

Online high school launched

Pensacola Company seeks to educate working adults

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A Pensacola company is launching an online program to help working adults earn their high school diploma from the comfort of their homes.

Smart Horizons Career Online Education is an adult-education provider that is working to become the country's first accredited online school district.

Howard A. Liebman, superintendent of Smart Horizons, said the program is tailored for working adults who dropped out of high school and have few resources available if they want to return to education.

"There is a lot of focus on dropout prevention, but there's not a lot of focus on dropout reengagement," Liebman said. "Our vision and mission are about re-engaging the adult learner back into the educational system and preparing them for the world of work."

The program launched its first class of 75 to 100 students April 26. Sammie Avis, 57, of Lawtey, is a member of the pilot class.

Avis said she got married at 17 years old, and quit high school shortly thereafter without earning her diploma.

"Several times I went to go back and get a GED or something, and it just didn't work out," Avis said.

Avis said she tried attending night classes, but had a difficult time squeezing in classes between a full-time job and caring for her two children.

"It was just too much. I couldn't do it," Avis said.

Now that her children are grown, Avis said she's trying again to earn her high school diploma. She works in childcare and is worried that future rule changes may require that childcare workers have a high school diploma.

She said because she needs to be home in the evenings to take care of her 76-year-old mother, online courses are a perfect fit.

"This way I can be at home with her ... and still take care of her and do the classes also," Avis said.

New opportunity

Online high schools are a relatively new concept in the education community.

Several local education institutions, including the Escambia County School District and Pensacola Junior College, offer free high school programs for working adults, but all require students to attend classes at brick-and-mortar facilities.

A public online high school program was launched in the late 1990s by Florida Virtual School, but the program is intended to supplement, rather than replace, traditional high schools.

In 2003, Liebman co-founded the University of Miami Online High School, the nation's first completely online high school.

That program, a for-profit private school now owned by Kaplan, is geared toward athletes and entertainers and costs more than \$11,000 a year.

In 2009, Liebman and his partners joined with Pensacola-based Smart Horizons to create a new online high school, which aims to provide affordable and accessible education and career training to people on the other end of the social spectrum.

Continued on reverse

Students enrolled in the program log on to a password-protected website. Once logged in, they access and complete interactive lessons in different subject areas.

The lessons use explanatory graphics, narration, animated examples and other interactive elements to walk students through coursework. At the end of a unit, students navigate to another section of the website, where they are tested on the subject matter.

Tests are graded automatically and scores are displayed on the student's report card, which is located on another part of the site.

There are no designated class times, and students can complete coursework at their own pace.

Liebman said graduates of the Smart Horizons program will receive a high school diploma coupled with career certification training in one of six disciplines, including health care, child care, office management, and security.

Counselors are available to answer questions by telephone at any time, but Avis said so far, she's had no problems.

"So far the stuff is pretty (self-) explanatory. I just hope it's as easy when I get to the other courses, like English and math," Avis said.

Two year program

The company plans to charge \$995 for the high school diploma program, and it will take a student with no high school credits about two years to earn a diploma.

The interactive lessons are designed and produced at Smart Horizons' Pensacola facilities.

AdvancED, a national accreditation organization, will evaluate Smart Horizons' high school program in coming months. Liebman said the accreditation process should be completed by the end of the year.

Daniel Busse, principal of the Escambia County School District's George Stone Technical Center, said there are significant challenges in providing an online education to adults who likely are working low-paying jobs.

"Many of the students that they serve don't have high-speed Internet connections – or any Internet connections for that matter," Busse said.

Liebman said the group hopes to partner with school districts, corrections systems and other organizations that provide financial assistance for adult education.

"We're looking for funding sources, ... We believe that adult education funding needs to resurface," Liebman said.

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