

Green Island students learning along with peers worldwide

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By Danielle Sanzone

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GREEN ISLAND — Most may think of a dying technology when they see the acronym VHS but at Green Island's Heatly School VHS is synonymous with state of the art advances and the possible future of the school's youth.

This fall, 13 students in the district started using VHS, or the Virtual High School, an online program offering more than 250 courses. The Green Island students are taking classes, including Russian and Oceanography, that other teenagers around the world are also taking.

High school junior Mason Towne, 16, is taking computational science and engineering. He has always been interested in computers since the day his father showed him how he could connect with people halfway around the world.

"I'm fascinated by how computers work and how you press a button and something happens. What I'm learning from this class is invaluable since computers are so prevalent in our society," he said.

Fellow VHS students Melissa Heffern, 17, and Katie Connelly, 17, both said they have also enjoyed taking their classes — sports and American society, and young adult literature, respectively.

All of the students said that the program is helping with their time management skills and that they are learning from their fellow online students.

The classes run from Tuesday to Tuesday, weekly, and the content from the courses are available online whenever the students sign on to the VHS site. There are discussion forums and private message threads, said Dana Zeppieri, a guidance counselor at the school and site coordinator of VHS at the site. Another staff member was also trained to be a VHS online teacher in World Religion, she said.

The only other nearby school that offers VHS programming is Emma Willard in Troy.

The district used a \$10,000 donation from an anonymous community donor to pay for the inaugural use of the program, said Superintendent Michael Mugits. He said the district looked into other online programs and found VHS was the best fit for their needs.

The district is allowed 25 students to take the courses per year and, if the program is extended, the students will be chosen through an application process. The current students were picked based on their transcripts, attendance record, and behavior.

"I am pleased to discover how excited our learners are about the prospects to explore new classes and extend their horizons. In addition to the subject matter and learning objectives, our learners are in 'classes' with peers from many different states and a handful of different countries," said Mugits.

The district hopes to offer the online courses next year but that would require it to be in the school budget at a time when most districts are cutting costs and some programs.

"We hope it's covered in the budget. It's worth sustaining," said Zeppieri.

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