

Students go to high school from 'virtually' anywhere

By Matthew Tungate

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Samantha Edwards looks out her window into the city of Milan, Italy, following a long photo shoot. The professional model from Union in Boone County has to get back to her chemistry homework.

Like thousands of students in Kentucky, she is studying core content, doing assignments given by demanding teachers and preparing for state tests. Unlike most students in Kentucky, she takes a full complement of classes as a senior at the Barren Academy of Virtual and Expanded Learning (BAVEL) without ever stepping into a classroom or seeing any of her teachers in person.

After one year at Larry A. Ryle High School (Boone County), this is Edwards' third year at BAVEL — a fully accredited, diploma-granting school in Barren County offering online-only classes. The classes are offered through the Kentucky Virtual High School (KVHS).

"Homeschooling was not an option, so I would have had to stay in traditional face-to-face school and miss out on all of the incredible experiences I have had and cultures I have had the chance to live in over the past few years," Edwards said. "Italy has been the most exotic and technologically challenging place I have done my schoolwork in. While computers are used every day in business in this part of the world, high-speed Internet and Wi-Fi in residences are very rare. While in Italy I was able to travel around a little bit, and my mom made sure my school work went everywhere with me. I have done homework in Milan, Rome, Tuscany and Nice, France."

BAVEL Director Amanda Wright said the school started five years ago when Barren County saw the need for an alternative-learning environment. There are 60 students, and about half are from outside Barren County, Wright said. Thirty-one districts have non-resident contracts with Barren County.

"I've got some students for whom this may be their last alternative to dropping out, but then I've also got absolutely wonderfully motivated, disciplined students who just prefer the online environment, who don't really need the social environment at school," Wright said.

Students receive a username and password to log on to the KVHS Web site with links to each class they are enrolled in. Students go into the class and read the content, which is organized by modules. Classes are set up on Blackboard. Wright said there is a lot of content to read, supplemental videos to watch and practice assignments and homework. Students take online tests.

Teachers contact students and grade their work. They and students also communicate via an instant messenger program, e-mail, online chat session and phone "so there's definitely interaction," she said. Students also can discuss with each other through discussion boards and instant messaging.

Edwards said it took a while to get the hang of the system and a new way of learning.

"After being in front of teachers for nine years it was an adjustment ...," she said. "I found the classes to be very challenging. Pre-calculus and chemistry were especially difficult to understand without the help of a teacher to explain some of the concepts. I actually had to go to a tutor for a period of time for each of these classes for some additional help."

Wright said Barren County wanted students to have the option to work exclusively online from home, which warranted the need for a separate high school. In traditional high schools, students are typically only allowed to take one or two courses online and must do so from the brick-and-mortar setting.

"But to do it exclusively and to be able to do it from home, that was a lot for a traditional high school to take on," she said.

It would have been a lot for students to take on as well. KVHS Instructional Supervisor Beth Gaunce said students at traditional schools pay \$300 per online class, while BAVEL students pay \$50, which is refunded with a 60 percent average or better. Barren County pays the full enrollment fee for BAVEL students.

"So at \$50 apiece, even if they didn't pass the course, that is much more manageable than \$300," she said. "It made it possible for students to take a whole curriculum online rather than just a course here and a course there."

Gaunce said students learn a lot more going through online classes than if they get their general education degree, which some students might consider along with going to BAVEL. They get core content, learn skills and are asked to perform at a high level. The classes are designed in accordance with core content and with more individual attention because teachers work with one student at a time, which helps keep students engaged, she said.

"There is no back of the class in a virtual classroom. If you're in the class and doing something, then you're engaged in learning."

Wright thinks the primary benefit to students is flexibility. Classes can be accessed 24 hours a day from any Internet-connected computer. Students also receive a high-level curriculum, including 20 Advanced Placement classes.

"I think we produce very highly motivated, disciplined learners, because the students have to take responsibility for their courses," she said. "They have to make themselves get up in the morning and log on and read through all the content. They're not passive learners anymore."

Michelle Clark is a 34-year teaching veteran, including four years teaching KVHS mathematics. She said courses do not take less time than traditional classes and are not easier. Students need to regularly log in and put five to 10 hours per



Photo by Amy Wallot

BAVEL senior Samantha Edwards works on an AP Psychology assignment in a Florence, Ky., coffee shop before a fitting for a modeling show in Cincinnati.

class into study per week.

"The students must be doing this not just because they want the credit, but because they want it and are willing to put in the work necessary to get it. It takes enough maturity and self-discipline to see it through," she said. "Good communication skills are also a plus. There is an understanding that keeping in communication with the instructors and letting them know when circumstances are going to require extensions or special help is a part of taking an online course."

Gaunce believes BAVEL is the start of a trend.

"When we talk about interventions for students who are having problems, this is a way for them to get their education, graduate from high school and move on to what-

ever they want to do next, outside the limits of the traditional day, the traditional place and maybe an environment in which they weren't successful before. I think we'll see a lot more of that," she said.

Wright said she could see online schools becoming more popular, but only to a certain extent.

"This program is for a certain type of student in a certain situation, and I think that it will continue to grow," she said. "Definitely there will be many more across the state and our enrollment will continue to increase, but I don't think it will ever completely take away the brick-and-mortar schools."

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