Counseling Is a Virtual Experience for Students at Online Schools

By Benjamin Herold

Kim Rogusky spends her days helping high school seniors plan for life after graduation, responding to teens' occasional crises, and plowing through endless administrative tasks—the typical work of a school guidance counselor.

But Ms. Rogusky, who works for the 8,000-student Commonwealth Connections Academy, the third-largest full-time online school in Pennsylvania, does nearly all of her work in cyberspace, interacting with students across the state primarily from her small cubicle in an office building in Harrisburg.

"It's definitely a challenge to my counseling skills," Ms. Rogusky said. "It's hard when [students] can't see that I'm smiling at them."

Nationwide, an estimated 310,000 students in 30 states now attend "multi-district, fully online" schools such as Commonwealth Connections, according to the Evergreen
Education Group, a consulting firm based in Durango, Colo. As the sector grows, those running the schools—usually states or charter school boards, both of which often contract with private companies for management services—are wrestling with how to better support the academic, social, and emotional needs of students they rarely see in person.

"The challenge is to make sure [full-time online schools] are really providing a comprehensive school counseling program to students," said H. Eric Sparks, the assistant director of the American School Counselors Association, or ASCA, based in Alexandria, Va. "It's very much a developing field."

Maurice E. Flurie III, the CEO of Commonwealth Connections Academy, in his Harrisburg, Pa., office, said his school recently hired four new counselors.

—Jessica Kourkounis for Education Week

Proponents say that virtual school counseling has its advantages, particularly for students more comfortable interacting online than in person. And some of the counseling practices utilized in full-time online schools are now being taken up by traditional schools seeking to catch up with their tech-savvy students.

But how to best respond to at-risk children who may be located hundreds of miles away and how to ensure the confidentiality of sensitive student information disclosed online remain challenges.

Cost is also an issue: Watchdogs maintain that, given their generally poor academic performance and high student turnover, full-time online schools—particularly independent cyber charter schools run by for-profit management companies—need to be more transparent about how much they invest in support services.
"We have to be able to compare them to traditional brick-and-mortar schools so policymakers can make good decisions about how we're going to fund these schools," said Gary J. Miron, an education professor at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo.

**Emotional Support**

The *Stanford University Online High School* in Stanford, Calif., which charges $16,600 a year in tuition and serves exceptionally motivated students, isn't the typical full-time online school. But it does embody a trend in virtual guidance counseling.

In 2010, Stanford University Online High had one counselor for its 500 students, twice ASCA's recommended student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1.

Three years later, the school employs two full-time counselors, who focus primarily on students' social and emotional needs and offer help with issues such as anxiety, depression, and eating disorders; two academic advisers, who make sure students are enrolling in the right courses; and two full-time college counselors. Roughly 10 percent of the school's full-time online students receive short-term virtual counseling from the school's staff, who will refer the students to local professionals for more in-depth treatment when appropriate.

"We realized that full-time online students have the same needs as any adolescent," said Tracy Steele, the school's director of counseling. "So we became more of a school and less a set of online courses."

Publicly funded, full-time online schools are starting to embrace a similar approach, said Mr. Sparks of ASCA. But the challenge, he said, is figuring out how to effectively deliver well-rounded services online while safely storing and limiting access to confidential information that is disclosed via email or an online chat.

"Not having face-to-face interaction can make it more difficult to assess what's happening with students," Mr. Sparks said. "Distance can also be a problem—if there's some type of emergency, the counselor may not even know where the student is."

Ms. Steele said a nascent network of virtual school counselors has begun exploring protocols for such situations, as well as guidelines for online counseling caseloads and use of specific technologies. But "the best practices are still being developed," she said.
College Preparation

Maurice E. Flurie III, the CEO of Commonwealth Connections Academy, said his school recently hired four new counselors, to bring its total to 12. It also launched a new online career-planning course, part of a larger shift from making sure students accumulate the credits needed to graduate to helping them prepare for college and careers.

"It all meshes together pretty well," said Ms. Rogusky, now in her second year at the school. "The time spent with career planning, that's bringing to the surface more of the social and personal concerns students have."

Mr. Flurie touted the new approach as beneficial to Commonwealth Connection's students. The school's most recently published four-year cohort graduation rate, for the 2010-11 school year, is 83.1 percent, slightly above the statewide rate of 82.6 percent for all schools and second-highest among the dozen cyber charters in operation at that time.

But like many full-time online schools in Pennsylvania and across the country, Commonwealth Connections has struggled with student retention and academic performance. In its most recent annual report filed with the Pennsylvania Department of Education, the school indicated that 1,622 students—roughly 1 in 3—withdrawed during the 2011-12 school year. And like the rest of the state's cyber charters, Commonwealth Connections failed to make adequate yearly progress towards its federally mandated academic performance targets that year, the most recent for which data is available.

Mr. Miron of Western Michigan University said that type of student churn and poor academic performance likely has something to do with the scope and quality of the counseling being provided to students. But he said many such schools—especially those managed in part by for-profit companies, including Commonwealth Connections, which contracts with Connections Education, a division of education publishing giant Pearson—publicly report very little information about what they spend on supportive services.

"When we try to look at these schools' expenditures, it's hard to tell how that money is being used," Mr. Miron said.
Mr. Flurie said his school spends an average of approximately $10,400 per student but has not broken out how much of that goes to counseling services.

Despite the questions, many are excited about the potential for virtual counseling to help further personalize each child's school experience—in both online and traditional brick-and-mortar schools.

Ms. Steele of Stanford University Online High said that shift is already underway: In a recent survey of ASCA members, she and her colleagues found that more than one-fourth of counselors are already using technology to remotely deliver services to their students, and that almost half believe that online communication can be an effective counseling technique.

"I think there is an opportunity for this model to serve a wider range of students," she said. "This is just the start."

*Coverage of entrepreneurship and innovation in education and school design is supported in part by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Education Week retains sole editorial control over the content of this coverage.*