

At her laptop, she's ready for school

Burlington, Wis. - May 24, 2008 - BURLINGTON — Carol Karns brings her laptop from her bedroom to a table in the living room, where a glass of pink lemonade awaits. Through the window, Bohners Lake sparkles in the afternoon sunshine.

She's ready for school.

Carol, 16, is a high school junior at Insight School of Wisconsin of the Grantsburg School District, one of 18 virtual schools in the state.

"I really liked the idea of planning my own day and not having to wake up at 6:30 anymore," Carol said.

Virtual schools are charter schools where students learn using computers and the Internet. A recent report from the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance found virtual school enrollment increasing rapidly since they were created in 2002-2003. That year, two schools had 247 students. In 2007-2008, 2,951 students were enrolled in Wisconsin virtual schools.

"Clearly, part of that increase is because you start from such a small base," said Dale Knapp, research director for the alliance, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization for public policy. "We've seen the increases slow over the last couple of years, but they're still growing fairly rapidly."

Racine's school district was third in the state in the number of transfers to virtual schools last school year, with 59 students.

Part of the appeal of virtual schools, Knapp said, is that they are an option for students who may not be getting the kind of education they want.

"It's got the possibility to solve some of the education problems in terms of small districts, declining enrollment districts, those in the north," Knapp said. "There may be better options available, a broader range of subjects available for some of the students in the virtual schools as opposed to their home districts."

Karns, who went to Burlington High School for her freshman and sophomore years, said she worked faster than some of the other students and she didn't like how crowded the school was. Her mother saw an online ad for Insight her sophomore year, and after thinking it over they decided to make the switch to virtual schooling.

"It just kind of appealed to us," Karns said.

Going to class online doesn't mean she doesn't get to socialize with her classmates. Before the school year started, she went to a meeting in Beloit with other students. She was elected class president for next year through e-mail voting. They even held their own prom in Hartland a few

weeks ago, where Karns met some of her classmates in person for the first time.

“It was kind of tiny, but it worked,” she said. “It was really cool to put a face to the name.”

Karns, who is taking five classes this semester, doesn't have a set schedule to follow. She gets her assignments, lectures, announcements, study guides and quizzes on class Web sites. There's a calendar to show when assignments are due, so she can work ahead if she wants to.

“Sometimes I do a few hours of studying and take quite a few quizzes,” Karns said. “I like it better because you can plan out your day, which is also harder because you have to motivate yourself to do your work.”

There are classes at set times, but they're not mandatory, she said. Students will go to class for extra credit or if they have questions. Class size might be three to six students, or sometimes just her, she said.

The classroom is similar to a chatroom — there's a box for attendees to type comments, and even a little hand icon if students want to raise their hands. The teacher gives permission for people to speak or use the “chalkboard,” which is a large box a person can draw on with a mouse. Some students can use Webcams or microphones to speak as well.

After graduation next year, Karns plans on attending college online. After that, she says she wants to become a teacher for virtual schools. And she's not the only one online. Her mother started taking classes online at Kaplan University, an online college, in January. Her two younger sisters, who are currently homeschooled by their mother, will be joining virtual schools next year.

“We're going to be an online family,” Karns said.