Online education expands, but is it effective?

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Clinton Parker, a senior at Julian High School, worked quietly at his computer in August as the clicks of mice from more than a dozen students punctured the air of an otherwise silent computer lab.

A teacher zipped through the classroom, assisting [students] as they worked their way through online classes that they had either failed during the [school] year or needed to pass to catch up with classmates.

By the time summer school had ended, Parker was among the more than 4,000 city schools students who earned credits taking online courses. What would have taken another year of school -- much of which Parker readily admits he would have skipped -- took just a few months, and he received his diploma.

The credit-recovery program at Julian illustrates why supporters say online learning has the potential to revolutionize education. It can be inexpensive, convenient and flexible -- valuable attributes for a cash-strapped district like the Chicago Public Schools. For those reasons, it's now one of the fastest growing areas of education. But research hasn't kept up with the rapid expansion, making it tough to know whether the programs really work.

Chicago Public Schools now offers a battery of online programs, ranging from math and reading enrichment, where elementary students spend a few hours a week online using a specific curriculum, to a virtual charter school, where students learn almost entirely from home.

The latest initiative came last week, when school officials announced a pilot program to add 90 minutes to the day at 15 elementary schools using online curriculum in place of certified teachers.

The recent growth within CPS has been rapid, mostly without fanfare. Two years ago, online courses were offered in just a handful of high schools. This year, they're slated to be in all of them. Other schools are scaling up to the initiative by installing cutting-edge media centers, piloting entirely online curriculums or contracting individually with vendors for online instruction materials.

The growth is reflected nationally as well. Just about every state has some sort of online learning initiative; experts figure the universe is expanding by 30 percent every year.

On reason for its popularity is that online learning allows students to learn individually and at their own pace, a difficult feat for a teacher with 30 students with varying levels of proficiency. The most advanced software can assess a student's progress and ability in real time, then adapt the difficulty of the questions.

While not all programs are created equal, those used by CPS align themselves with the state learning standards.

"A computer never replaces a teacher," CPS chief Ron Huberman stressed. "(But) it allows the most talented and gifted students to move extra fast and the students struggling to take the time they need to before moving on to the next task."

Still, even the most enthusiastic supporters of virtual schooling acknowledge that practice is far ahead of both policy and research. There's a risk such efforts could be as ineffective as the worst schools, experts say.

Additionally, critics worry online learning robs students of the classroom experience and the social aspects of school.

The local teachers union has come out strongly against the effort, saying any program that simply reinforces the "drill and kill" testing mentality that will fail to engage students. And poor implementation could stymie even the most promising approaches.

Despite its break-neck growth, the world of online learning is still tiny. Nationally, about 2 percent of all students do some form of online learning, experts figure.

Those pushing for the expansion of online opportunities argue that people shouldn't hold online learning to a higher standard than conventional classroom learning.

"I've heard people say that every online teacher and course isn't high quality," said John Watson, who publishes an annual report on the growth of K-12 online learning. "Well, I'm pretty sure every physical class isn't high quality, either."

One exhaustive report found online learning and the combination of online and classroom, called blended learning, were in fact better than face-to-face instruction. The results came from analyzing the findings of 46 different scientific studies comparing the two.

But only a few of the studies published between 1996 and 2008 were in K-12 settings. The rest ranged from college to military training.

"In a time of both strapped budgets and a limited supply of qualified teachers in certain subject areas, this is a very attractive option for school districts," said Barbara Means of the research group SRI International and lead author of the study. "It really adds a degree of

freedom that school districts haven't had."

Since the world of online instruction is still relatively new, districts have a responsibility to scrutinize their programs, Means stressed. With such a wide array of vendors hawking instructional software, the only way to know which ones work is to study them, she said.

CPS has attempted just that in Area 13. In that region of the school district, which runs along the old State Street corridor, Chief Area Officer Shawn Smith rolled out an ambitious pilot at his 27 elementary schools.

Every student from third to fifth grade was given about three hours of online math each week using software that leads children through a series of problems, adapting to their skill level as each answer is given.

ISAT scores from last year show staggering -- some say implausible -- gains in math. But even greater gains were achieved among seventh grade students at one school that didn't use the online curriculum, making it difficult to connect the increases in scores strictly to the online curriculum.

Still, Smith says it's having an impact, and district administrators agree. This year, they're rolling the software out to every class in his area.

In a dimly lit computer lab, their heads barely protruding above the plastic chairs, Overton Elementary School students watched their monitors as a computer penguin zoomed across it. Part of the software, the penguin introduces them to each set of gamelike problems.

One child worked on whole numbers, filling imaginary bags with grapes. Another used his hands to measure distance.

"When I first started, I thought it was going to be hard. But I got the hang of it now," said Phylicia Rich, a fifth-grader. "I think this made (testing) easier for me."

Other efforts are being closely watched, too, like VOISE Academy, a contract school in Chicago's Austin neighborhood that uses the blended approach of online learning and in-class teachers. Students use laptops instead of textbooks, and the district plans to pilot a similar approach at up to five schools.

"There's so much data ... that we know the strengths of every individual students and weakness of every individual student," said Todd Yarch, the principal there. He said online curriculum "really frees our teachers up to help individual students."

Yarch isn't sure what his schools' ACT scores will look like this year. Maybe they'll be great. Maybe they won't.

"Too many times in education when it doesn't work right away we tend to move away from it," he said.

"You have to kind of stick it out," Yarch said. "There are going to be issues."

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