

A View from the Field: students speak

When the idea of a virtual Community School was first brought to us by parents, we had some significant questions – significant enough that they could really be called doubts. Top of the list was the question of healthy peer community. This was the greatest need for our preadolescents: could it be done online? Could real relationships be formed with teachers and peers alike, genuine and constructive ones?

Second on the list was depth and breadth. Simply put, could we do this online with the depth and breadth that is Enki? If not, what was the point of doing it at all?!

Lastly, these students would be readying for full adolescence and, not infrequently for Enki students, that would mean taking classes at junior colleges. Could they be supported in holding a high standard and making real progress with both skills and creative work?

Significant issues, indeed, and unless we could address all these, at least at a reasonable level, it was not a program we wanted to run. And still, we felt there was no way to find out except to jump in; plus it was clear that there was a need for *something* and the online world is the world into which they are growing up. So, off we went.

We have now had four years, with 19 classes total, and can unequivocally report that all the issues have proved to be not only workable, but are the very areas in which the children have soared. Still, rather than offering an adult opinion, I want to invite you to hear from the students, themselves.

1) PEER COMMUNITY

Rebecca, Virtual Community School Student for two years. Now at 16, she looks back:



I expected an impersonal experience, a teacher lecturing and students glancing uncomfortably around. That was not what I received. Instead I found a warm and welcoming environment, where the other children and myself were allowed to talk and joke about the things important to us, with the teacher there to guide conversations and, when necessary, focus us on the content. After the first day, people began showing up early for the sole purpose of talking before class. Then during class we were often put in virtual meeting rooms with one or two other pupils, so we could get to know each other and hold more in-depth discussions.

It was in one of these rooms I met my friend Hazel. I hadn't really spoken to her before that point, but we worked well together. It was a few weeks later that we were assigned a project together. To do that, we got on a private meeting room in our free time, and started in on our topic. Three hours later, we were laughing and eating lunch together like old friends, despite the miles between us. Eventually both of us graduated middle school, and left the online school, but still almost two years into high school, we remain friends. She came to Denver to see me, and I visited Chicago to stay with her. It was strange the first time seeing her in person, but after two minutes all that faded away and we were able to settle in.

Mateo Enki, Virtual School Student for one year, recently completed Enki Grade 8/9



Enki Virtual Community School has definitely been one of my favorite and most useful educational experiences in my ongoing homeschool adventure. I have not encountered nor expect to encounter anything quite like it. Knowledgeable teachers help create an environment full of fun and learning. They make sure everyone is being included and help bring the best out in all of us; they excel at bringing out skills that the students never knew they possessed.

The teachers will often stay after class to help students and work tirelessly to ensure everyone is having fun while learning. Although online, students still feel like a part of a group and build friendships with each other and the teachers. Once I even tried to hold something for the teacher! (Remember, she's on the other side of the screen!)

Michael, Virtual Community School Student for two years, now completing Grade 8:



I have been in the Enki Virtual Community School for three semesters, soon four. I am having a good time. I enjoyed creating my own idea with other people and making it a reality. You may wonder if there are difficulties doing this? Well, anything that has come up, we have overcome. Our teacher is good at presenting our assignments and leading us through different projects. I have made friends and keep in touch with them. I've had fun and learned lots!

Hannah, Enki Virtual School Student for two years. Now at 15 years old, she looks back:



My experience with Enki Virtual Community School was absolutely incredible. It was so cool to get to have real classmates and get to do group projects, and share our work with each other. We all got along so well, and had so much fun together! I would recommend this program to every homeschooler, it was such a great experience. Even though it was hard to go back to normal homeschooling when it was over, I'm so glad I did it.

Hazel, Enki Virtual School Student for two years. Now at 15 years old, she looks back:



The middle school years are already so confusing, and having a small group of kids to chat and learn with really helped me. It pushed me out of my comfort zone, allowing me to tackle some of my social anxiety without making me retreat into my shell. Through the classes, I formed a friendship, that I believe, will last a lifetime. Despite living several states away, Enki gave us a tool for us to communicate.

2) DEPTH AND BREADTH

Mateo continues . . .



What I love about Enki is how everything is so organic and immersive (despite the fact that it's online!). The stories draw you in with their rich detail and compelling journeys of the characters they contain. The movement is fun and serves as an ice breaker, getting everyone more comfortable with each other. Those who enjoy art and working with their hands (me) will love the cultural arts and crafts, some of which are painting, drawing, clay work, beading, making board games and much more. . . .

In my class, the Enki program helped the students to immerse themselves in the culture in focus by reading compelling stories, writing creatively, hands on arts and crafts, and movement. We had very spirited group discussions, too.

Michael continues . . .



Every semester we paint, read, write and take part in group projects. I have done three group projects and have enjoyed creating my own idea with other people and making it a reality. My first project involved creating a section of a graphic novel. The second project was to make our own board game on the European Renaissance. Last semester I worked on a stop motion short using clay, wood and other props. Altogether I've learned about people from different time periods and cultures. I've had fun and learned lots!

Hazel continues . . .



In a lot of ways, Enki Virtual School meshed really well with my personality. It fostered my love for writing, and especially history. Before, I barely had any interest in either. Now, even though my writing has grown quite a bit beyond what I did in those classes, I still look back fondly at the opportunities to explore different perspectives. In fact, that was when I began to find my voice.

Likewise, I have always loved drawing and art in general, both of which are held deeply in the curriculum. Through class, I fully realized just how important art is to me, which pushed me to begin regular art classes when I aged out of Enki Virtual School. For a while, I used many of the pieces I created in the classes in my portfolio.

3) PREPAREDNESS

Rebecca continues . . .



For me, the Enki Virtual school was a perfect transition in a social sense. It got me out of my shell and provided me a way to spend time with other kids in a "classroom" setting while still within the familiar homeschool environment, and still with the Enki's curriculum. It gave me my best friend, and now looking back, I also see how graceful it made my transition to high school and how much it gave me socially.

Joshua continues . . .



Homeschooling even when you have a strict curriculum, is very different from the schooling you would receive in higher education, such as Universities. Virtual School gave me an opportunity to practice things such as homework outside of class time, working with others on school projects such as the final project for the semester, and how to learn from teachers outside of your parent or usual homeschooling teacher. All of this, prepared me well for handling college.

Mateo continues . . .



Because the class is online, I learned many digital skills and habits that are very useful in a world where technology is, for better or worse, the future - such as keeping track of websites while studying, many useful features for digital writing, using iMovie, and correctly composing emails.

Enki has significantly helped me with art, digital skills, working in groups, pacing homework, and writing. I did not have much experience with writing before Enki, and it was never one of my favorite subjects. After one year with Enki, writing became fun and much easier. In Writer's Workshop, students learn to write creatively and help one another by giving constructive feedback, encouragement and tips to draw out the best in their writings. It is definitely one of the most beneficial things that has come out of my time with Enki.

My only regret is that we didn't find out about Enki sooner than we did!