

Kaplan Virtual Education

Schools Designed to Fit the Student

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INTRODUCTION

In today's changing world, technology is revolutionizing the ways in which students can be educated. No longer must a student be destined to failure within the confines of the traditional brick and mortar school. Whether it is a student with learning disabilities who needs to study from home, a student who must tend to health concerns, a student who must balance school with work or sports, or a student who merely prefers home schooling, virtual high schools can be a great choice. KVE's pairing of technology

with strong pedagogy offers educational opportunities that prepare all of today's students for the twenty-first century.

WHO IS THE KVE ONLINE STUDENT?

Matt is an energetic seventh grader. His room is filled with pieces of the graphic novel he is writing and illustrating himself. Some of those pieces end up posted on his website. He estimates that he spends about two hours a day either working on the novel or looking at websites or postings of



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others. He is quick, curious and interested in the world, but sitting in a classroom has never engaged his attention or imagination. He was a successful student in elementary school, but his grades began to fall when he started middle school.

Esme is a sweet, shy girl. Her parents recently divorced, so she has had to adjust to living in both parents' houses. Esme plays the flute and participates in a community youth orchestra. She has two "best friends" who live close to her Mom's house, so she divides her time by hanging out with them, going to the movies, and shopping. When at her dad's, she keeps in touch by texting. The educational challenge is that her parents now live in two different school districts, and it is difficult for her father to get her to and from school every morning when she stays with him.

Anthony is at home recovering from several surgeries following an automobile accident. His doctor anticipates that he will return to school in six months, but for now, he needs help at home. Prior to the accident, Anthony ran track for his school, worked out with his older cousins on weekends, and worked after school. Now, he is bored. He tries to keep busy with his schoolwork but has trouble sitting for long periods of time. A tutor visits his house twice a week, but during the days and hours when Anthony is alone, he has trouble staying focused and engaged in his work. When he *does* try to do his schoolwork, he has nowhere to turn for help.

Raqui learned she was pregnant during the summer before her senior year of high school. She had always done well in school, but the combination of the pregnancy, working at the mall, and moving out of her parents' house made it impossible for her to keep up with her studies. Today, her baby is in a childcare center close to home, and Raqui is ready to go back to school full time—if only she could have some flexibility. She can't afford all-day childcare, and she still has to work at the mall. She knows that she needs to

bring up her math and science scores to graduate. Her plan is to go to nursing school and, eventually, medical school.

Matt, Esme, Anthony, and Raqui are not real students, but personas created by the Instructional Team at KVE to represent types of students who enroll in our online learning programs—some part time, some full time. These personas help to identify typical students who need online learning and to focus on what their needs might be. Many students choose online education because they have grown tired of having to adapt themselves to the format of traditional schooling—the classrooms, the class periods, the daily schedule, and the pacing of the curriculum. While many progressive and experimental schools exist across the United States, most students encounter a schooling model that has remained essentially unchanged for more than a hundred years. School tells children, "This is what school is. Your job is to fit into it, regardless of who you are." There is little room for flexibility. At KVE, we believe the school should shape itself to fit the student.

OUR LEADERSHIP

Our vision for excellence in distance learning stems from the leadership within Kaplan, Inc. Our leaders have strived to incorporate the best in pedagogical theory, unsurpassed technology for the new millennium, and staff committed to excellence in the online education environment.

KVE President, Charles Thornburgh, notes:

As we work to adapt and improve our education system, we are discovering that today's students have a broad variety of needs and require more options in order to reach their goals. The growing demand for a more flexible learning experience has inspired Kaplan Virtual Education to provide middle and high school students with a personalized and engaging educational alternative, integrating one-on-one support, a robust curriculum, flexible

instruction, and innovative technology. Free from the constraints of traditional schooling, students are discovering a world of possibilities.

In the past decade, the number of students participating in online learning has skyrocketed. We are seeing tremendous growth, not just in numbers but also in the type of students online learning attracts.... Increasingly, we are finding students turning to online education for a variety of different reasons—whether they are ahead of their classmates and are seeking more advanced coursework to attend a top-tier university, or live outside the country and are searching for a school in the U.S., or are adults in the workforce who are now seeking a high school diploma to advance their career.

OUR SCHOOLS

KVE offers flexible, online education through its private and public schools. Each program answers a student's or a district's individual needs and allows students flexible scheduling and online access to coursework.

KVE PRIVATE SCHOOLS

KVE offers three private online schools. These schools offer a range of curriculum for students in need of alternative education due to scheduling, sports, work, life situations, or to supplement their current high school curriculum in preparation for college.

Kaplan College Preparatory School (KCPS) is a private, accredited online college preparatory school for students in Grades 6-12.

