NOVEMBER 12, 2011

My Teacher Is an App

More kids than ever before are attending school from their living rooms, bedrooms and kitchens. The result: A radical rethinking of how education works.

By STEPHANIE BANCHERO and STEPHANIE SIMON

(associated video)
http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204358004577030600066250144.html?KEYWORDS=STEPHANIE+BANCHERO#articleTabs%3Dvideo

Allison Schnacky attends an online school at her Florida home.

It was nearing lunchtime on a recent Thursday, and ninth-grader Noah Schnacky of Windermere, Fla., really did not want to go to algebra. So he didn't.

Tipping back his chair, he studied a computer screen listing the lessons he was supposed to complete that week for his public high school—a high school conducted entirely online. Noah clicked on his global-studies course. A lengthy article on resource shortages popped up. He gave it a quick scan and clicked ahead to the quiz, flipping between the article and multiple-choice questions until he got restless and wandered into the kitchen for a snack.

Noah would finish the quiz later, within the three-hour time frame that he sets aside each day for school. He also listened to most of an online lecture given by his English teacher; he could hear but not see her as she explained the concept of a protagonist to 126 ninth graders logged in from across the state. He never got to the algebra.

His sister Allison, meanwhile, has spent the past two hours working on an essay in the kitchen. She has found a new appreciation of history. At her old school, she says, the teacher stood at the blackboard and droned, and history was "the boringest class ever." Now, thanks to the videos she's been watching on ancient Egypt, she loves it.

From the outside it looks pretty much like any other high school. Inside? Maybe not. WSJ's Stephanie Simon reports on iPrep Academy, Miami's newest public high school.

In a radical rethinking of what it means to go to school, states and districts nationwide are launching online public schools that let students from kindergarten to 12th grade take some—or all—of their classes from their bedrooms, living rooms and kitchens. Other states and districts are bringing students into brick-and-mortar schools for instruction that is largely computer-based and self-directed.

In just the past few months, Virginia has authorized 13 new online schools. Florida began requiring all public-high-school students to take at least one class online, partly to prepare them for college cybercourses. Idaho soon will require two. In Georgia, a new app lets high-school students take full course loads on their iPhones and BlackBerrys. Thirty states now let students take all of their courses online.

Nationwide, an estimated 250,000 students are enrolled in full-time virtual schools, up 40% in the last three years, according to Evergreen Education Group, a consulting firm that works with online schools. More than two million pupils take at least one class online, according to the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, a trade group.

 Allison Schnacky, 11, works through the public school sixth-grade curriculum at her kitchen table.

Although some states and local districts run their own online schools, many hire for-profit corporations such as K12 Inc. of Herndon, Va., and Connections Academy in Baltimore, a unit of education services and technology company Pearson PLC. The companies hire teachers, provide curriculum, monitor student performance—and lobby to expand online public education.

It's all part of a burst of experimentation in public education, fueled in part by mounting budgetary pressures, by parental dissatisfaction with their kids' schools and by the failure of even top-performing students to keep up with their peers in other industrialized countries. In the nation's largest cities, half of all high-school students will never graduate.

Advocates say that online schooling can save states money, offer curricula customized to each student and give parents more choice in education.

A few states, however, have found that students enrolled full-time in virtual schools score significantly lower on standardized tests, and make less academic progress from year to year, than their peers. Critics worry that kids in online classes don't learn how to get along with others or participate in group discussions. Some advocates of full-time cyberschools say that the disappointing results are partly because some of the students had a rough time in traditional schools, and arrive testing below grade level in one or more subjects.

(see below)The ABCs of Online Schools

The experimental schools draw a diverse lot. Some students were previously home-schooled, some are high achievers and others have erratic schedules because of sports training or health problems. Many are ordinary kids who didn't prosper in traditional schools or whose parents want to shelter them from bullying and peer pressure. They are, however, less likely to be poor or to have special needs than the general public-school population, according to data from state education officials and from online schools.
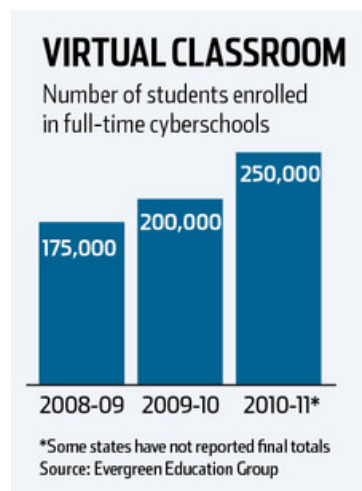
One promising approach, many experts say, is hybrid schools, which blend online study with face-to-face interaction with teachers.

