



# Virtual schools offer students more choices, advanced classes

by Diane Schenk

Distance learning is nothing new. But like so many other facets of today's society, it is being transformed thanks to the tools and benefits available through the World Wide Web.

States are just beginning to tap into the potential of virtual learning, but many policymakers believe it eventually will provide an important supplement to traditional high school curricula.

"I do see it as a valuable way of filling in some of the gaps we now have," says Michigan Sen. Leon Stille, a Republican from Spring Lake. "In sparsely populated rural areas, there just aren't enough resources or students to teach a lot of advanced classes. That puts students in those schools, along with those in economically challenged areas, at a disadvantage."

Stille and others believe the Internet can help states equalize the educational opportunities offered in their economically, geographically divergent school districts.

Some Midwestern states either have opened or will soon open virtual high schools. Unlike traditional distance learning, course materials are



Sen. Leon Stille

taught over the Internet. From there, though, virtual high schools can differ significantly from one another in both their purpose and characteristics. Some aim to instruct high school dropouts, while other virtual schools cater to

students seeking advanced classes or a very particular subject area. The location for learning also varies. Online learners can take their classes at school, the library or home. In addition, courses either provide interactive learning (students are logged on to their computers at a specific time so they can hear the lectures and exchange ideas) or independent learning (students can work whenever it is convenient for them).

## Charting new ground

In fall 2000, a virtual charter school opened in Ohio — the first of its kind in the United States. The Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow (ECOT) serves approximately 2,200 K-12 students. According to Tom Baker, superintendent of schools at Lucas County Educational Service Center, the school began in order to provide an alternative to public schools as well as to service home-schooled students.

The school has 80 state-certified teachers, provides instruction to include 100 special education students and has a waiting list of 4,000. Regional teachers offer both online assistance as well as home visits, and students are expected to take state proficiency tests. In June, approximately 100 students will graduate from

ECOT's high school program.

Starting this unique charter school, however, has been difficult. For example, because it must contend with more than 900 telephone carriers, ECOT has had difficulty sometimes connecting students from around the state.

Florida High School was the first state-funded virtual high school, and as of spring 2000, more than 1,900 students were registered. The school offers Internet learning as a method for students who need to make up credits in order to graduate on schedule as well as those who are home-schooled or want to graduate at an accelerated pace. The school's goal is to soon provide a complete high school curriculum, including services that will enable students to successfully transition to postsecondary education institutions and the workplace.

Midwestern states also are beginning to offer virtual high school programs. Illinois Virtual High School (IVHS), which opened after the Illinois Legislature and Republican Gov. George Ryan appropriated \$370,000 for the educational venture, offers courses to all high school students in the state.

"Technology brings us the capability of delivering educational opportunities to anyone, anytime, anywhere," Ryan says. "It does not replace teachers, but supplements their classroom efforts."

IVHS faculty members include state-certified teachers along with community college and higher education instructors. The school targets a wide range of high school students, such as gifted and talented pupils, children with learning disabilities, at-risk youths and limited-English-proficient students.

The school's curriculum includes 16 courses and 10 advanced-placement review courses. It also offers high-stakes test review and preparation courses. Currently, IVHS does not plan to offer a high school diploma or grant credits to students.

Michigan has established two programs for Internet-based learning. The first, the Advanced Placement Academy, is designed to allow high school students who excel in their everyday classes to enroll in online advanced-placement courses through Michigan Virtual University, a not-for-profit, private organization founded by Gov. John Engler and the Michigan Jobs Commission in 1998. The second program, a statewide virtual high school, is scheduled to be up and running in time for the 2001-2002 academic year.

Stille calls initiatives like the ones in his home state "an embellishment and finalizing of distance learning." But while he supports an increased use of electronic classrooms, Stille

also believes they have substantial limitations and should be considered a supplement to, rather than a replacement for, traditional schools.

"You can only take this so far. I can't ever see and don't want to see this replacing what we have now," adds Stille, a former teacher. "Socialization and rapport building are important parts of a student's experience, and you can't duplicate that with a virtual high school."

## Benefits and limitations

In addition to assisting current high school students, virtual learning can help those who have dropped out but are now looking for a way to earn a diploma. The Minnesota-based Mindquest, which is part of the Bloomington Public Schools system, is the first adult diploma program on the Internet.

Students earn a diploma that looks similar to that received by a traditional Bloomington Public School student, except it does not include grades. Minnesota students receive instruction through Mindquest for free, while out-of-state residents pay \$300 per course.

Proponents of Internet learning also point to the possibility of virtual schools reaching home-schooled children, students who have medical conditions and cannot attend a traditional school, and migrant students and others whose parents move frequently due to the nature of their jobs. Instructors can benefit from flexible schedules and by teaching courses that they may not have the opportunity to lead in a traditional school setting due to limited class size or funding.

There are potential drawbacks and obstacles related to Internet instruction as well. First, states must deal with technological problems. "Bandwidth and more advanced software needs are more of an obstacle than schools and individuals," says John Fortier, assistant superintendent for state instructional services at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

In addition, issues surrounding teacher development and effective instruction are heightened in a virtual school setting. Additional care is needed to ensure that the course lessons and homework are clear, and instructors must learn effective ways to teach without face-to-face interactions with students. Another concern voiced by critics is the quality of the education being offered. At ECOT, for example, the school cannot offer a kindergarten program because a specific curriculum for that grade level is not available.

Still, although virtual schools are in their infancy of development, they already are providing state policymakers with new options as they try to address key educational challenges. 