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Cyber school for kids logs in Virtual academy is state's first for elementary students

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Nathan Dueck of Pacifica studied Cezanne, Picasso and Matisse in public school last year. 

This year in first grade, he'll explore the great religions. He'll read music in second grade, study astronomy in third and manipulate millions in fourth. By fifth grade, he'll be analyzing Shakespeare.

Thrilled with their son's education, Nathan's parents also like his teacher -- a desktop computer.

Nathan, 6, studies at the **California Virtual Academy**, the state's first cyber elementary school. 

"What I liked most was, I didn't have to pay -- and I didn't have to do lesson planning or grading. The school does it for you and saves hours of work," said Debbie Dueck, who homeschools her three older sons through a Christian program. One son, 12-year-old Stephen, will join Nathan in cyber class this fall, as grades 6 and 7 have been added.

What makes e-school possible are improved technology and a new taste among entrepreneurs for tapping into the riches that pay for American public schools. 

The speculator in this case is William Bennett, former U.S. education secretary under Ronald Reagan and founder of K12 Inc., a private Virginia company that has opened cyber charter schools in 11 states since 1999.

Bennett's virtual approach has found favor among many conservatives and Christian homeschoolers like the Duecks. As author of the morally prescriptive "Book of Virtues," Bennett has earned their trust, despite also earning the nickname "Bookie of Virtues" after admitting recently to years of high-stakes gambling.

Now Bennett is taking another gamble: that his budding empire of e-schools will transform American education and deal him a profit along the way.

That's particularly tough in California, where laws for nonclassroom-based schools demand that half of their public money go to teacher salaries -- not a huge need when your instructor has hardware for brains.

K12 Inc. sells its online curriculum to the cyber schools and takes a fee of roughly 20 percent. The company performs administrative duties and supplies technology.

The program is aimed at success, requiring students to pass online exams before proceeding, and has just three report card grades: "M" for "mastered," "C" for "completed sufficiently to advance," and "I" for "incomplete."


But the idea of software-as-public-elementary-teacher is not without its critics.

"You could go to the supermarket and buy a CD with math programs," said Gary Miron, a charter school researcher from Western Michigan University. "You do an activity and get feedback."

Jill Wynns of the San Francisco school board, a critic of for-profit charters, said a computerized curriculum is anathema to public education. In school, "kids are graded on participation. It's about discussion, listening, asking questions -- playing well with others."

Like any startup, the virtual academy has run into trouble -- two of its five charter schools have already closed, and K12 is looking for districts to handle them.

But the company says the nearly 100 cyber students at those schools, including many Bay Area kids such as Nathan and Stephen Dueck, can continue using its program through other charters or for free from K12 this semester. K12 already had to pay some \$300,000 for the education of 50 students at one of the schools when a San Joaquin County district blocked funding.

Despite the cyber school's rough start, overall enrollment is up to 933 from 751 last year, and **test scores are higher than the state average,** said Jim Konantz, a former assistant superintendent in Los Angeles who is now head of school at the California Virtual Academy. 

Of the 426 second- to fifth-grade cyber students tested, 46 percent ranked proficient or above on the language arts section of the rigorous California Standards Test. In math, 42 percent scored as well.

That was better than the state average of 35 percent proficient in each subject. Yet virtual school is no panacea: 228 students also ranked "below basic" or "far below basic."

The California Virtual Academy (CAVA) begins its second year with three charters that take students from Tuolumne, Kern and San Diego counties and the surrounding areas. Nearly 70 CAVA students also get the cyber school through a separate charter in Kings County.

ABSORBING AND LEARNING

Parents praise what Bennett calls "character education," strong doses of patriotism, heroism and old-fashioned cautionary tales infused into the online curriculum. To Bennett and the cyber families, the computer is an ideal feeding tube for high-nutrient data.

"Nathan is reading!" said Debbie Dueck, a cosmetics saleswoman who works from home. "We've been comparing notes with a friend whose daughter goes to kindergarten in Brisbane. Her class is still on letter sounds."

Although Nathan can sound out letters and recognize some sentences, at 6, he is not adept at

using the computer. So Dueck positions herself between them.

"Give Nathan the 10 frame and 11 counters," the computer tells Dueck in a bold, clear font. Dueck reaches into a box and pulls out colored disks and a board marked with 10 squares. She tells Nathan to count out 11 discs.

"Check to see whether Nathan has placed 10 counters on the ten-frame and one counter outside the ten-frame," the computer tells Dueck. He had. But something is wrong.

"Mom, there's one extra!"

"Good!" says Dueck. "Can you tell how many there are?"

"Twelve."

"Look again!"

"Thirteen?"

"Look again!"

"Eleven."

Whew. The math materials were among a boatload of freebies that arrived at the Duecks' home last year: computer, printer, CDs, art supplies, workbooks and more. K12 bought them with the nearly \$5,000 per pupil that the cyber school gets from the state. The company also pays \$18.95 per month toward Internet service.

LESS STRESS FOR TEACHERS

"Students are learning much more than they would have learned in the classroom," said Nancy Walker, who was among 45 teachers that the California Virtual Academy employed last year to meet monthly with families and comply with state law. "In class, they would have to sit through the lesson even if they knew it. Here, they don't waste time on concepts they know."

Being a cyber teacher carries less stress than the usual classroom job, Walker said, and others agree. About 250 teachers applied for just two openings

this year, said Rebecca Houser, the academy's assistant head of school.

Yet Walker, who was with a cyber charter that closed and now works at the academy's Oakland headquarters, said the 24 families she met in libraries, parks or coffee bars kept her busy.

"Say a student is having trouble understanding multiplication. That's where I get to teach the parent all my teacher tricks."

Some students need little help. "I had a couple of (brothers) who were absolute wizards," Walker said. "The boy in third grade started last September and finished all the material in December and moved on to fourth grade. Now, he and his brother are both starting fifth grade. School would be boring, and they know it."

For others, such as three shy sisters, motivation is hard -- and cyber learning may be a poor choice. "I'm really pushing for them to go back to school." Walker said. "It just seems like they need to get out of the house."

Despite holding a full credential and working full time, Walker is paid \$30,000 with no retirement benefits -- less than regular teachers or even what she earned as a beginner.

Superintendent William Lebo of the Lammersville district in San Joaquin County was appalled at the academy's anti-union position and refused to sponsor the cyber charter last year.

But that didn't stop K12. The company went ahead and advertised a Lammersville virtual academy and said the district was sponsoring it. K12 hired teachers and recruited students, many from the Bay Area. In the end, though, K12 wound up with no state funds for those students and had to pay for them all.

CONTROLLED ENVIRONMENT

Despite its troubles, California's new virtual school has the approval of Stanford Professor Mike Kirst, a leading voice in education policy.

"There are a lot of people out there looking for

high-quality curriculum that gives them a lesson for every day," said Kirst, a paid adviser to K12. Kirst also envisions a cyber-classroom blend. "California schools are so weak in art and music -- but you can do a lot with showing art and hearing music on the computer," he said.



Adam Miles of Clayton has a simpler reason for sending 10-year-old Mikaelyn to cyber class, not regular school: "boys."

"We just felt that we could do a better job of controlling her environment," Miles said.

So he enrolled her in the Lammersville virtual academy last year, and intended to re-enroll her for fifth grade. Two weeks ago, he got word that it had closed.



"Maybe I'm missing something here," Miles said, "but I don't really care."

That's because, unlike a school of brick and mortar, cyber lessons are transferable. Mikaelyn will simply study K12's fifth-grade curriculum through another charter this year.

"The school is dynamic," Miles said. "We haven't looked back."

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