In California, Rocketship Education, a chain of charter hybrid schools that serves mostly poor and minority kids, has produced state test scores on par with some of the state's wealthiest schools. Rocketship students spend up to half of each school day in computer labs playing math and literacy games that adjust to their ability level.

At Southwest Learning Centers, a small chain of charter schools in Albuquerque, N.M., standardized test scores routinely outpace state and local averages, according to data provided by the schools. Students complete most lessons online but come into class for teacher support and hands-on challenges, such as collaborating to design and build a weight-bearing bridge. The high school recently received a statewide award for its students' strong scores on the ACT college admissions test.

Allison Brown, a Georgia mother of three, says that she intended to enroll her son in the local public school for kindergarten last year until she met with an administrator there to discuss how the school might accommodate his advanced reading skills. She says the teacher told her that her son would be challenged—by helping other kids to learn their letters. So she enrolled her son in an online school where he could advance rapidly into higher grade levels.

Her son, Aarington, is now in first grade at Georgia Cyber Academy, and she has also enrolled her twins there for kindergarten. Ms. Brown has set up her basement as a mini-school, complete with counting blocks, reading nook and blackboard, and she tutors the kids through their online curriculum for most of each day. She says they're all thriving, and she plans to keep them in a full-time online school at least for the next several years.

VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

Number of students enrolled in full-time cyberschools

175,000 — 2008-09
200,000 — 2009-10
250,000 — 2010-11*

*Some states have not reported final totals
Source: Evergreen Education Group

"I don't think learning has to happen at school, in a classroom with 30 other kids and a teacher…corralling all children into learning the same thing at the same pace," she says. "We should rethink the environment we set up for education."

Colleges and universities have offered online courses for decades. The practice first cropped up in secondary schools in the early 1990s, when a few states began offering virtual Advanced Placement and foreign-language classes to high-school students. Cybercourses were also promoted as a convenient way for students who had failed a class to make up the credit.

The amount of teacher interaction varies. At online-only schools, instructors answer questions by email, phone or the occasional video conference; students will often meet classmates and teachers on optional field trips and during state exams. Southwest Learning Centers requires just 14 hours a week of classroom time and lets students set their own schedules, deciding when—or whether—to come in on any given day. And in Miami, students at iPrep Academy work in free-flowing "classrooms" with no doors or dividing walls but plenty of beanbag chairs and couches. Teachers give short lectures and offer one-on-one help, but most learning is self-directed and online.

"If it seems strange, that's because it is strange," says Alberto Carvalho, superintendent of the Miami schools. But he sees no point in forcing the iPod generation to adapt to a classroom model that has changed little in 300 years.

Noah Schnacky, 14, says he likes expressing his thoughts at the keyboard instead of in a crowded classroom.

The drive to reinvent school has also set off an explosive clash with teachers unions and backers of more traditional education. Partly, it's a philosophical divide. Critics say that cyberschools turn education into a largely utilitarian pursuit: Learn content, click ahead. They mourn the lack of discussion, fear kids won't be challenged to take risks, and fret about devaluing the softer skills learned in classrooms.

"Schools teach people the skills of citizenship—how to get along with others, how to reason and deliberate, how to tolerate differences," says Jonathan Zimmerman, a professor of educational history at New York University.

The growth of cybereducation is likely to affect school staffing, which accounts for about 80% of school budgets. A teacher in a traditional high school might handle 150 students. An online teacher can supervise more than 250, since he or she doesn't have to write lesson plans and most grading is done by computer.

In Idaho, Alan Dunn, superintendent of the Sugar-Salem School District, says that he may cut entire departments and outsource their courses to online providers. "It's not ideal," he says. "But Idaho is in a budget crisis, and this is a creative solution."

Other states see potential savings as well. In Georgia, state and local taxpayers spend $7,650 a year to educate the average student in a traditional public school. They spend nearly 60% less—$3,200 a year—to educate a student in the statewide online Georgia Cyber Academy, saving state and local tax dollars. Florida saves $1,500 a year on every student enrolled online full time.

For individual school districts, though, competition from online schools can cause financial strain. The tiny Spring Cove School District in rural Pennsylvania lost 43 of its 1,850 students this year to online charter schools. By law, the district must send those students' share of local and state tax dollars—in this case $340,000—to the cyberschool. Superintendent Rodney Green, already struggling to balance the budget, cut nine teaching jobs, eliminated middle-school Spanish and French and canceled the high-school musical, "Aida."

