

Don Bradley - Article

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Digital-course law changes schools' lessons

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A new law requiring all high school students to take at least one digital course leaves the decision about what to offer up to school districts.

The Arkansas Department of Education recommends that superintendents and principals give the same scrutiny to digital courses that they do any other course offered, said Debbie Jones, assistant commissioner of learning services for the department. Jones recommends that courses also involve some face-to-face interaction, even if that interaction is through a Web camera.

"We have posted suggestions," Jones said. "It's not required."

Computers are increasingly used in schools. Some schools issue computers to students or provide computers for classrooms or departments to share. Some schools already operate in a digital environment where students receive and submit assignments via the Internet.

Act 1280, passed in 2013, mandated public school districts and charter schools to offer at least one digital learning course this school year. The law also requires students to take a digital learning course as a requirement for high school graduation, starting with this year's ninth-graders, who will be the graduating class of 2018.

Educators say high school students will need experience with digitally delivered courses because they likely will encounter them in college and in training programs for their jobs.

Other states

Arkansas' law is in line with similar legislation passed in several other states that push online learning for high school students, said Julie Rowland, a researcher at Education Commission of the States, based in Denver. Laws in Alabama and Michigan require some online learning during high school, and Tennessee specifies that students take online courses, starting with the class of 2017.

New Mexico requires students to complete either a distance-learning course, an honors course, Advanced Placement course or dual enrollment course, she said. Georgia passed legislation in 2012 directing the state board to adopt rules to maximize the number of students, beginning with this year's ninth-graders, who complete courses that including online learning.

In Arkansas, the new law allows for courses already being taught in junior highs and high schools to be converted to meet the requirements. Districts also can offer courses from outside providers, as long as the course and provider have been approved by the department, Jones said.

The department has approved 22 providers of online courses and more than 500 courses, plus concurrent courses offered by a half-dozen Arkansas universities and colleges.

Courses should give students some element of control over the path, time and pace at which they complete them, she said. The courses can be delivered entirely online or can consist of a mix of traditional and technology-based instruction. Courses must meet or exceed state curriculum standards.

Benton district approach

In the Benton School District, which has 5,000 students in Saline County, ninth-grade civics and economics courses are being converted to courses that blend digital and traditional instruction, said Mary Morgan, an assistant superintendent for the district.

Students use laptops and an online portal through Google Classroom to access and submit assignments for class, said Tamme Adams, one of three teachers of the courses at Benton Junior High School. Students also are able to share and work on documents and projects simultaneously from separate laptops.

This year, students are designing a chart online, rather than on paper, that shows the system of checks and balances included in the U.S. Constitution, Adams said. She found a website that provides students an interactive lesson on how a bill becomes a law.

Adams still devotes class time to traditional instruction and gives students a choice of using paper or home computers when she assigns homework.

"A lot of it is just getting the students adjusted to doing it on a digital device rather than pencil and paper," Adams said. "It does take a little more sense of responsibility."

Tech-savvy students

In Rogers, 10th-grade health courses are undergoing a transition to a blended format to meet the new requirements. Chelsea Perry, one of the health teachers at Rogers Heritage High School, plans to try the new format in one of her classes in the spring before switching all of her classes to it in 2015-16.

"Today's generation is very much technologically savvy," Perry said. "They like to be on their cellphones, on their tablets."

Perry anticipates having some days when students take notes on paper and other days when they grab computers and log into an online portal through the Edmodo website to follow her instructions. The online portal will provide them with Web links to videos, simulations and articles they need to read. She might have them visit six websites to find answers for a quiz or have them create a comic strip to explain a health concept.

"I think that's where education is moving," said Perry, who completed her entire master's degree online through Missouri State University. "Technology is really important in the work world. If you don't have that background in technology, you're getting behind."

Other districts, like Harrison School District, with about 2,700 students in Boone County, are offering digital courses through providers, such as Virtual Arkansas and the Arkansas Public School Resource Center.

Schools historically have used Virtual Arkansas to address teacher shortages and to provide their students with more variety of courses than they could offer locally, said Cathi Swan, state coordinator of digital learning.

Schools now are turning to Virtual Arkansas to meet Act 1280 requirements.

Schools pay a membership fee and then a per-student tuition, she said. Students remain on their campuses to take courses. The most popular offerings are Health and Wellness, Spanish I and II, Civics, Oral Communications, ACT Preparation, Economics, and Career Ready 101.

The legislation is expected to lead to Virtual Arkansas doubling its enrollment from 10,000 students last school year to an expected 20,000 this school year, Swan said. Virtual Arkansas is serving 200 schools this school year.

Grants paying for shift

The Arkansas Public School Resource Center, based in Little Rock, began offering digital courses this year using a two-year grant from the Walton Family Foundation. The center awarded \$335,000 in eResources Digital Learning Grants for schools to offer digital courses this year and plans to award another roughly \$350,000 for next school year, said Barbara Hunter-Cox, director of teaching and learning for the center. Applications for the second round of grants are due Dec. 1.

The center is providing districts with access to core courses that all high schools must offer, but also is working to provide access to a broader variety of courses, such as Italian and pre-law, Hunter-Cox said.

"This is one of the first steps into having a much more personalized curriculum for every single student based on their interests and also their needs," Hunter-Cox said. "We're all much more motivated to learn about things we have an interest in."

A freshman economics teacher at Harrison Junior High School is teaching a digital course to ensure that students meet that requirement for graduation. Harrison High School is expanding course offerings to students via Virtual Arkansas and Arkansas Public School Resource Center, Guidance Counselor Rance King said. About 120 high school students are taking digital courses this semester.

The high school's online courses include photography, Advanced Placement world history, ACT preparation and game design, King said. In the photography course, students have projects where they snap photos and then upload them for their teachers to see. They have face-to-face meetings over the computer with the teacher a couple of times a week.

In the past, the Virtual Arkansas classes were taught in classrooms where students watched a single TV screen, but the transition to digital courses means that students now participate in the courses through a computer at their desks, with headphones and a webcam, King said.

"Considering the way technology is being used by students, it's pretty much a natural progression for them to go ahead and learn online," King said. "With the enrichment courses, they're able to learn about what they're interested in."

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