

7/5/2012 5:30 AM

District 128 offering first online courses to summer-school students

By **Russell Lissau**

A pair of computer-based English classes offered this summer at [Vernon Hills High School](#) mark District 128's first foray into the expanding world of online education.

Twenty-two students are enrolled in the classes for the second semester of summer school. One is a remedial world literature class for freshmen and sophomores, and the other is a remedial American literature class for juniors and seniors.

Thirty students took the classes in the first semester, which concluded last week.

The students work in a computer lab at their own pace. Teachers are there to guide them, help when needed and occasionally step in with some group lessons.

"For instance, during writing instruction, I am able to talk to students individually about specific issues," said Tara Nieves, Vernon Hills High's English department supervisor and one of the teachers for the digital classes. "When students are having trouble with one of their quizzes, I can see if they are having a problem understanding the question, or if the student did not do a thorough job completing notes."

The courses were created by teachers from Vernon Hills High and its sister school, [Libertyville High](#). They're offered at Vernon Hills High because summer school is at that campus this year for all District 128 students.

A Seattle company called [Apex Learning](#) provided the software for the classes.

The company creates digital curriculums in math, science, English, social studies and world languages, as well as for Advanced Placement classes. They use audio recordings, video animation and interactive elements to get lessons across.

"The computerized focus helps reach kids that otherwise may struggle," Apex spokeswoman Teri Citterman said in an email.

Digital curriculum also frees up teachers' time in the classroom, enabling them to work more closely with students instead of merely lecturing at the front of the room, Citterman said. "They often say it is more rewarding because they get to know their students as individuals," she said. "Teachers are able to take real interest in each student and have the time to really care about what they are learning."

That's certainly the case at Vernon Hills High this summer, Nieves said. "We can hone in on specific skills as needed," she said in an email. "This process also gives us the opportunity to have conversations with students (and) get to know them a little better, even though we have them in class for a very short amount of time."

Vernon Hills student Mario McGhee is among the teens enrolled in the online classes this summer.

Enabling students to work at their own pace is helpful for those “who don’t learn as fast as others,” McGhee said.

Apex’s courses are based on national and state educational standards and are customized for specific local objectives.

The company’s software is used in a handful of Chicago-area school districts, Citterman said, including Chicago Public Schools, [Elgin Area School District U-46](#) and the Zion-Benton High School District.

All five U-46 high schools have e-learning classes, district administrator Nan Ochs said. Introduced during the 2010-11 school year, the courses initially were designed to let students retake classes while continuing with their studies, she said.

They’re also used in alternative learning programs, Ochs said.

“By incorporating an online learning option, U-46 is offering students multiple ways to learn and succeed,” Ochs said in an email. “Online learning is meaningful for the 21st century learner. It is student-friendly, challenging and engaging, especially for students who enjoy technology.”

The students in the first-semester summer classes at Vernon Hills High quickly adapted to the computerized curriculum, Nieves said.

“Kids are already technologically savvy, so many of them breezed through the ‘how-to’ part of the course and were able to work at a pace that fit them,” Nieves said.

District 128 educators are investigating turning some existing courses into digital classes or creating new digital-only classes for the traditional school year.

That’s particularly important because online courses are becoming more common at colleges and universities, said Deb Larson, District 128’s former assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction.

Larson, who retired last week, oversaw the development of the electronic classes. Similar e-courses could be used to teach an array of subjects during the regular school year, she said.

For example, educators could turn to the digital format to offer an AP German class to the few students who might want to take such a course, Larson said.

Some chemistry teachers already are looking at using the technology in their courses, she added.

Nieves sees the possibilities, too. Next summer, more e-learning courses will be offered, and not just to students who are taking classes because they struggled during the regular school year, she said.

“The plan is to offer courses in creative writing, world literature and American literature for students who would like to earn credits to get ahead,” she said. “We want our students to have the best educational experiences possible, and e-learning may be an additional way to provide that.”

Daily Herald photographer Steve Lundy contributed to this report.

Copyright © 2012 Paddock Publications, Inc. All rights reserved.