Dennis Van Roekel, president of the National Education Association, the nation's largest teachers union, says that his organization opposes full-time online schools but supports integrating virtual lessons into classrooms. "Obviously, we all want to save money," he says. "But to replace teachers with online learning is a mistake."

Online advocates note that teachers are still involved, delivering optional online lectures and answering questions by phone, text and email. Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, who co-founded the Foundation for

Excellence in Education, which promotes online schools nationwide, says learning will be "digitized" with or without cooperation from the unions. "I'm happy to go to war over this," he says.

Rupert Murdoch, chief executive officer of News Corp., which owns The Wall Street Journal, has been an advocate of digital education. Last year News Corp. bought a 90% stake in Wireless Generation, an education-technology company that sells hand-held computers to teachers to help monitor student performance.

Two companies, K12 and Connections Academy, dominate the market for running public cyberschools. Full-time enrollment in online schools using the K12 curriculum has doubled in the past four years, to 81,000, the company says. K12's revenue grew 35% to $522 million in its fiscal year ended June 30, when it reported net income of $13 million.

At some K12 schools, academic struggles have followed rapid growth. Colorado Virtual Academy, launched in 2001, notched strong test scores initially. But enrollment has soared to nearly 5,000—and scores have plummeted. The school falls below Colorado averages on nearly every standardized test at every grade level, with particularly big deficits in math and writing. Outside Colorado, too, many K12 schools have poor results on state standardized tests.

K12 officials say state scores can be misleading because students often enroll midyear and take the tests after just a few months online. They say that the longer kids stick with cyberlearning, the better they do: Only 39% of students pass state math exams when they've been enrolled in K12 schools for less than a year, compared to 48% for kids enrolled at least one full school year. The same trend holds true for reading.

Tim Booker, an insurance agent who presides over the school board at Colorado Virtual Academy, says he fears that the program simply attracts too many kids who aren't suited to online learning. He now has deep concerns about whether full-time cyberschools are a viable model. "The jury's still out," he says.

Ron Packard, chief operating officer of K12, acknowledges that achievement has declined at some schools, which he attributes to explosive growth in the number of struggling students who register. K12 has become a "school of last resort" for many, he says. Traditional schools are best for most students, he says, but for some, "online education is a powerful choice."

Poor scores aren't unique to K12. In Minnesota, full-time online students in grades 4 through 8 made half as much progress in math during the 2009-10 school year, measured by annual state exams, as their peers

TESTING TROUBLE

A Colorado study based on 2010 standardized test scores found that full-time cyberschool students 'consistently lag behind those of non-online students,' even after controlling for economic status and other variables.

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS MEETING STATE STANDARDS:

■ Traditional schools   ■ Full-time online schools

Reading

Writing

Math

Source: Colorado Department of Education
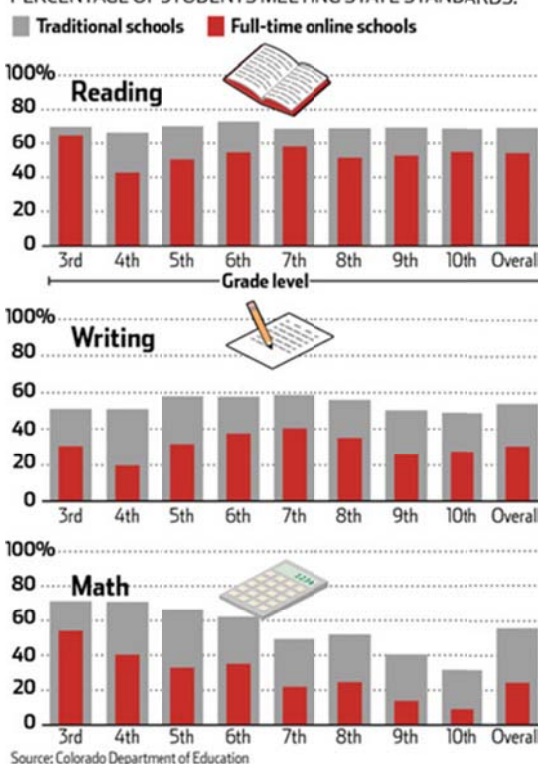
in traditional schools, though they were about equal in reading. A September report by the Office of the Legislative Auditor also found that 25% of high-school seniors in virtual schools dropped out, compared to 3% of seniors statewide.

Nonetheless, many parents and pupils who have tried online education tout its benefits. The curriculum is flexible, so a second-grader can enroll in fourth-grade math. And while many lessons look like digitized workbooks, some online classes are more creative.

