



Going to Cyber School

A unique schooling option is putting a virtual school in Clinton Township on parents' radar throughout the state.

By Kristine Stewart Hass

Twelve-year-old Julia Zink gets up in the morning to go to school just like all the other seventh grade students. But Julia doesn't get on a bus, or get driven to class. She sits at a desk at her home, connects to the Wi-Fi on her school computer and prepares for her day of class at home. Zink attends My Virtual Academy based in Clinton Township, but she lives in Farmington Hills.

There are times when a traditional school environment may not be the best fit for a student during his/her educational journey. My Virtual Academy is an online public school program that has partnered with 11 school districts throughout the state to offer students a unique homeschooling choice.

Zink loves the program because she can work at her own pace and on her own schedule. Her father, Raymond, said that the virtual school gives him an opportunity to really know what Julia is learning, which he didn't always experience with traditional school. He believes the program is preparing Julia for the future because, in addition to her schoolwork, she's learned some valuable communication, organizational and technology skills. "She has a jump start on a lot of computer skills," he said, referencing her regular use of software programs such as Word, Powerpoint and Excel. "She has more work than most of her friends, but she gets it done in less time," he said. Julia's favorite subject in seventh grade is science, finding the interactive element fun and engaging. Julia also said she likes the personal contact she has with her teachers and mentor.

Eighteen-year-old Rachel Manzella from Harrison Township finished her coursework for her senior year in April. She's graduating with students at Harper High since she's enrolled in My Virtual Academy through the Harper Woods School District. Rachel started the program as a junior so she could work at her own pace and because she was tired of bullying, she said. "I can work on my schedule and help watch my nieces," she said, noting that she knew students who like her finished early, some who were even done by January. "I would recommend it because I think I did better. The teachers were great and ready to help with any problems I had," she said. She thought the one-on-one communication was key to her success. Her favorite course as a senior was psychology. She's enrolling in training to become a certified medical assistant with hopes of working her way up from there.

Families with students in grades 6-12 may enroll in the program as a homeschooling option or they might choose it as a transitional solution. "There are many reasons a student might decide on the program," said the academy's Community Relations Director Mark Krutell. There may be family or health issues that make transportation to and from school challenging, social or disciplinary concerns that conflict with regular school attendance, or a family might be looking for a homeschooling choice that allows their children to work at their own pace and schedule. The academy's calendar runs parallel to the traditional school year — starting the day after Labor Day and ending in early June. What happens between those dates depends on the student's approach to tackling their required coursework, which is available to them 24/7.

Prior to enrollment, mentors from the school meet with potential students face to face. "We want to make sure it's a good fit for the students before we get them started in the program," said Katherine Tanevski, who is a mentor to students at the school. "We sit down with the parent and the student and say this is how the program works," Tanevski said. "We want to make sure they understand that the student has to be independent and the different things that it takes to be a good online student." The program requires self-discipline and an ability to work independently.

"It's an avenue for districts to provide students with another option," said Aaron Brown, My Virtual Academy's director of school development. The concept is new to many schools, but the feedback has been positive, he said. "The districts love that they have the ability to help some students who may fall through the cracks."



In its third year, My Virtual Academy has close to 400 students enrolled in its middle and high school programs. As part of enrollment, students are provided a computer, scanner and the Internet needed to have access to their coursework. Students are able to complete their work electronically 24 hours a day, seven days a week. They also have regular personal contact with school mentors and certified teachers via video streaming, instant messaging, email and telephone calls. Teachers are based at the school's Hall Road location and work from their own virtual classroom spaces.

"Eighty percent of the curriculum comes from Compass Learning and Odyssey, the two main platforms we use," said Brown. "The remaining 20 percent, our teachers create." This gives teachers the opportunity to tailor programs to meet the needs of each student," Brown said. The curriculum is very rigorous since each element is aligned with the state's educational standards and each student's mastery of those standards is closely tracked.

Students take standardized testing, such as the ACT, at their host district and earn diplomas with other graduates from the district. Upon graduation, students are awarded a \$500 scholarship from the academy to be applied to their continuing education. "We have students who have enrolled in Oakland University, Wayne State, some of the community colleges, as well culinary schools and other trade programs," says Krutell.

By taking advantage of school of choice opportunities, My Virtual Academy is an option for students living in Michigan's lower peninsula. Some of the academy's other partner districts include Harper Woods, Cheboygan Area Schools, Muskegon Public Schools and DeWitt Public Schools.

More information about My Virtual Academy and its alternative education affiliate programs is available online at myvirtualacademy.com or by telephone at 855.682.2333.