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Charter school breaks ground in 'open education'

Author(s): Kirsten Stewart kstewart@sltrib.com The Salt Lake Tribune **Date:** January 1, 2010

Jizelle Jurquina won't tell you she's gifted. She's too modest for that. But she's the type of student who does six math equations for every three required. The kid who is easily bored in class. The one who makes teachers swoon and, more often, sweat. She's a natural candidate for the **Open High School** of Utah, an online public charter school, say its administrators.

Jizelle belongs to the growing ranks of K-12 students engaged in distance learning. About 3,000 students in Utah chose the digital route over traditional brick and mortar schools last year, up 30 percent from the previous year.

But the **Open High School**, now in its inaugural year, is no ordinary virtual school.

Whether she knows it or not, Jizelle and her peers are on the leading edge of yet another educational trend: the open educational resources movement.

The **Open High School** of Utah is believed to be the first secondary school in the nation (perhaps the world) to use learning materials and textbooks that are freely available for anyone's use, remixing and redistribution. Because the materials aren't produced by commercial publishers, they can be tailored to meet students' educational needs, free of copyright or licensing restraints.

For advanced learners like Jizelle, that might mean adding an extra chapter or assignment. For others, it's about finding new ways to present hard-to-grasp ideas.

But for David Wiley, the school's founder, it's a means to a larger end: providing America's schoolchildren with more educational opportunities and variety.

"As budgets shrink and the student population grows, we must find ways to deliver education more efficiently," said Wiley, associate professor of instructional psychology and technology at Brigham Young University.

The school has no fixed campus. Its director, DeLaina Tonks, works in donated commercial space in Salt Lake City. Students -- a mix of gifted and struggling learners, athletes, home-schoolers, concert pianists and teens with health problems or disabilities -- hail from all corners of Utah. And the school's four teachers conduct class from the comfort of their homes, sometimes responding to students' midnight queries on their Blackberries.

"It helps us be more nimble and offer a more individualized approach," a tough feat in conventional high schools with classes of 35 to 40 students, said math teacher Sarah Weston.

Weston has taught for 14 years, including a stint at East High School in Salt Lake City, where she earned a reputation for making math relevant, even entertaining.

Initially, she feared the "Sarah show" wouldn't translate online. But through the use of Skype (free video conferencing), e-mail, instant messaging and pre-recorded lectures using an electronic white board, her big personality shines through.

"When I Skype with a student, it's actually more personal. I'm right there in their home with them," said Weston.

It took some getting used to. Weston said parents were initially surprised by the frequency of contact. "Now they love it and expect it," she said.

Students, on the other hand, took to it immediately.

The school currently offers ninth grade only; its 125 spots filled up fast. Enrollment next year will double with the debut of 10th grade, but there's already a waiting list.

"Kids are computer natives," said Tonks, who thought the school would mainly attract students who failed to thrive elsewhere. The Internet is a "great equalizer" where kids are judged not by what they wear or how they look, but by their academic contributions, said Tonks.

But the flexible format has proved equally attractive to students such as Jizelle, an aspiring actress who, when she's not studying, takes Kung Fu and competes in ballroom dancing.

"I get plenty of socialization. I get out of the house and hang with friends. It's not like I'm hiding here under a rock," said the 14-year-old.

The American Fork teen logs onto the Internet each day at about 10 a.m. Prominently highlighted on her "dashboard" are alerts for new assignments, testing dates and school announcements.

It takes her until about 3 p.m. to get through reading assignments for six classes, online lectures and worksheets. She breezes through the easy stuff first, saving the "best" for last.

And when life interrupts, such as a trip to the orthodontist, Jizelle simply logs off and shuts her laptop. No need for an excused absence or tardy slip. She can always top off homework later or join a late-night study session with classmates on Skype.

"That's what I like best. You can do stuff on your own time. You can do it at 3 in the morning if you want," she said.

What Jizelle may not fully appreciate, though, is the work that teachers put into keeping instruction fresh and challenging.

On the other end of the digital stream are teachers receiving instant feedback on students' performance via a learning management system called Brain Honey.

"It's the most amazing thing. I know how many minutes students spend on a reading assignment, how successful they are on a given question or quiz," said teacher Becky Ellis, who uses that data to target tutoring and tweak lesson plans.

The curriculum must align with Utah's core standards. But Ellis is free to diverge from, even rewrite, the "text" because it's not copyrighted.

"You don't get that kind of feedback in the classroom because by the time you get your testing results, it's too late," said the 14-year veteran of California's public school system.

Wiley acknowledges the school isn't for everyone. It takes self-driven learners and skilled teachers who are well versed in their subject areas.

Relatively low overhead frees the school to woo top talent with higher salaries and a \$5,000 "performance pay" bonus tied to test scores and student and parent reviews. The school has no building to maintain and outsources its legal and financial oversight, but it bears heavy I.T. costs.

Ironically, one of its biggest costs is its curricula, which the school's teachers write or purchase with a \$150,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

Because the open resources movement is new to K-12 schools, there's a dearth of free instructional materials, said Wiley, who predicts that will slowly change. He recently convinced the Utah Board of Education to pass a rule encouraging Utah teachers to share their materials.

Anything created by a state-funded school should be fair game for other state-funded schools, said Wiley, who believes sharing knowledge this way breeds excellence through broader peer review.

"In kindergarten we're all taught that sharing is a good thing," he said. "Then at some point, someone convinces you that it's a foolish and naive idea."

The **Open High School** of Utah, likely the nation's first secondary school to use freely shared curricula, further secures Utah's leadership role in a decade-long movement with roots in higher education.

The open resources movement began as a way to make higher education available to everyone, not just the well-fed and well-bred. It's enabled by technology. Just as MP3s have undermined the profits of big record labels, free college lectures on YouTube EDU and iTunes U have driven a rethinking of college education. And it's being championed by so-called "edupunk" intellectuals like Brigham Young University professor David Wiley.

Wiley launched Utah State University's OpenCourseWare Venture and is now associate professor of instructional psychology and technology at BYU. Under Wiley's leadership, Utah State University built one of the country's largest libraries of free online courses, second only to MIT's library. He did it on a shoestring budget of \$120,000.

But the program fell prey to a bad economy and state budget cuts.

So, Wiley switched gears. He moved to BYU, where he heads up the business school's Access to Knowledge Initiative. He recently helped start Flat World Knowledge, which creates peer-reviewed textbooks for free download or affordable purchase as paperbacks. And this fall, he founded the **Open High School**.

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