Online classes multiply in state

Nicole Rizzitano practices pirouettes at ballet school in Seattle, but she expects to graduate 2,500 miles away in May from the North Hills School District. That's because Rizzitano, 17, a senior originally from Ross, totes her laptop to Pacific Northwest Ballet School and takes online classes from North Hills when she is not dancing.

By Bill Zlatos

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Rennick Kilpatrick, 20 months watches as his brother Tristan Kilpatrick, 7 of West View works on a language arts assignment from the North Hill School District while his mother teaches an Irish step class in Wexford Friday, February 28, 2014.

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Details
Sample of online school programs
• The Online Academy at North Hills
"Taking online classes from North Hills meant graduating from North Hills High School, which is what I wanted since I was little," said Rizzitano, who left her family in September to move to Seattle and concentrate on her ballet.

Pennsylvania public school districts in the past few years began opening online schools as they watched enrollment decline with the advent of cyber charter schools that siphoned their state funding, a formula legislators are reviewing. Pittsburgh Public Schools, for example, formed its online school two years ago when projections showed it would pay cyber charters who enroll students from the district $11.4 million in 2016-17, up from $232,200 in 2000-01.

"Online learning is extremely popular because it provides districts with options to provide students with flexible classrooms, but it does it in a very cost-effective way," said Denise Decheck, program director of Waterfront Learning, the Allegheny Intermediate Unit's online program. More than 40 school districts contract with the AIU for some or all their online learning programs.

About 2 million K-12 students take an online course in the United States, according to the International Association for K-12 Online Learning. Of those, 310,000 take all of their classes online.

Pennsylvania started online education differently from most states, said Allison Powell, vice president for state and district services/new learning models for the association.

Most states began with their departments of education offering students an online course or two to supplement what they were doing in their school district. Pennsylvania began with cyber charter schools, which are not affiliated with school districts, offering all their courses online. As of last year, 16 cyber charters in Pennsylvania taught 35,000 students, up from one school with 155 students in 2002.

A prime attraction for students is flexibility.

"I like it better because it works better with my schedule," said Kate Meyers, a junior in the Norwin School District.

Meyers, 16, of North Huntingdon switched to online classes because they allow her to take more graphics arts classes than just the one Norwin offers.

Her mother, Mary Beth Meyers, said the online classes also allow her daughter to take private guitar and dance lessons.

"It's working out well with Kate," she said. "She's very time-disciplined."

Students who go to schools such as the Online Academy at North Hills like being connected to a district — they can go to the prom, for example — even though they go to class outside the traditional setting. Tristan Kilpatrick, 7, of West View was able to celebrate Valentine's Day with first-graders at Highcliff Elementary School in the North Hills School District. He takes the district's online language arts course at home and is home-schooled in other subjects.

"He enjoyed being able to hang out with the kids," said his mother, Jolie Kilpatrick, 28.

Experts say, however, that online learning is not for everybody, and enrollment in districts' online programs still pales to brick-and-mortar schools. Pittsburgh's online school has 124 students. The rest of the district has about 25,000.

"Some students don't have the individual motivation to do their work," Decheck said. "In online learning there are no bells."

Most virtual programs have built-in checks to make sure students are keeping up. Half of the city students in Pittsburgh's Online Academy, for example, attend a drop-in center on the South Side where they take their online courses. Cyber charters have drawn fire for test scores that lag behind their traditional counterparts.

But for students who are disciplined, virtual learning allows them to do what otherwise would be impossible. Toni Baldanzi, supervisor of ancillary programs at West Allegheny, which started its online program three years ago, recalled a student who took classes on her laptop in North Carolina so she could be with her father in the military.

"She was able to take her school with her," Baldanzi said.