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Colusa High offers online learning; Computer classes give students an option during busy summer

[By Monica Vaughan Colusa County Sun-Herald](#)

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Cellphones are usually banned in school, but now they are replacing classrooms.

The seats will remain empty in Colusa High School English teacher Rebecca Changus's classroom as she facilitates summer school to about 70 students through a digital learning platform.

RedHawk attendees are three weeks in to the school's first all-online class.

Principal Darren Brown, who just completed his first year at the school, introduced the program, which provides more class options and creates flexibility for the learners.

But it lacks the social element achieved in a classroom and requires students to self-manage their time.

"We looked at online learning as a way to improve results. We look at how kids function. They're on their computers 12 hours a day, on their phone, their iPad. We wanted something that was student-centered," Brown said.

This year, students are enrolled in English, history, math courses and electives, including a Career and College Preparation course.

"I think the core of the decision was the fact that we could offer multiple curriculum areas at a high level of rigor and get more opportunities for kids to make up credits or gain credits," said Colusa Unified School District Superintendent Dwayne Newman.

The Apex Learning system costs the school district \$25 per student, per course, plus the price of the initial software purchase, Changus's salary and training. But the school saves on other expenses, such as additional teachers.

The Colusa Unified School District has about \$15,000 budgeted for district-wide summer school.

"The district is planning on spending the same amount this year as last year. The software was quite expensive," said Sheryl Bailey, chief business officer for the district.

Brown said because the teacher training and software were paid for this year, the district will save money next year.

The online system is based on reading sections and quizzes. It offers multimedia functions such as video clips and audio training, including some bilingual support.

"It's natural for them. If you can tie in something they enjoy with learning, it's engaging," Changus said.

Students can access the content from anywhere they have access to the Internet, even with their phones.

That accessibility provides flexibility to students who are traveling, in sports or working jobs.

Students who don't have home access to computers or Internet-connected phones use the library or the computers at the high school.

Students work at their own pace, though there are benchmark deadlines.

"One kid wanted to do all his English. He's already finished everything; he's done," Changus said.

Independent time management can be a problem for some students.

"Usually, struggling kids struggle because they can't do things on their own, like write essays. They need that teacher support," Changus said.

The students aren't on their own. Changus can provide support whenever she logs in to the system. She monitors their progress, offers a nudge if necessary and is available for assistance.

"Some kids were busy at fair. I had to send a message saying, 'OK, fair is over. You need to get started.'"

She was able to choose among curriculum options, and the content is strong.

"They're good stories and engaging to the kids, so that's cool," she said.

The main thing online education lacks is socialization and peer-to-peer communication.

Changus said there was a discussion room option, but she chose not to utilize it because it is not the same as a classroom setting.

"I'm a teacher, so I want them in my classroom to interact with," she said.

If online education were the primary form of education, she said, she would have concerns about the students' performance in the workforce without having enough teamwork exercises and social skills.

"Those skills would drop drastically, but for summer school it's fine," Changus said.

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