



# SCREEN TEST

Enrollment for K-12 online education is exploding in our state, but some are wondering whether there's a downside to the online diploma

BY ELIZABETH M. ECONOMOU

**SIXTEEN-YEAR-OLD KONNER ACKERMAN**, a full-time gymnast who placed sixth in the Junior Olympics' pommel horse event last May in Cincinnati, is about to begin his sophomore year, and he'll do so without ever entering his local school—Mount Rainier High School in Des Moines. But Konner is not being homeschooled—at least not in the traditional sense. He's working toward his diploma by taking online courses. In his case, it's through Insight Schools, a Portland-based company that operates Bellevue-based Insight Schools of Washington—a free, full-time, diploma-granting online public high school. The program is overseen by the Quillayute Valley School District in Forks.

Konner, whose life revolves around competitive gymnastics, says he spends about five hours a day online doing schoolwork. He's never actually met his teachers, who are scattered around the state and country but are all certified in Washington state. Konner—who communicates with his teachers at least once a week—says the best part of Insight is the supportive nature of his teachers and the flexibility that online learning offers. “I

don't have to get up early in the morning; I can sleep in,” he says. For students like Konner who take classes through Insight, teachers schedule at least one live session per week for every course, at which time they can talk, write or share PowerPoint or video-streaming lessons. Educators can also “meet” with individual students or small groups in their virtual offices for tutoring or solving problems. Students, meanwhile, read lessons online and submit their work electronically.

In Washington state, the number of K-12 students taking online classes has increased dramatically, from about 6,100 during the 2002-2003 academic year to nearly 14,000 in the 2007-2008 school year, according to the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI). Insight High School has grown from 630 in 2006—the first year it operated—to 2,000, according to principal Frank Walter.

But with this growth have come a number of issues not originally addressed in 2005 when the state passed a law that authorized school districts that operate online programs to claim the same per-student funding as traditional public schools. Among those concerns: oversight of these schools—many of which are for-profit—and consistency among them. Another emerging issue is whether such schools put college-bound students at a disadvantage.

The Washington State Legislature began dealing with some of these issues during its last session when it passed Senate Bill 5410, whose goals, says Sen. Eric Oemig (D-Kirkland), prime sponsor of the bill, are to improve access and quality. The bill will create standards for online programs where there have been virtually none. “We're not unique in Washington state,” notes Martin Mueller, assistant superintendent for student support with the OSPI. “Everyone is trying to find out the right way to do it, and every state is wrestling with this [online learning].”

The online learning bill requires that all online schools be accredited; the OSPI will develop an approval process for online learning providers and establish a statewide Office of Online Learning. At the moment, Joe Pope, executive director of the Northwest Association of Accredited Schools (NAAS), a regional accreditation

organization, says only six online schools that contract with the state's public school districts have gone through the rigorous three-year accreditation process by NAAS. “[Accreditation] means that credits, transcripts and diplomas from our school are accepted by all other member schools—high schools and colleges and universities,” says Walter of Insight, which is accredited.

University of Washington Professor Stephen T. Kerr, an expert in educational technology, lauds the Legislature for taking on issues related to the growth of online schools, but he also registers concern. “I worry a bit that the sorts of issues the new group will be asked to address could be dealt with in a fairly surface manner,” he says. “Much of the focus will be on numbers of students, numbers of courses, etc.... rather than on efforts to try to determine quality, effectiveness or value to the student.” He notes that not all online schools are created equal; many leave much room for improvement. Because much of the baseline model for virtual programs was formed 10 years ago—an eternity where technology is concerned—most of the programs have lagged behind advancements in interactive technology. “Online schools, to date, have not kept pace with Web 2.0 technologies, such as Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and MySpace; that's the next phase,” Kerr says.

Online learning also raises a critical financial issue for school districts, because districts are awarded money from the state based on a per-pupil-enrolled basis. That's something that worries Mike Ragan, vice president of the Washington Education Association (WEA), a math and physics teacher who represents the state's teachers union. When a student within the boundaries of Seattle Public Schools (SPS), for example, enrolls in a for-profit online school that is in partnership with another district, the state money for that student will go to the partner district and not SPS. “It has districts scrambling for funding,” says Ragan.

Despite the state's concerns about online learning, with the ubiquitous role technology plays in the lives of young people today, it's likely that online learning will continue to grow. “It's a sign of

the times,” says Pope of NAAS. Virtual courses appeal to a wide variety of students—from those who live in rural communities where advanced placement (AP) or college courses are not available, to students who work to support their families, those who've fallen behind in traditional classrooms or those, like Ackerman, who are pursuing their passions.

Insight—if not all online schools—also tries to fill the social gap left when students don't spend time in a traditional school. Walter notes that his school encourages a vibrant online community among students and has some face-to-face social events during the year. “We also have a real graduation and prom,” he notes.

Of course, virtual learning—even with a social side—isn't for everyone, says Kerr, the UW professor. Students who'll benefit the

most from digital learning are those with “a kind of self-starting, take-charge attitude,” he says. “The passive student won't be as successful at online learning.” Ragan, of the WEA, has additional concerns. Online-only students may miss out on cultural diversity and a sense of community that a traditional school provides. Equally worrisome is that online students could be exposed to superficial learning, not the type of deep pedagogy that encourages and develops thinking skills, he says.

One unknown regarding online learning—specifically for high school students—is whether colleges will give equal value to online courses and an online diploma. At Seattle Pacific University (SPU), Amy Evans, an admissions counselor, says of the university's admissions review: “We're looking for good academic rigor and grade trend.” That's not to say that SPU would not accept applicants with one or two unaccredited online courses if they had high SAT and/or ACT scores. Evans says SPU considers the mix of courses, including honors and AP, and evaluates on a course-by-course, student-by-student basis. Dr. Philip Ballinger, director of undergraduate admissions at the UW, says online learning hasn't been an issue at the UW, and he doesn't anticipate that changing. He points to his experience with applications from homeschooled students,

## THE ABCS OF ONLINE LEARNING

IN WASHINGTON, students can enroll in online learning programs offered by one of the state's school districts—but not necessarily the student's home school district. Students may attend full-time or enroll for a specific course while taking classes at a traditional school in their district. ¶ Students who take online courses as part of their regular class schedule may be required to be physically in the school for those classes—such as an AP calculus class that a school district purchases from an online provider. In this type of situation, the online-school vendor provides a teacher electronically, while the district supplies an onsite teacher or supervisor. ¶ Alternative learning experiences (ALEs), on the other hand, are online courses that students take from a distance. Fully accredited Federal Way Internet Academy—run by the Federal Way School District—offers full-time and part-time courses to students K-12 statewide, and is considered an ALE. ALEs may serve students with unique needs such as teenage mothers or students who have either failed a course or are physically unable to attend school because of an illness. With ALEs, there is no brick-and-mortar requirement. ¶ Online schools are not run by the state. Instead, they may be run by school districts—such as the Federal Way program—or may have partnerships with various school districts.

who are sometimes better prepared than students who attend traditional schools, and believes the same may hold true for online learning. Despite the complexities of online learning, the growing popularity of this option is a clear indication that virtual schooling is filling a huge need. As for Konner, he hopes to one day train to become a chiropractor or massage therapist. But in the meantime, he says, “I want to earn a college scholarship and compete—I'm willing to go as far as my body will take me,” he says. **S**

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