

WV students can take extra classes through virtual school - 3/18/08
By Cecelia Mason

Lead: For eight years now, high school and middle school students across WV have been able to augment their education through the state's virtual school. In 2003, students from a Hampshire County middle school were the first to enroll in the virtual school. Since then it's grown to educate nearly six thousand students. Cecelia Mason reports:

(student speaking Spanish)

Mason: Eighth grade students at Warm Springs Middle School near Berkeley Springs are working on their Spanish. Through the WV Virtual School these students are getting a jump on their education by taking high school Spanish. The Technology Director for the state Education Department, Brenda Williams, says this is one of the many courses the Virtual School offers.

Williams: So you'll find things from, anything from fine art, foreign language, health, math, even physical education, reading, language arts, science, social studies, career and technical education.

Mason: Williams says the virtual school provides students with courses they might not be able to take. In some cases, there might not be enough qualified teachers in a county. And sometimes students take virtual classes because they have scheduling conflicts or want to take more advanced placement courses. A virtual class costs the state between two and eight hundred dollars a course. Williams says through the Virtual School students all over the state have access to the classes they need:

Williams: These students need to have equal access to quality courses, not only the core courses but the electives. We have such limitations in some of our rural areas just because we can't get enough qualified teachers. This way it doesn't hurt their opportunity to learn.

(Spanish class)

Mason: The virtual middle school Spanish classes are some of the most successful. About 650 seventh and eighth graders across the state are taking high school level Spanish over a two year period. A facilitator helps in the classroom and adjuncts grade the work on line. Mary Sullivan is one of the teachers who work with the students by phone once a week:

Sullivan: That's the time that we do a little bit of review. Joyce and I have studied what the students have been doing. We've looked at their tests; they know what they need to review. We prepare reviews, we do a lot of oral Spanish, a lot of drills and then we also teach the lesson of the day.

Mason: Sullivan and her partner Joyce McClanahan also give students quizzes and interactive exercises on line:

McClanahan: There are lots of flash card activities where students will see a Spanish word and they will have to say what it means in English and they see the answer. They'll see lots of matching activities where they're matching the Spanish words up with the English. They're really cued activities that Mary and I have created. We have over a hundred of them for the students. And not only are they a fun game for the students but also they are learning as they work through them.

Mason: When a student takes on-line courses, their school assigns a teacher, counselor or administrator to mentor or facilitate the class. At Warm Springs Middle School Hazel Morton is the Virtual Spanish teacher. Morton is retired from the U-S Army and has taught high school Spanish in several states. She's a big fan of the virtual school:

Morton: And it is just a wonderful program because it opens up the culture to them. We can go to any site on the Internet and see the holidays in Spain, go to the Prado if we want to see art. So it's just wonderful. Before you'd have to find a National Geographic, try to find a picture of Spain. This just is right here at your fingertip.

Mason: Morton says her classes learn about Spanish culture by trying the food, making crafts and celebrating holidays:

Morton: We do a project for each holiday, Día de los Muertos, la navidad, we have el cinco de mayo coming up so we'll be doing something with that. Unfortunately all of our snow days kept us from doing our valentine and I think that hurt all the chicos because they didn't get to make a valentine for their sweetie pie.

Mason: Each student in the eight grade Spanish class at Warm Springs has a module book that outlines what they will work on each week. The students are learning computer skills by taking tests on-line and sending voice mail to adjuncts who work with them on pronunciation. They are also required to put together a power point presentation in Spanish that is used throughout the state. Antonio McKee hopes taking Spanish in middle school will give him an edge in high school and beyond

McKee: I'm taking this class because I want to learn a foreign language and Spanish, at our high school they offer four years of it. And I can get the first year done here and get a high school credit and Spanish is one of the most rapidly growing languages in the world so I figure I might as well learn it now rather than later.

(Spanish class)

Mason: Students can take virtual classes at school, at the library or at home if they have internet access. To be successful students need to be self motivated and disciplined. The state provides a self assessment test so students can determine whether on-line learning is for them.

For West Virginia Public Broadcasting I'm Cecelia Mason in Shepherdstown.