Kaplan High School (KHS) is designed for students in grades 9-12 who prefer independent study and are able to work at a self-directed pace to achieve academic success according to their individual needs and schedules.

Kaplan University High School (KUHS) provides adults the opportunity to com-

plete their high school education and earn a diploma from an accredited institution.

KVE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

KVE offers public schooling through partnerships with various public education organizations in a number of states including California, Florida, Arizona, Kansas, Washington, Colorado, Oregon, Wisconsin, Virginia, and Idaho. Through these partnerships, KVE enables states and school districts to expand the range of courses offered to students and to offer high-quality instruction to students in many alternative educational settings.

OUR CURRICULUM MODEL

KVE designs courseware through its curriculum development division and uses courses licensed from curriculum vendors, which are selected on the basis of quality and comprehensiveness. KVE undertakes an evaluation of the curriculum itself, its level of engagement, and its flexibility for use with students of different populations.

The core course offerings cover all the essential subject divisions within each of these academic areas: language arts, mathematics, history/social studies, and science/health. KVE also offers an array of electives reflecting a wide range of student interests, including communications and the professions, fine arts, liberal arts, computer technology, practical skills, and career-oriented courses that focus on real-life experiences. KVE offers courses in Advanced Placement, Honors, Academic (grade-level), and Foundations levels.

Every course offered by KVE is built on research-based online instructional strategies and learning models, using rich interactive and multimedia elements to capture students' attention, to keep them engaged in the lesson, and to help them grasp difficult concepts and processes. The primary goals of our courses are to expand learning opportunities, improve student outcomes, and empower students to manage their

own learning. These goals guide content creation, design, and delivery: accessibility for all students, flexible pacing, multiple opportunities to achieve and demonstrate mastery, and development of a student-centered curriculum that is continually improved through research and iterative evaluations that guide refinements to its design and delivery.

OUR INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Online education is often criticized because of a perceived lack of social interaction. Critics imagine students sitting at home, alone, in a silent room, abandoned by both peers and caring adults. Nothing could be further from the truth. Today's Internet is a collection of communities where people come to connect. The Internet is the way many of today's teenagers already connect with the outside world, make and maintain friendships, and learn. An online learning environment provides an excellent vehicle for social cognitive learning through meaningful learning communities that create a sense of belonging.

An online school cannot be defined by its online curriculum any more than a brick and mortar school can be defined by its textbooks. A school, whether traditional or online, is an intricate network of relationships, conversations, and activities. Our teachers create and maintain educational relationships with students in a variety of ways making use of instructional strategies, both synchronous and asynchronous.

ELUMINATE SESSIONS

Elluminate sessions allow teachers to hold live class sessions in cyberspace, bringing students together in real time using an interactive whiteboard platform that allows participants to speak, write, show video, and run presentations. Teachers use Elluminate sessions to demonstrate

classroom concepts, supplement curriculum, and foster school community in a number of ways. We have seen dramatic presentations for English classes, virtual museum tours in art history classes, group problem solving in math classes, teacher demonstrations of lab experiments in science classes, vocabulary pronunciation practice in foreign language classes, and opportunities for group discussions across multiple classes.

Elluminate sessions allow teachers to group students in a number of different ways. Sometimes they bring entire class sections together; other times they may meet with individuals, pairs, or small groups. It is a perfect tool for differentiating instruction, allowing teachers to provide the level of support that each student needs without having to worry about what the rest of the class is doing. Students who require occasional coaching, but who can otherwise work independently, can do so using live sessions as interesting supplements to their core work. Students who require more direct instruction and live interaction to complete their work have regular live access to teachers and fellow students to have concepts reviewed or retaught. We have found that students who regularly attend live sessions become more engaged learners, develop stronger relationships with their teachers, and gain a deeper understanding of curricular concepts.

These sessions are recorded so that they can be made available for review or for students who are unable to attend the session. Teachers may also post archived sessions in our online Faculty Lounge to help peers in their own school or other KVE schools.

INSTANT MESSAGING

Instant messaging is a vital part of establishing and maintaining instructional and personal relationships between students and teachers in an online school. It keeps students connected to their teachers when they work from home and lets them know

that help is always just a click away. It gives teachers an opportunity to provide the kind of individual assistance and tutoring they often find difficult to provide in a brick and mortar setting. It also allows both students and teachers to participate in—and pull away from—an ongoing instructional conversation so they can move at their own pace to meet their own needs. As students do their work, they can “check in” with the teacher using instant messaging and then turn their attention back to their work without the teacher needing to “walk away.”

