Moving into the virtual classroom

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HESPERIA • When Beamon Parker, 13, has a question regarding his pre-algebra homework, he simply picks up the phone and calls his teacher.

The seventh-grader from Hesperia is in one sense a traditional homeschooler, however he does most of his learning online and participates in daily virtual classroom lessons from his Macbook laptop.

“When I go in a live lesson room there’s a whole bunch of other students there,” Beamon said. “I can hear my teacher talking but I can’t see her face.”

Beamon attends the online public charter school called Capistrano Connections Academy. The school has more than 2,000 students enrolled from across Southern California, including Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino and San Diego counties. It touts a diverse student body including competitive athletes with rigorous schedules, children pursuing acting or other careers or hobbies, and previously homeschooled students, according to a Connections Academy spokesperson.

The school is also fully accredited by the Schools Commission of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) and employs state-credentialed teachers.

“I don’t think there is any doubt the trend for education is going toward more sophisticated technology,” said Dan Evans, a spokesman for the San Bernardino County superintendent of schools. “The use of virtual classrooms and virtual teaching is certainly going to have an impact, but I don’t think we’re there yet.”

While the online classroom model doesn’t appear to be the 21st century norm for kindergarten through 12th grade students, online schools are cropping up more and more. Last year, the Taylon High Desert Academy opened its doors, offering a locally-based virtual school option.

“He was doing OK in a regular public school,” Beamon’s mom Stacey Parker said while describing why the family made the switch when he was in third grade. “It just felt like he could do better. I think he just needed more individually paced lessons because some things he wasn’t really excelling at, and we knew something needed to change.”

Since joining the online learning platform, Beamon has improved his reading, overcome stuttering, and advanced to gifted and talented science courses where he is excelling. Last semester he stood out among his peers for choosing to clean up the nearby desert outside his house.

He has a 120 percent grade in his science class, he says, after checking the gradebook online himself.

“I do feel like in this environment I give more individual attention,” said Connections teacher Paromita Das. “I really get to spend time with the student and their family. A lot of times I’m also talking to a parent or caretaker and sometimes conversations are 30 minutes to an hour.”

The Aliso Viejo-based online school is enrolling for the 2014-15 school year. For more information see www.connectionsacademy.com/southern-california-virtual-school/home.aspx.
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