burkhart, a 17-year-old in Chicago, spent his freshman and sophomore years in Stanford's program, partly so he could play competitive hockey. He says that while he found the courses fun and intellectually stimulating, the physical distance from students and teachers took a toll. He withdrew from the Stanford program in 2008 and now attends the Benet Academy outside Chicago.

"We need to find ways to have kids spend time together. They are hot-wired to learn from each other," says Dr. Keating.

In Palo Alto, Ms. Ray's parents, an entrepreneur and a lawyer, are largely letting her chart her education. For her senior year this fall, she is taking some classes at EPGY

and others at Foothills Junior College. She was just elected senior class vice president at the online high school.

"We're really hoping to get in some kind of dance at the end of the year because we don't have a prom," she says. "We don't want to miss out on everything."

Copyright 2009 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved