

## **Picture this: A school in a virtual world**

*Software lets students chat, work in groups at Northern Ozaukee district's academy*

By Katharine Goodloe

Last Updated: Dec. 17, 2005

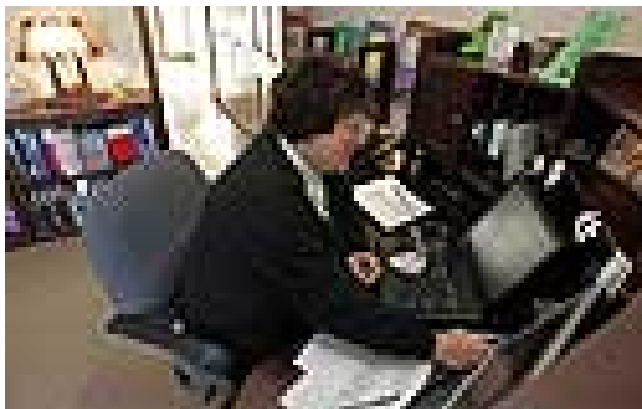
Original URL: <http://www.jsonline.com/news/ozwash/dec05/377987.asp>

As an eighth-grader at the Wisconsin Virtual Academy, Roberto Fernandez can do something this year he's never experienced before: talk with other students before class.

The school, based out of the Northern Ozaukee School District, adopted a program this year that turns online gatherings of 10 students and a teacher into virtual classrooms where kids use Webcams to see each other, click a button to raise a "hand" icon, and separate into small groups using virtual "breakout" rooms.

The lessons, held in a program called Elluminate, serve as a twice-monthly supplement to the school's online curriculum. Teachers also use the software to tutor students one-on-one, update parents and attend online staff meetings with teachers throughout the state.

But teachers, administrators and students say it's particularly suited for one thing: helping kids accustomed to learning alone adapt to large-group activities.



Photo/[Mark Hoffman](#)

Kathy Hennings teaches her second-grade language arts class from her home office in Cedarburg. Hennings works for the Northern Ozaukee School District. This virtual class has students in cities throughout Wisconsin, including Burlington, De Pere, West Allis and Fond du Lac. Hennings and the students communicate online in real time with audio, instant messaging and Webcams.



Photo/[Mark Hoffman](#)

Before becoming a teacher for a virtual school district, Hennings was honored for her work at a traditional school.

"What I like is that you can talk and you can see," said Roberto, 13, who was home-schooled until his family enrolled in the school when it started three years ago.

The K-8 virtual academy launched in 2003, a year after the state's first virtual school debuted. Students and staff at the Wisconsin Virtual Academy are spread throughout the state, logging on from home to attend or teach classes, or review the day's assignments.

Students can instant-message as they log on before Elluminate lessons, he said, and catch up on one another's holiday plans or upcoming school outings. It's the equivalent of kids in brick-and-mortar schools gossiping in hallways before class, but it's also something Roberto and many of the school's other students aren't accustomed to.

"It's really cool because it's a huge class experience," he said. "And you can do stuff in a big class that you wouldn't be able to do on your own."

Until this year, students saw each other only at monthly school-sponsored outings, and teachers held conferences with parents and students over the phone. Now, kids can see a list of other students on their computer screen during Elluminate lessons. When one speaks, his or her picture shows up on the screen, from their Webcam. They can see the teacher, too.

The program was purchased by K12, the company that provides content to the virtual academy, said principal Daniel Hanrahan. It's the same program used by IQ Academies, a virtual public high school operated by the Waukesha School District.

The program also comes with a "virtual whiteboard." Teacher Kathy Hennings, who works from her Cedarburg home, said that allows her to post different questions and handouts for each of her 60 students, tailored to their learning levels. She can also separate kids into virtual "breakout rooms" to work in groups, then click in and out of each room to monitor the group's progress.

Hennings has even used the program's accompanying Webcam to show a student where she hung the paper snowflakes the girl sent to her.

"I think it really opens a world of community for students," she said. "They get excited to see one another's pictures on the Webcam, and when they see each other on outings now they say 'Oh, I remember you. You're in my math class.' "



Photo/[Mark Hoffman](#)  
Student Emma Bird, pictured at upper left on this computer screen, communicates via Webcam from her West Bend home with teacher Hennings. The lesson of the day was on letter writing.

## Helps kids focus

Other teachers say the lessons are well-suited to kids who have learning disabilities, or might be easily distracted. The students don't have to worry about other kids rummaging through desks or getting up to sharpen pencils - and although they can talk to one another online, there's no way to sit and gossip at the back of the class without the teacher seeing.

"It allows the kids to focus on what they need to focus on," said Jennifer Trattner, a teacher at the virtual school.

Trattner has used the program to take kids on "Web tours" where she imports a Web page and adapts it to their lesson. Right now, her math students are keeping track of when and where they see roadkill, so they can create a graph of the information next month.

She has used several Web sites to show students how to chart the information, which they'll turn into pie, line and bar charts. The roadkill assignment, she said, was chosen because "it's right up middle school kids' alley."

The lessons, administrators say, are akin to those in brick-and-mortar schools.

"To me, the interesting thing is how similar it is to a traditional school, and not how different it is," said Mike Skurek, associate principal.

That's some of the attraction for Rose Fernandez, Roberto's mom. The Mukwonago family has four children, including Roberto, enrolled in the virtual academy. The school provides a computer for each family and began providing a Webcam and digital pen and other equipment since using Elluminate. Families do not pay to be part of the academy.

"You know how kids are, they really like to use the microphone, the camera, they like to see their teachers and they like to talk back and forth," she said. "Since this way of learning isn't the traditional classroom, it's an opportunity to learn in a group - and that wasn't possible before."

Kids also say the new lessons give them a sense of community. Roberto, who spends 30 or 40 minutes at the computer for each Elluminate lesson, said the new format is "a lot better" - giving him all the benefits of group learning, without many of the distractions.

"It's just cool," he said. "You can see yourself in a classroom and not in a classroom, all at the same time."



Photo/Mark Hoffman  
Kathy Hennings teaches online

### **Quotable:**

*I think it really opens a world of community for students. They getfp excited to see one another's pictures on the Webcam.*

- Kathy Hennings, on the use of a Webcam in her virtual classroom