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Here's Some 'Insight' Into One High School In Marin County...It's Online



"Music appreciation, I-learning, English...running- that's my P.E.- algebra, bio, world history..."

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11th-grader Patrick Harrington is ticking off the list of classes he's taking, all fairly typical except...I-learning? And there's something else very different too.

We are talking with Patrick in his high school classroom, which happens to be the dining room of his hillside home in Novato.

Welcome to the newest version of high school here in Marin, [Insight School of California- North Bay...completely online!](#)



Insight School, the nations largest diploma-granting online high school network, welcomed its first students in the North Bay to virtual high school this past September 2008. Harrington was one of nearly 300 pupils who signed up to "attend" school *solely* online.

Harrington, who has Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, cites difficulty in his previous school- San Marin High in Novato- as his motivation for enrolling in Insight.



"I just couldn't really focus the same when I was in class, I had too many distractions," says the personable 17 year-old, "I would talk to people and I just wouldn't get my work done."

His mother Maura, sitting nearby, nods in agreement. She says she discovered Insight and it was a mutual decision to enroll Patrick in the new program in September. It's been five months and we ask Maura how it's going-

"I am completely impressed by it, it's kind of been a salvation honestly."



The online school network, which is publicly funded, had its school charter authorized by the Windsor Unified School District in Sonoma County. Insight has been around for about three years and has twelve 'districts' nationwide. There are two in California, including the North Bay Chapter which enrolls students from Marin, Sonoma, Solano, Mendocino, Lake, Napa and Contra-Costa counties.

According to Insight of California's Exec Director Sheila Shiebler, Insight appeals to a diverse group of students who appreciate the virtual class- "AP and honors students who perhaps are graduating early, students who have been home schooled all their life, sports stars, actors and actresses and students who just flat out don't feel comfortable in a public school environment."



Patrick especially likes the fact that, unlike the set schedule of a traditional school, he can work at his own pace which gives him the flexibility for employment at Jamba Juice and Tommy Hilfiger-

"I can get online for three hours a day and then I go to work for six hours."

Or, he can devote *more* hours to a subject if wants to-

"When you're in the normal class, you have 45 minutes and then the bell rings and you have to go to the next class. For instance I really like World History, so I don't have to learn it for just 45 minutes and then, oh- there's the bell I have to go to the next class. I can spend more time on it."

At Insight, students "attend" a real-time class with a real teacher, only it is online. The classes are conducted with various students who can participate in the lesson by texting or messaging within the class. Insight also requires every new student take iLearning, which is a class designed to help integrate the student into the online learning experience.



"People assume you don't have a teacher, you don't have classmates, and in fact we do," Harrington says, "I have eight different teachers in eight different classrooms."

Shiebler explains the process-

"Teaching sessions are live-time where all the students log-on. The teacher has a white board; all the students can participate, they can write or text questions. There are icons for clapping, a happy face; raising a hand to be called on."



The real-time classes, which are scheduled daily, are also recorded. So if a student misses a class or needs another review or can't attend real-time, he or she can just watch the recorded class online. But couldn't you just skip watching class and say you attended we ask?

Patrick laughs and shakes his head. They've thought of that, he says. The teacher mentions a keyword sometime during the lesson and students who review the recorded session must note that word. There are several other software programs to prevent cheating as well.

We wondered about the social aspect of being enrolled in an online school, and Patrick and Maura both agree that worried them in the beginning.

"I didn't know what to expect because I had never done anything like this," says Patrick, adding "I knew I was going to lose the whole social aspect."



He says he misses the camaraderie at his previous school, and has to rely on his friends for updates on things like basketball game schedules. But he also admits he's learning a lot more without goofing off with his buddies in a classroom, and his mom agrees-

"What's interesting about this is he's actually learning, because this is not a matter of just getting by," she says, "He really has to learn to be able to complete their process...and it's possible without the distractions."

Shiebler says Insight makes an effort to incorporate social activities for their students-

"We have opportunities for online and face to face meetings. We have clubs that are part of the school...everything from senior club, to writing club where they do a newspaper to fitness clubs based on special interests, that sort of thing. We have online discussion boards that are monitored where students can get to know each other, so they can meet offline."



Insight is in the process of arranging a Junior-Senior prom for the North Bay students, which Patrick says will be "either in the City or on a yacht on the bay."

And graduation will also be traditional; off-line and in person with speeches and cap-and gowns. Insight plans to hold it in a central location so all graduating students can attend.

What about school sports, which can sometimes play a huge part in the high school experience and can often impact a student's admission to college?

At Insight, a student can apply to any high school (in a participating county) to play in any sport, as long as they meet that school's requirements (e.g. grades). Patrick, who enjoys golf, skateboarding, snowboarding, bike-riding and especially lacrosse, which he hopes to play soon in the Petaluma High School league.

Just then the phone rings. It's Patrick's English teacher who is just calling to check in with him.

One of the things Patrick and Maura really appreciate is the supportive atmosphere at Insight. Each student is assigned an iMentor, a kind of counselor/guide, who checks in weekly with their assigned student. In addition, Maura can log on and communicate with Patrick's teachers to follow his progress.



What Patrick especially likes, is the freedom to do schoolwork *whenever* he prefers. Take Physical Education for instance. Patrick- "For P.E., I can go up snowboarding on the weekends and I can just record down how many hours I ski...they gave me a step counter, so I can just go for a run and count my steps. Or I can ride my bike and just record the miles."

Another online advantage is the ability to do schoolwork *wherever* they prefer.

Patrick has mobile broadband so he can take his laptop along with him and catch up on some school assignments if he's away from home. Each student at Insight is provided with a state of the art laptop, a printer/fax/scanner and reimbursement for high-speed internet connection. Books are online as well. Best of all, it's provided free of charge.

Patrick, who appears to be thriving in the online environment, apparently has a lot to like about the program. But he mentions the teachers more than once during our interview and they seem to be the most motivating factor for him-

"The teachers here, they like me..they are really, really friendly. Teachers in normal school, they don't always give you a second chance...for this school, they like to help you out. They are actually really supportive. It's a lot more positive environment."

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For more information about Insight School of California- North Bay, [check the website here.](#)