Instant messaging is also less ephemeral than a live conversation. What is said does not have to be lost in the moment. Participants can scroll back at any time to review what was said earlier. Instant message threads can also be saved as Word or Text files by students or teachers for future reference.

ASSESSMENTS

An instructional strategy often overlooked is assessment. Because assessments in a brick and mortar school are often centered on standardized tests, they are often not constructive or formative. At KVE, assessment is one of the major tools that online teachers use with their students. Because the students are not sitting in front of the teacher, a higher value is placed on students’ work. It is how the teachers “know” the students. Because of this dynamic, teachers spend more time on the assignments. Constructive feedback is given to the student, usually within 48 hours. This allows the students to revise and grow from every assignment. It also allows both teacher and student to ask questions of each other and to LISTEN to the answers given. Students learn by asking questions. The comments made on assessments open new avenues for discussions

OTHER STRATEGIES

Teachers use various other strategies to assist students in understanding assignments. These include graphic organizers,

study guides, outlines, VoiceThreads, videos, webquests, podcasts, providing links to websites, telephone tutorials, and video e-mails.

MEETING INDIVIDUAL LEARNING CHALLENGES

Our teachers see each student as a unique individual. For this reason, they work hard to create a pathway for each student to reach success. Teachers monitor to ensure that students are placed correctly in their courses. This sometimes involves moving students from Academic sections to Foundations level, or the opposite, encouraging students to move into Honors sections to encourage their growth and development. Even if students are placed correctly, they still may need something that other students do not need. Teachers often create special work sessions to help students who need remediation or provide advanced topics and assignments to higher-level students who require more challenge.

OUR COMMITMENT TO TEACHERS

We recognize that the online teaching environment is quite different from the traditional classroom. In fact, in many ways, when teachers begin to work online, it is as if they are first-year teachers again. Professional development and ongoing support for teachers is a vital part of KVE’s success.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

At KVE, we continually discuss and evaluate how to define the teacher’s role, how to focus more of our efforts on instruction, and how to train and support our teachers. Our teaching community is also a learning community. Because of this, professional development is not considered something that has to be “delivered” from the top down. It is, instead, an ongoing

ing professional dialogue involving every aspect of our organization.

This ongoing dialogue takes place through workshops, live meetings, conference calls, and in our online Faculty Lounge. The Faculty Lounge provides training materials, demonstrations and tutorials, information on technology, reading lists, and connections to other staff members across the country. It creates a national network of online teachers—a place to go for ideas, materials, or just a chance to chat.

SCHOOL SITE CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

At the school site, principals and teachers examine and analyze school data and then set obtainable goals. They hold weekly departmental and staff meetings to examine student achievement and discuss ways to help specific students. Principals and teachers also participate in collaborative staff training using Elluminate. Teachers work together, within and across schools, using e-mail and instant messaging.

As one of our teachers has noted, “The administration promotes a ‘willing to learn’ attitude regarding KVE schools.”

We know that the best teachers are also the best learners, and we believe this is true for organizations as well. Our goal is to learn and grow together. We know that teachers who feel fulfilled and happy tend to have higher-performing students and tend to stay with the organization longer.

REAL STORIES, REAL SUCCESSES

We began this article with student “personas,” our way of imagining the types of situations and challenges that lead students to pursue online education, to ensure that we are designing and implementing programs that meet the real needs of real students. We conclude with some of those real students. All student names have been changed.

Roger suffered years of ridicule because of his obesity, and drugs had become the only way he could cope with the pressure he was feeling from his peers. He was working through a serious drug problem. His mother sent him to counseling, but he needed a change in environment to cure his dependency. With our online school, she felt confident that Roger would be able to focus more clearly on his education and focus less on the negative influences of his former school. Roger began working diligently in his courses and became more interested in some of his former hobbies and healthier habits. He regained his self-confidence and has moved away from drugs and negative influences.

Grace has been dealing with Lyme disease, which saps her energy level. There are days she can barely get out of bed. Attending a brick and mortar school on a regular basis was simply not possible for her. Our school has allowed her to gain high school credits in her own way and work toward her goal of attending and graduating from college.

Carlos is an autistic student with several learning disabilities. He has difficulty organizing information, knowing how to limit research, and writing. In cooperation with his mother, his teacher was able to modify the work through the use of graphic organizers and alternative assignments. Carlos was able to work at his own pace, review readings and assignments as often as necessary, and ask questions without risk of embarrassment. Carlos completed the last semester with a grade of “A.”

OUR FUTURE

Now and in the future, we will continue to fulfill our core values. By adhering to our core values of integrity, opportunity, knowledge, support, and results, we provide our students the educational opportunities they deserve and the educational experience that will prepare them for the twenty-first century.