



## Online schools offer parents alternatives

February 13, 2006

By DAN SIMMONS / La Crosse Tribune

<http://www.lacrossetribune.com/articles/2006/02/13/news/01school.txt>

The Millington sisters, ages 6 months to 9, don't get on a school bus every morning; they go to the basement of their La Crosse home.

Computers sit among other more traditional school supplies — paint sets, flash cards and alphabet wallpaper. Their mother, Michelle Diaz, and father, Jeff Millington, work with them. But this isn't home school.

"It's more school at home than home school," Diaz said. "We work with at least four teachers every day."

The girls are open enrollment students at Wisconsin Virtual Academy. The online charter school out of the Northern Ozaukee School District in Fredonia, Wis., opened in 2003-04, offering the same curriculum and testing standards as other public schools. With a different approach.

The school's 15 full-time teachers, all of whom have teaching certificates and experience in the public schools, provide classes and instruction online.

The school's 615 students register attendance by logging on to the school's Web site. They participate in class discussions by posting messages on a message board or speaking through a school-provided microphone. But a lot of their learning happens offline.

As Katie and Stephanie Millington focused on their lessons Friday morning, Chelly Millington focused on hers — numbers. There was no computer involved.

Instead, her mom, Michelle Diaz, pointed to flash cards, 1 to 100, spread across the carpet. Chelly, a second-grader in a white Hello Kitty shirt, made a sweeping gesture with her arms, then said the numbers.

When they got to 100, Diaz rejoiced and gave Chelly a high five.

"I never dreamed she'd be able to add and subtract," Diaz said of her daughter, who was diagnosed with autism at 22 months. "Her progression's been amazing."

Diaz credits a lot of her daughter's progress to the individualized approach at the school. She receives one-on-one instruction from Jeff Nylander. He's a special education teacher who had previously worked in bricks-and-mortar public schools and now provides special needs educational support, online, over the phone and in person, to students in the northern third of the state.

He said the individualized approach allows him to cater lessons to the mastery level of each student, instead of giving an entire class of students the same lesson. And, he said, it eliminates a lot of the environmental factors — lighting, sounds, other students — that often distract special education students in traditional schools.

"Here they're in a comfortable environment — their home — with comfortable people — their parents," he said. "It makes it easier for them to focus on learning."

Eric Sesvold, a second-grader in West Salem, also enrolled at the school. On Friday, one of his lessons happened online, with teacher Nancy Peerenboom instructing from her base in Poynette, Wis.



“Today we’re going to talk about pizza,” she said through the Toshiba laptop screen in Eric’s bedroom, introducing a language arts lesson. “What’s everyone’s favorite flavor of pizza?”

Adam of Oregon, Wis., said he likes extra cheesy. Bevan of Mineral Point, Wis., said he likes pepperoni. Sesvold said he likes cheese. Sally of Sun Prairie, Wis., said she likes cheese and bacon and sausage and pepperoni. Eric’s never seen his classmates or his teacher, but class progresses about the same as anywhere else.

Peerenboom continued with her lesson, displaying sentences on the screen and having students identify the subject and verb by underlining them with an e-pen. Sesvold’s mother, Sandy, said she appreciates the dual role parents and teachers play in Eric’s education.

“Think of me like a teacher’s assistant,” she said. “He has to meet standards and take tests, and the teachers are the ones who make sure he’s on track.”

## Open houses

A schedule of open houses by online schools this week:

Wisconsin Virtual Academy (grades K-8) will be at the Holiday Inn Hotel and Suites, 200 Pearl St., La Crosse, today from 7 p.m. to 8 p.m. For more information, visit <http://wivcs.org> or call Principal Dan Hanrahan at (262) 707-4715.

iQ Academies at Wisconsin (grades 9-12) will be at the Radisson Hotel, 200 Harborview Plaza, La Crosse, Wednesday and Thursday from 3 to 7:30 p.m. For more information, visit [www.gotoiq.com/info](http://www.gotoiq.com/info) or call (866) 468-6472.

Wisconsin Connections Academy (grades K-8) will be at Country Inn & Suites, 737 Avon Road, Sparta, Wis., Wednesday from 6:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. For more information, visit [www.connectionsacademy.com](http://www.connectionsacademy.com) or call (920) 993-7076, ext. 2218.

## Online school Q&A

*Q. Who pays for the equipment required?*

A. The school pays for a computer, microphone and web camera. It also reimburses families for dial-up Internet access.

*Q. Does it affect socialization of kids?*

A. Local families with students enrolled said their kids get plenty of social opportunities with peers through outside activities such as karate, scouts and sports. Most online schools offer periodic field trips, as well.

*Q. Do students ever miss school?*

A. No. Eric Sesvold talked about a snow day for all his friends. He still had school. Another time there was a tornado warning. He moved his computer downstairs and continued his science lesson about friction.

*Q. Is a parent/guardian required to be with students during the day?*

A. Yes. Because students attend school at home, a parent or guardian must be present at all times. Some families team up and share supervisory duties, said Dan Hanrahan, principal of Wisconsin Virtual Academy.

*Q. How do school districts feel about online charter schools?*

A. Kathy Tyser, associate superintendent of the La Crosse School District, said the district is watching the schools closely. Very preliminary conversations are taking place, she said, about offering selected classes or even an entire school online. “We need to get answers to some questions,” she said. “What do people want? Why are people signing up for online learning? What’s the advantage of it?”