The Virtual High School Global Consortium

by Mark Katz, PhD

DRAWING UPON THE TALENTS of highly skilled teachers from around the United States and the world, the Virtual High School Global Consortium (VHS) provides middle and high school students with exposure to courses and potential career paths usually first encountered in college.

Parents, educators, health care providers and well informed consumers are finding creative ways to address the needs and daily challenges of those who struggle with AD/HD. In each issue of Attention, *we highlight one innovative program, model, or practice and pass on appropriate contacts so you can implement similar efforts in your community. Appearance in this column, however, does not imply endorsement by CHADD.*

Students can take classes ranging from *Mandarin Chinese* to *American Popular Music* to *Career Awareness for the New Millennium*. All courses are instructor-led, emphasizing project-based learning, peer-to-peer interaction and group discussions. Courses are also fully accredited. With participating schools in 29 states and 34 countries, students have an opportunity to meet and get to know students from across the United States and the world.

"We offer students a very unique and important global experience, "says Donna Scribner, PhD, Chief Learning Officer at VHS. "In traditional schools students learn about natural disasters by reading about them. At VHS, they get to know people who lived through them." A former classroom teacher with over twenty-five years of teaching experience, Scribner sees VHS also benefiting students with learning differences, including AD/HD.

"I remember how bored these students [with AD/HD] often were in class, and how better they responded when I could individualize my instruction and provide them with more hands-on activities," Scribner says. "In many instances our online learning experience is actually much more compatible with how these students learn best." As a classroom teacher she always felt students needed to be in place of comfort to learn. "I didn't often see students with learning differences in a place of comfort. I do see them feeling this way now."

The nonprofit global collaborative offers over two hundred full-semester and year-long online courses, including courses required for high school graduation. All VHS courses are taught by certified teachers, 85 percent of whom hold a master's degree and have at least 16 years of teaching experience. Class size is limited to 25 students.

Once they learn about VHS, some students find they prefer taking courses online rather than through traditional classroom instruction. Among the advantages of online courses are that students can complete each week's assigned work at any time, so long as they do so within a seven-day period, weekends included. While all courses are offered on a semester basis as in traditional schools, students still enjoy much greater flexibility in completing weekly assignments.

Another advantage of online instruction is that students who struggle with paying attention, have difficulty listening to, processing, and taking notes during traditional classroom lectures are sometimes better able to comprehend similar subject matter online, particularly when course content emphasizes project-based learning opportunities. Still another advantage,

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Scribner points out, is that "kids can't pre-judge other kids based on how they look or sound. They have to get to know each other as people."

How the VHS Global Cooperative works

To become a member, schools agree to release a certified teacher one period a day to teach a VHS course. In exchange, the school site can register as many as 25 students each semester in any of the VHS courses. Before teaching a course online, teachers must first complete one of two different online training courses: Netcourse Instructional Methodologies (NIM), a ten-week course on how to deliver an already existing VHS course, or Teachers Learning Conference (TLC), a 22-week course for those planning on developing and delivering their own unique VHS learning experience. Both courses can be taken for graduate credit.

After fulfilling VHS training requirements teachers are assigned a VHS mentor, who monitors and coaches them during their first semester of online teaching. Each host school also designates an onsite coordinator who monitors each VHS student's progress, serves as a counselor to students on an as needed basis, communicates with families and provides technical support to students. Before assuming responsibilities, site coordinators first complete a four-week online professional development course where they learn, among things, how to register students, how to monitor student progress and to receive and report student grades.

On average, 10,000 students per year enroll in VHS courses. Once enrolled, 80 percent reportedly complete courses successfully and

76 percent receive a grade of C or better. Among VHS certified teachers, 79 percent say they apply what they learned in their online training course to their day-to-day classroom activities. Among its advanced placement (AP) courses, VHS reports an AP exam pass rate of 66 percent, which they say compares favorably to the national

AP exam pass rate of 60 percent.

Students can also enroll in any of the more than 200 VHS courses independently. Students enrolling independently are assigned a site coordinator who performs similar functions to site coordinators at a host school. Tuition for a semester course is $425, tuition for a year-long course $850. VHS does not grant diplomas or GEDs, but rather partners with degree-granting schools to provide students with enriched educational opportunities.

Readers interested in learning more about VHS are encouraged to visit www.govhs.org, where visitors can log on to a demo course, experience "a day in the life" of a VHS student, teacher or site coordinator, or enroll in a VHS webinar, an online informational meeting offered several times a year. Anyone interested in learning more about signing up for VHS courses independently can do so by logging on to www.govhs.org/single. Those preferring to chat with a VHS staff person by phone can do so by calling 978-897-1900. ●

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