At Florida Virtual School, which has 4,300 full-time students, up from about 1,500 last year, high-school students can earn a U.S. history credit by playing a semester-long video game that whisks them through the historical milestones. Biology students don 3-D glasses to dissect a virtual frog.

Noah and Allison Schnacky, aspiring actors who travel frequently, initially chose Florida Virtual for its flexibility. Noah says that he likes expressing his thoughts at the keyboard, alone in his room, instead of in a crowded class. But there are downsides. After falling behind in algebra, he tried to set up a 15-minute call with his teacher. She was booked solid—for a month. Florida Virtual says that was an anomaly and most students can set up calls within three days. Teachers also answer emails daily.

Miami's iPrep Academy, which blends online learning with in-person instruction, is so new that students have taken just one standardized test, in science, where they handily topped state averages. The unstructured days let teachers work one-on-one with struggling students; the free-form classrooms hum with conversations and impromptu lessons.

In the end, virtual schooling "comes down to what you make of it," says Rosie Lowndes, a social-studies teacher at Georgia Cyber Academy. Kids who work closely with parents or teachers do well, she says. "But basically letting a child educate himself, that's not going to be a good educational experience." The computer, she says, can't do it alone.

Write to Stephanie Banchero at stephanie.banchero@wsj.com and Stephanie Simon at stephanie.simon@wsj.com

The ABCs of Online Schools

By STEPHANIE SIMON

The growing popularity of online public schools lets states and local school districts effectively outsource some teaching functions—to parents.

Students enrolled in an online school full-time are required to work closely with a "learning coach," usually mom or dad, to ensure that they are staying on track in their studies.

For younger students, the learning coach becomes the primary teacher. A typical first-grade language arts lesson, for instance, asks the student to brainstorm a list of words about her favorite place, then write three complete sentences. Parents go online to certify that their child has done the work and to answer questions about its quality—for instance, did the child use proper punctuation?

"It's not about just putting them in front of a computer and saying, 'Here, get this work done,'" says Allison Brown, who has three young children attending Georgia Cyber Academy, a statewide online charter school run by the private firm K12 Inc.

Online teachers are required to check in with each student—and each learning coach—regularly, often every month or two. They are available to answer questions by phone or email. They also try to encourage interaction by hosting optional field trips to real-world museums and by creating online social activities. At Georgia Cyber, for instance, younger students can participate in virtual show-and-tell, via webcam.

But because teachers only review select pieces of work from each student, it's up to the parents to monitor how much effort a child put into any given lesson. A third-grade history unit on Johannes Gutenberg asks kids to complete several activities offline, such as writing a few sentences about the printing press. The teacher has no way of knowing whether a child does that work. The learning coach is simply asked to certify that the student can answer three basic questions about Gutenberg before moving on to the next lesson.

Older students can be more self-sufficient. Their lessons are studded with multiple-choice tests, graded on the spot by the computer. Teachers grade bigger projects, such as essays and lab reports, along with some short-answer quizzes.

The online experience can be isolating for students. Instead of playing basketball in P.E., for example, they scroll through health units and certify that they're staying active each week. "I do have less interaction with people my own age," says Trent Buckler, a ninth-grader at Georgia Cyber Academy. But he says he prefers working through lessons at his own pace, with a soundtrack of Beatles tunes playing in the background and his three dogs at his feet.

Like other online schools, Georgia Cyber offers live online lessons several times a week at every grade level.

During one recent fifth-grade language-arts class, teacher Lauren Riley asked students to pull out a five-paragraph essay they were supposed to be writing at home and circle spots where they correctly used capital letters. Then she moved on to commas, running through several slides explaining their use. "Give me a smiley face if you've heard this before!" she said, urging students to click on an emoticon as a way of keeping them engaged with the lesson.

When they complete their essays, the students can enter them into a computer program that gives immediate feedback on grammar and organization. Ms. Riley says she monitors their online progress but grades very little of their work.

Most online classes don't use video, so students can hear—but not see—their teachers.

"Everyone say, 'Hola, clase,'" Spanish teacher Erica Wattley called to open a recent class for first-year students at Georgia Cyber Academy.

The students couldn't hear one another, but if they were speaking into computer microphones, Ms. Wattley could hear them. "Excelente," she responded.

As students logged in and out—at one point, 144 were listening in—Ms. Wattley cheerfully introduced new vocabulary and asked students to create sentences about likes and dislikes. A few had the opportunity to read their work aloud.

Not everyone was engaged, though. A chat box set up for students to type in questions quickly filled with flirty gossip—the virtual equivalent of passing notes in class. Ms. Wattley eventually noticed and turned it off