The 2013 Kansas Connections Academy graduating class gathers on stage Friday, May 31, in Wichita following the ceremony. Students from throughout the state attend the virtual school with an office based in Elkhart. Courtesy photo

By ROBERT PIERCE • Leader & Times In the 21st century, times are rapidly changing, and in the past decade, how students learn has been revamped.

Through a partnership with USD No. 218 in Elkhart, students in that town can be educated right along with youth from Wichita and Kansas City through a free virtual public school.

As a way to take young people outside the walls of a classroom, the Kansas Connections Academy started a few years ago as the Elkhart Cyber School, and principal Jerald Rash said about three years ago, that school merged with Connections Education to become KCA.

“We’re a K-12 tuition free virtual public school,” he said. “We’re allowed to serve any student that lives in Kansas.”

KCA has an office in Elkhart, and the school is operated under the umbrella of the superintendent of USD 218.

“We’re state accredited through Elkhart, and we also are accredited through Advance Ed,” Rash said.

Rash said students from all across Kansas attend KCA, but he said not many come from Elkhart itself.

“We have more kids in the Liberal area than we do in the Elkhart area, but our biggest populations are the Wichita area, the Kansas City, Kan., area,” he said. “I would say the next ones would be Dodge City, Hays, those types of areas. We have families scattered everywhere,

and we have a big state."

Rash said enrolling at KCA can be done through a variety of means.

"We do a lot of face to face events as well, so they can come and meet us and learn what our program is all about, what we do in our school," he said. "We also have virtual sessions where parents can come virtually from the convenience of their home and check us out and see what we're all about."

Rash said right now, KCA has a little less than 400 kids from K-12, with about 60 percent of those in the 7th through 12th grade. The principal said he believes the strongest thing about his school is its curriculum.

"It's rigorous," he said. "It's taxing to even the brightest kids. We're the leader in terms of education. We're really blessed, in my opinion."

Rash said he believes KCA has the best curriculum that can be offered at any level, whether it be high school, middle school or elementary.

"The feedback that I get from families is that it's really challenging, but the kids, when they're truly dedicated, are learning," he said. "That's our goal. That's our number one goal by far."

Rash said unlike many public schools, parents play a big role at KCA.

"We call them learning coaches, and they really help us monitor and keep up with the student to make sure that they're working as they should, logging in, communicating with their teacher, completing lessons," he said. "It's really a partnership between us and our families and great families that really care about education. They tend to thrive with us. They do really well."

Rash comes from a background in brick and mortar schools, having worked as an administrator in USD No. 259 in Wichita for about 10 years, and he is pleased with what virtual schools have to offer.

Kansas currently has 88 different options in terms of virtual education, which Rash said means the avenue is becoming more widely accepted in the state.

"What I love about it is it gives parents and students another option," he said. "We call ourself a school of choice. If they want to come to us and do something different and the parents can really take a primary role in their child's education, they can seek us out."

Rash said the biggest difference between virtual schools and brick and mortar schools is the active role that parents play.

"That's really been refreshing to me," he said. "I just really love their families that are that interested. They're that involved. They're there."

Rash said with traditional schools, only a few families would attend events such as open houses and conferences. He said KCA offers this, and more people are taking advantage.

“Every couple weeks, you can truly have a dialogue with a teacher,” he said. “You can always see how your student’s doing online and see if they’ve completed lessons. You can see how they did on their tests. It’s all right there at the parent’s fingertips. The active parents make a world of difference in our world.”

KCA is state accredited, putting the school under the same guidelines from the Kansas State Department of Education.

“We really try hard to do everything that the state tells us we should be doing,” Rash said.

Rash said what KCA has to offer for students and families is “tremendous.”

“If you have families or students that aren’t really motivated, it’s definitely a bigger challenge for us,” he said. “That’s where we have to get really proactive with our families and students and really asked the question, ‘Is this the best fit for you?’ For those kids that are really motivated, truly want to learn differently,”

Rash said students who could become competitive athletes or aspiring actors and actresses are dedicated to school at KCA, so much so they carve time into their schedule specifically geared to hone their craft.

“They’ll practice from 8 to 10, 8 to 11, and they’ll do school from 11 to 7 o’clock, 8 o’clock, whatever it takes,” he said. “We also offer that flexibility for students that are aspiring to do something above and beyond. Not many schools can say that they do something like that.”

Rash said open enrollment takes place at KCA through Sept. 20.

“We also serve special education students,” he said. “We take anybody who enrolls with a few exceptions. We are a tuition free virtual public school. If we feel we can’t meet a student’s needs, that’s when we’ll have conversations with parents and help them explore their options.”

Rash said KCA’s staff is an outstanding group.

“We have people that are just truly dedicated, and they care immensely about kids,” he said.