

Online learning adds flexibility

BY BARBARA BALFOUR, FOR THE CALGARY HERALD MARCH 19, 2014



Alexis Rogers studies in the learning commons area at the Calgary Board of Education's career and technology centre based at Lord Shaughnessy High School.

Photograph by: Wil Andruschak, For the Calgary Herald

From athletes constantly on the road to 40-year-olds retaking high school physics to pursue a medical career, there's no such thing as a "typical" online-learning student.

The flexibility provided by an online environment appeals to a wide set of learning needs, including more time to complete coursework or a desire to wrap up earlier; a schedule that does not accommodate regular class times; or physical and emotional challenges better accommodated at home.

For student Alexis Rogers, the empowerment she gets from taking charge of her own learning has made the difference in her success.

"I put myself in a position where I can do my own research on how to learn something better," says Rogers, 17.

"Doing work online allows you the time to build on your knowledge until you are ready to move forward. In class, they might give you two sheets of exercises before going to the next

concept. It gets stressful — I found I struggled a lot in the regular classroom.

“With online learning, whether you need more help or more time, it’s there for you.”

Rogers is one of 7,000 students enrolled in online classes through the Calgary Board of Education’s CBe-learn program. It offers a full curriculum between grades 7 and 12, including all core academic courses, second languages and online physical education.

Approximately 25 per cent of students are online full time, while most will only take a few classes combined with coursework in a bricks-and-mortar classroom.

The program is housed at Lord Shaughnessy High School, which includes a teacher workspace, learning commons and a success centre where students get face-to-face time with teachers, write exams or do their work on site using technology available to them.

It also houses a state-of-the-art career and technology centre where students can fulfil hands-on requirements in cosmetology, welding, auto mechanics and culinary arts courses — of which the theory part can also be completed online.

Assistant principal Monti Tanner has seen the CBe-learn program grow exponentially since joining the school seven years ago.

“We changed a lot from when we first started. We were really seen as a school of last resort for students who didn’t fit into a traditional learning environment, who weren’t necessarily great online learners, but had no other options,” he says.

“Because of supports we’ve put in place — such as extra teachers, virtual meetings and a stronger understanding of what flexible learning looks like — I’ve seen us become a first choice for students who understand their own learning styles and what it means to be successful.”

Over the past several years, students in the CBE system have been coached, starting at the junior high level, to recognize what they’re good at and what they struggle with.

“By Grade 10, they’ve done work that helps them understand, ‘Am I a better audio or visual learner? Do I need to work with my hands? Do I do better learning while listening to music, or do I need a quiet, well-lit workspace?’ ” says Tanner.

All online students must take a mandatory course to ensure they have the right managerial, technical and academic skills to cope in this environment.

Students also complete a digital citizenship requirement on the ethical nature of working

online, says Cathy Faber, superintendent of learning innovation for the CBE.

“If students are not good digital citizens, we would follow the same procedures as in a physical school setting. There’s no anonymity in our environment,” says Faber.

“We know the relationship component of learning is important for student success. That’s why there’s lots of face time online; the tools we use allow access to video conferencing and audio.

“We ensure students are connected; if we lose touch, even if over a 24-hour period, if we haven’t negotiated that downtime, we’re reaching out to that student and his or her parents to ensure they’re still doing well and getting the support they need.”

Online work doesn’t mean it’s easier — that’s a common misnomer, says Ken Turner, who co-ordinates the digital U-Learn program for the Calgary Catholic School District out of St. Anne Academic Centre.

Before signing up, students complete a survey to determine if they’re good candidates for online learning. Considerations include access to up-to-date technology and Internet connections, parents who can support them in being successful and a dedicated workspace.

“Being online could mean you have to be a little more disciplined, independent and motivated in working through the material,” says Turner.

“At some point it might feel isolating to work alone, and we do our best to provide opportunities for interaction. Communication is really important, and parents are an essential part of that process.”