

## **Rural students look to e-learning for advanced courses**

By Michael Collins

Thirteen-year-old Brooke Westcott is a young writer who wants to better understand the building blocks of fiction.

But her small school in rural Missouri doesn't offer the kind of advanced writing courses that appeal to a budding author. So when she begins the eighth grade this fall, she will go online several hours a week and learn about plot devices, scene setting and character development.

"I've never taken a course when there's not a teacher directly in front of me to ask questions," said Brooke, who lives in Chula, Mo., a rural farm community near the Iowa border. "It will be really strange."

Strange, perhaps. But not that unusual.

More and more, students in rural districts are looking to distance education, or e-learning, to take advanced-level courses that aren't available in their schools.

A study released in March by the U.S. Department of Education found that one-third of public school districts had students enrolled in distance education courses in 2002-03. Nearly half of all rural school districts had students taking distance education courses.

Less than 10 years ago, no state used the Internet to provide courses to middle or high school students. But distance learning has exploded in popularity over the past few years as technology has improved and budget constraints have made it increasingly difficult for schools to offer a wide variety of courses.

Distance learning is especially popular in rural districts, where the student enrollment may be too small to justify offering many advanced-level courses.

"Rural schools are very much attracted to online courses and distance education because of the ability to get courses to their kids that they otherwise would not be able to get,"

said Liz Pape, president and chief executive officer of Virtual High School, which designs the online courses used by many schools.

Paul K. Smith, principal of Bolton High School in Bolton, Conn., was hoping that at least 10 percent of the school's 300 students eventually would enroll in an online course when the school began making them available last year.

The school surpassed that goal immediately. Forty students signed up for one of the courses the first year. All 40 seats for the upcoming school year already are filled.

"For several students, this has proven to be a real nice addition to their schooling," Smith said.

At Forks High School in Forks, Wash., about 80 students enroll every semester in online courses such as poetry, photography and advanced math. One student took first- and second-year German, which isn't offered at the school, then continued her studies in Germany as an exchange student.

"It was invaluable to her," Principal Steve Quick said.

In many cases, distance learning resembles an up-to-date version of traditional correspondence courses. Students go online to complete assignments, write essays and communicate via e-mail with other classmates and teachers whom they have never met.

But teleconferencing and interactive video also have become more common. Students in remote areas can now sit in a classroom at their school and watch a television monitor as a teacher hundreds of miles away delivers lectures on subjects such as physics, statistics and Irish literature.

"This is one of those moments in time when different districts are finding different opportunities with e-learning to solve different problems," **said Matthew Pittinsky, chairman and co-founder of Blackboard Inc.**, which provides the software and services that many schools use in online courses.

To get the most out of online and other distance learning courses, students must be independent, self-motivated and not have a great need for the social setting of a traditional classroom, educators say.

"Not every student is an online learner," Quick said.

Brooke's teachers suggested she take an online course after she tested high in reading on the ACT college entrance exam. She chose a short fiction workshop that will be offered this fall through Duke University's Talent Identification Program, which is geared toward academically gifted students.

Brooke's school agreed to pay half of her \$750 tuition for the program. Teachers at her school will review her online work and then give her a grade for the course.

Other students at Brooke's school could probably benefit from online courses, said her father, Jeff Westcott. The school has just 70 students in kindergarten through eighth grades.

"If we get more students who can test this high, this will be a way we can accelerate our gifted program and give the brighter students more opportunities," said Westcott, school board president.

Even in the age of computers and cell phones, students in isolated areas sometimes fail to recognize the world is literally right at their fingertips, Westcott said. "A lot of kids don't realize the opportunities that exist for them," he said. "I think this will help."