

By KELLY ST. JOHN REGIER



A virtually viable option

Thanks to cyberspace, today's students have another avenue to pursue their dreams.

Dante Saleh, a 18-year-old from Newport Beach, is not your typical high school student. A competitive tennis player with aspirations to compete in the pro tour, he juggles a grueling schedule of morning and afternoon practice sessions, fitness workouts and travel to tournaments with a typical academic load of homework and tests.

Dante is pursuing his dream, thanks to his enrollment in Capistrano Connections Academy, an online high school. A tuition-free public charter school affiliated with the Capistrano Unified School District, it offers an "independent study" experience for students like Dante.

Dante attends live "lessons" and interacts with his teachers and fellow students online. If he has a question, he sends an email to his teacher. He takes the same state tests required of students in traditional high schools and uses the same textbooks.

"Short of getting up in the morning and going somewhere to sit in an actual

classroom, it's not that different," says his father, Terek Saleh. "It boils down to time and efficiency of work. I don't think Dante is missing anything other than the traditional high school experiences. There's no prom, no homecoming and no football game at the end of the week."

Like the Salehs, a growing number of Orange County families are turning to online public charter schools for their children's education. Nationwide, about 228,000 students are enrolled in virtual K-12 schools, up from 50,000 a decade ago, according to the nonprofit advocacy group International Association for K-12 Online Learning.

Connections Academy, for example, serves about 1,900 students in central and Southern California. Some 385

Orange County students are enrolled in Capistrano Connections Academy.

Reasons that families turn to virtual schooling vary, school officials say. Some students are advanced learners who need an opportunity to work ahead in certain subjects; others are struggling learners who need more time to grasp concepts or work without distractions.

Virtual schools also attract students from military families prone to moving and changing schools, as well as the children of professional athletes and actors who need classes that can travel with them during rehearsals and competitions. The programs also attract

homebound students with health issues or physical restrictions and children seeking relief from bullying.

San Clemente mother Patricia





Crocicchia had been home-schooling her four children because her eldest daughter is a television actress. When the family moved to Orange County from Connecticut, Crocicchia learned about California Virtual Academy (CAVA), an online school that uses the curriculum developed by K12 Inc., a company cofounded by William Bennett, former U.S. secretary of education.

"It is not only tuition-free, they send you a computer to use," says Crocicchia. "It seemed a little bit too good to be true."

Now Crocicchia's sixth-grade son, Chuck, has time to pursue music and skateboarding in addition to his schoolwork, while her seventh-grade daughter, Isabella, pursues an interest in dance. Because CAVA offers foreign language instruction, Crocicchia's son is learning Spanish and her daughter German.

"It's teaching my kids to be self-motivated as well. They're reading and learning on their own," she says. "This gives them freedom to [also] be out in the world doing things."

Both CAVA and Connections Academy are publicly funded charter

schools. They are tuition-free because they receive state funding based on their students' average daily attendance, just as public brick-and-mortar schools do. They are subject to the same rules enforced at other public schools, such as collecting attendance and testing student achievement, and use similar textbooks and other teaching materials. They also offer a full spectrum of special-education services.

CAVA serves about 800 students in Orange County, says its head of schools, Katrina Abston. Throughout the state, it has about 14,000 students attending 11 schools, she says. That represents a huge growth in the decade since it opened.

Some of that growth is among families that no longer can afford the cost of private school, says Abston, and families disappointed in how budget cuts are affecting local public schools.

"A lot of districts have cut programs. We've not cut any of our programs. In fact, we added foreign language starting in the third grade," Abston says. "The biggest thing I hear from parents is that they feel like they now have real-time information

about how their children are doing. You don't typically know every day, 'What is going on and how are they doing?' Now they can know 24/7 how a student is achieving and have a part in customizing a child's education."

As do other virtual schools, CAVA offers field trips and other opportunities for its students to socialize and meet teachers face to face, officials say. However, they note, virtual school is not for everyone.

"It will not work for a family who thinks this is something they can do on a part-time basis. If you're not dedicated to daily education, it will not work," Abston says. "Our program is rigorous, and we have a high level of expectation of our families. If you are dedicated and looking for rich educational opportunities, this is for you."

Tennis player Salen agrees that it takes a certain kind of student to succeed in a virtual school.

"You have to be accountable to yourself, and you have to recognize if you're



having problems with a given subject so you can get help. It's easy for the problem to get ahead of you," he says.

His family is pleased that Dante can customize his education plan; in fact, he may graduate early.

The degree that Dante will receive from Connections Academy is the same as a diploma from a traditional high school. But to satisfy the laboratory-science-class requirements for California's UC and Cal State college systems, Dante took biology and chemistry at a local community college instead of completing a strictly online course.

Dante knows he is giving up some typical high school experiences, but he says it's a small price to pay to pursue his dreams.

"It's a whole different set of things I want to do because of my goals with tennis," he says. "If you like being at school all day or with people all day, it wouldn't be the right thing." 