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United States

Online education
Raising Alabama

Jul 16th 2009 | ALEXANDER CITY
From *The Economist* print edition

An experiment in levelling the playing field

ON A sweltering day in Alexander City, Alabama, summer school was in full swing. Two girls were reading "Julius Caesar" as two others wrestled with maths. A boy worked his way through a psychology quiz, and a teacher monitored an online discussion with students from around the state: Was Napoleon the last enlightened despot or the first modern dictator?

This is not a traditional classroom scene, but it has become common enough in Alabama. The state has many small, rural schools. Because of their size, and the relative scarcity of specialised teachers, course offerings have been limited. Students might have had to choose between chemistry or physics, or stop after two years of Spanish. But thanks to an innovative experiment with online education, the picture has changed dramatically.

In 2005 the governor, Bob Riley, announced a pilot programme called Alabama Connecting Classrooms Educators and Students Statewide, or ACCESS. The idea was to use internet and videoconferencing technology to link students in one town to teachers in another. It was something of a pet cause for Mr Riley, who comes from a rural county himself. He was especially keen that students should have a chance to learn Chinese.

There were sceptics. The pilot programme cost \$10m, not pocket change in a poor state. Teachers worried about how they would connect to their virtual students. But ACCESS quickly became a hit. In 2006 students took more than 4,000 courses at 24 schools. In 2008, with ACCESS now in more schools, the number exceeded 22,000. Administrators are finding new ways to liven up the experience. Last year a dozen schools went on a "virtual field trip" to Antarctica, with scientists beamed in by satellite, and a school in Birmingham has been liaising with a counterpart in Wales.

As for the goal of levelling the academic playing field, the state is pleased so far. Mark Dixon, the governor's adviser for education, says that several years ago fewer than half of Alabama's public high schools offered any college-level Advanced Placement (AP) courses. As of this summer, they all will; ACCESS is being extended to all the state's schools.

Joe Morton, the state superintendent of schools, points to the number of black students taking AP courses. In 2003, according to the College Board, just 4.5% of

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Alabama’s successful AP students (those who passed the subject exam) were black. In 2008 the number was up to 7.1%. There is still a staggering gap—almost a third of the state’s students are black—but the improvement in Alabama was the largest in the country over that period. “That makes it all worthwhile right there,” says Mr Morton.

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