

'Virtual students' go to school without being in school

October 20 2009, By Tim Engle

Eleventh-grader Philip Marten's second-hour class is orchestra. But first hour, third hour, fourth hour and the rest of his school day are spent not at school but at home in Shawnee, Kan.

Philip may look like any other high [school](#) kid, but in fact he's a "virtual" student. For him and others enrolled in virtual schools online, getting an education involves no bells, no lockers, no school plays, no marching band, no snow days and no cafeteria food.

Virtual students don't sit in a classroom at all. Their day can start whenever they like -- 7 in the morning or 7 at night. They work at their own pace. They may never meet their teachers in person, let alone fellow students.

Philip takes orchestra at Shawnee Mission Northwest High School because otherwise he wouldn't be able to audition for all-state orchestra. But in his 16 years he has rarely darkened the door of a school building. Before high school, his parents home schooled him.

The main reason: He's a serious violinist -- co-concertmaster of the Kansas City Youth Symphony -- who hopes to one day play in a professional orchestra. On a typical day he practices three hours.

Doing high school online is "tough, because you don't always have the person there saying, 'Hey, this needs to be in now,' " says Philip, a student at iQ Academy Kansas.

Cyber school gives him more flexibility for practicing and rehearsal. Plus, he says, "I don't think I operate well in a public school situation. By the fourth or fifth hour, I start to lose focus."

Only about 1 percent of all school kids -- elementary and secondary -- are taking virtual classes, according to national estimates. But that number is expected to grow, because virtual learning programs are popping up all over.

The state of Missouri runs a virtual school, the Missouri Virtual Instruction Program (www.movip.org), now in its third year. MoVIP, as it's known, started with 2,000 students and grew 30 percent its second year. But this school year, enrollment is off about 20 percent thanks to a \$1 million state budget cut, says Curt Fuchs, Missouri's coordinator of educational support services. "We are now stalled because of money," he says.

School districts around Missouri offer their own virtual learning programs, and more are expected to add them, because districts now can get state funding for virtual students. The law was changed this summer.

In Kansas, many districts offer online programs, some run by for-profit companies such as Insight Schools, K12 and Kaplan. Insight School of Kansas, a full-time online charter school with offices in Olathe, has nearly tripled its enrollment: from 500-plus students last year, its first, to about 1,400 this year. They live all across Kansas.

But what exactly is a virtual school?

It's not a home school -- parents are the teachers and control the curriculum in home schools -- although like Philip, some home schoolers have transitioned to virtual school. Virtual schools employ state-certified teachers, who typically meet in "live" online sessions once a week with

classes. Teachers might use webcams or just microphones.

Insight School, affiliated with the Spring Hill School District, issues laptop computers and printer-scanners to its students. Some programs mail their students textbooks; some provide all course information online.

Full-time virtual charter schools like Insight are typically tuition-free. Some charge enrollment fees or fees for computer or textbook rentals. MoVIP has a limited number of "free seats" in classes. After the state-funded seats are full, parents or school districts can opt to pay.

Hillary Laaker, an 11th-grader at Insight School of Kansas, lives on a farm in Linwood, in Leavenworth County. She's being raised by her grandmother, Dea VanDeBerghe, and an average weekday will find Hillary on the computer in her office, right beside the office of her grandma, who works from home.

Hillary calls her virtual school "a great thing," and what she likes best is her interaction with teachers. One Sunday she had a question about an assignment, so she called her teacher and left a message, expecting to hear back Monday. But the teacher called back at 9 that night.

Her online teachers "have such dedication to helping you do your best," Hillary says. And although a traditional school class might meet five days a week, those five hours can't compare "to one hour (online) where you ask questions and get really detailed responses and can still call when you need it," she says.

Because Hillary is a Type 1 diabetic, she spent a lot of time in the nurse's office when she was in regular school, VanDeBerghe says.

Interaction with other kids is not a problem for Hillary, VanDeBerghe

says. She was in the children's chorus of the Lyric Opera's recent production of "Tosca," and she's active in Girl Scouts and church activities.

VanDeBerghe still marvels at the memory of a cross-country trip last year, when Hillary was on her laptop in the back seat, headset on, talking to a teacher during class.

Some classes, of course, don't lend themselves to being online. An eleventh-grader at Truman High School in Independence, for instance, takes metal shop and P.E. there, but his other five classes are online through MoVIP.

But some virtual schools offer P.E. online. Insight and iQ Academy do. Insight students are mailed a jump rope, a pedometer and a heart-rate monitor and instructed to develop personal fitness plans and log their activities. "There's no dodge ball," jokes Pauline Hintz, Insight's principal.

Insight also offers a communications/public speaking class -- students give speeches to a webcam. Take performance studio and you'll perform -- sing, for instance -- in front of the class (actually your computer). You won't dissect a real frog in a science class, but you can virtually dissect one on the computer.

And while there's no homecoming dance or prom for full-time virtual school students, there can be get-togethers. Next weekend, Insight students from across Kansas will meet face-to-face in Olathe for a talent show, dance and float trip.

Some virtual schools even have virtual clubs -- photo club, French club, creative writing club, etc. -- all of which meet online.

In Missouri, the two districts that are "well ahead of everyone else" with virtual offerings are North Kansas City and Park Hill, Fuchs says. North Kansas City's program is called eCampus, now in its fifth year. It started with three courses and 20 students and has grown to 28 courses and 500-plus students from the district's four high schools as well as home schools and St. Pius X High School.

But North Kansas City students don't attend eCampus full time. Most take either one or two virtual classes a semester. There aren't enough course offerings for a student to take all classes online.

More and more traditional classes in the district are becoming online-friendly. Teachers of these "blended" classes have "super-duper interactive Web sites that they use," says Marla Walker, the district's eCampus coordinator. And this fall every high school student is getting a mini-notebook computer.

Walker has reservations about [high school](#) programs that are completely online. "I really think it's good for (students) to have that social interaction with other students," she says.

Fuchs, with MoVIP, says he's found that kids who take virtual classes in addition to traditional classes "are really achieving well."

In any case, Walker and others agree that not every student is a good candidate for online classes. "Some kids really need to have a teacher in front of them," she says.

Fuchs disputes the notion that an online class sounds easier than a regular class. "To be honest, it's harder," he says. "You have to do so much more reading. You have to be self-motivated. You have to have a work ethic."

He says MoVIP has attracted dropouts wanting to get their diplomas. But

if they've struggled in a regular school, they may struggle online, too.

Then again, kids who find it tough to learn with all the distractions or social pressures of a regular school might do better online. Insight School's typical student is not the "class president, A-personality extrovert," says Chuck Wolfe, operations manager.

But his program draws all types, including students who have day jobs or families to support. Or have to travel frequently with their families. Or have health issues, including pregnancy.

Advocates of virtual learning say it's an education trend that's only going to get bigger and bigger, much like the Internet itself.

"Is this a silver bullet? No," Fuchs says. "It's just another way to make some kids successful in their education."

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