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1 OF 6 PHOTOS:
Students at Nansemond River High School in Suffolk meet with their World History teacher, Daniel Waller, for the first time during their virtual classroom on Monday, Nov. 4, 2013. Students introduced themselves and asked questions about their homework, test and how to reach the teacher. (Thé N. Pham | The Virginian-Pilot)

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By Cherise M. Newsome
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SUFFOLK

In McKenzie Cobb’s World History class, homework is submitted with a few keystrokes.

Narrated videos replace lectures. Questions are answered with a pop-up messages. Same thing for McKenzie’s physical education class, except she logs daily fitness activities, too.

The Nansemond River High School sophomore has joined hundreds of Hampton Roads students taking online courses, a growing option in secondary education. And now a required one.

Virtual public high school courses have been around about a decade in the region, but a new state law requires students to take one online course before graduating, beginning with this year’s freshmen class. State education leaders said the experience will help prepare students for college and careers. But students of all grade levels can take such courses.

McKenzie said online classes accommodate her Governor’s School for the Arts program that conflicted with traditional class times when the division changed its schedule this year. She completes coursework at home and also logs in at school with a teacher’s assistant supervising her and about a dozen others. McKenzie likes the flexibility, but noted some drawbacks.

“Some students get a whole class session; we get, like, an 11-minute video for a topic,” she said.

Classmate Emily Bowden said online courses work well for disciplined students, but the workload seems heavier.

“I miss quizzes,” she said. “Instead, they give us, like, projects.”

With online courses, teachers from across the state lead the classes, and students can take courses otherwise not offered at their school. Locally, school divisions have worked together to develop online content, partner with WHRO public TV and radio for additional courses, and also enroll students in the state’s Virtual Virginia online program.

The number of half-credit enrollments in the state’s online program nearly tripled in the last three years, from 6,988 at this time in 2011 to 19,607 now, according to information provided by a spokesman.

Generally, divisions pay a per-student license fee for the programs – around $10 – and provide textbooks and materials as with other classes. The costs have been absorbed in existing budgets.

There are several versions of online courses. In some self-paced courses, instruction, classwork and testing occur completely online. In others, students view live teaching on a computer and complete coursework on their own time.

For the new requirement, many Hampton Roads public school divisions are using a “blended” approach, incorporating online activities and assignments into traditional classroom instruction.
Portsmouth Public Schools’ technology supervisor Karen Streeter said many students gravitate to online courses because of their interest in technology.

“Schools are trying really hard to individualize learning, and so part of that is meeting the student where they are, part of that is providing learning opportunities in the mode that’s most comfortable for them,” she said.

Chesapeake Public Schools uses the blended method for its Economics and Personal Finance course, also a graduation requirement typically taken in the junior year, so it’s a two-for-one deal to offer it online, school leaders said.

But some School Board members during their meeting last month questioned whether the division should use a fully online version.

Tom Mercer said the division’s course should mimic courses students will take in college.

“We’re kind of doing ‘Romper Room’ here and directing them,” he said at the meeting. “We’re at least moving in the right direction, and that’s why I don’t think we’re there yet.”

Superintendent James Roberts said then that the blended model helps ensure all students meet the requirement.

“That’s a lot of equity issues about who’s got a computer and who doesn’t if you’re going to require it – especially the online component – completely, where the student doesn’t come to class,” he said.

To that end, local schools provide computers and other resources to help students meet the requirement.

For example, at Nansemond River High students gather in an assistant principal’s office to videoconference with their online history teacher from Lakeland High. More than a half dozen Monday peppered Daniel Waller with questions about timed tests and study guides while peering through a web camera attached to a large monitor.

It was their first face-to-face interaction this year after scheduling and technology glitches. Waller offered a pep talk after the students worried about completing assignments with their hectic Governor’s School schedules.

He promised to be available when needed, but reminded them to log in consistently. Discipline is key, he said.

“The pressure is on you guys to make this a success, and I have all the faith in the world that all of you will.”

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