



Online school enrollment soars in summer

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The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
Monday, July 06, 2009

For as long as he can remember, 13-year-old Quinn Pratt has spent his summers at Camp Kingfisher in Marietta.

For him, few things are more important.

And so when he discovered he needed to take algebra to be on par with other rising freshmen at Holy Spirit Preparatory School, he knew he had to find a way to get it done this summer — without giving up camp.

Luckily for Quinn, of Atlanta, he could take the course online at Kaplan Virtual Education.

While virtual schools are nothing new, online summer school is quickly becoming a favorite among students and parents unwilling to sacrifice summertime pleasures. In fact, in some cases online school enrollment is increasing as brick-and-mortar enrollment decreases.

More than 1,500 private school students around the world are enrolled in Kaplan's online schools, including 200 like Quinn in metro Atlanta.

Administrators say that more students are going the online route either to replace a low or failing grade or to move ahead.

Quinn needed to take algebra so he'd be ready for ninth-grade geometry. Because neither Holy Spirit nor DeKalb Online Academy offered the course, his father Tom Pratt said Kaplan was the next best thing.

It's considered a leader in private online high school education, he said.

The four-week session came with a \$600 price tag, comparable to both brick-and-mortar summer schools and other local online schools across metro Atlanta. Costs range from \$275 for a half credit to \$550 for a full credit in Cobb County; from \$250 to \$500 in DeKalb and Fulton counties; and \$300 to \$600 for the state virtual school.

In Gwinnett County, online enrollment jumped 25 percent from 1,986 in 2008 to 2,490 this summer, according to Matt Waymack, director of the online program. The numbers have doubled since 2004, reducing the need for brick-and-mortar schools offering summer courses to three from four.

Susan Hale, spokeswoman for Fulton County, said enrollment in its online program grew from 400 in 2008 to 671 this year. By contrast, traditional summer school enrollment was down from 2,218 in 2008 to 1,638 this year.

Kaplan has been offering its online private school since 2001 and in 2007 acquired the program previously known as the University of Miami online high school, said Miriam Rube, principal of the online school.

She said it consists of a variety of programs, including one for adults who want a diploma to get ahead on their jobs and a college preparatory school.

The online summer school has proven to be popular, especially for parents looking for an alternative to traditional summer school.

Regina Merriwether, principal of the DeKalb Online Academy, said 800 students are enrolled this summer, a number that's been rising since 2005 when it first opened.

"The number of face-to-face sites have decreased tremendously since then because our online academy is taking the population," she said.

Just a year ago, she said, the county had two brick-and-mortar summer school locations. Now it has one.

More than 1,000 Georgia students are taking classes this summer in the state-run virtual school, said Dana Tofig, spokesman for the Georgia Department of Education.

Virtual summer school enrollment has grown from 856 students taking 1,182 classes in 2007 to the current 1,121 students taking 1,500 courses, Tofig said.

It's easy to understand the appeal.

"With virtual summer school, students can earn credits without derailing their plans for camps, job or vacation," said Tim Lafferty, executive director of instruction for Kaplan Virtual Education.

And that's what appealed to Quinn. After a long day at camp recently, he sat, with pen, paper and calculator, at his family's kitchen table, powered up his Mac book and got to work on equations.

Each course begins with a half-hour orientation in which students learn to log in, then they get their instructor's name.

Unless they have questions, they move through each lesson alone. They have homework to complete and quizzes and exams to take.

School administrators recommend that students spend five hours a day.

"I do two to three hours a day," Quinn said. "If I'm really tired, I can skip and catch up the next day."

Either way, he said, "This is much better than sitting in a classroom."