

# Robertson County Virtual School meets the needs of military families and rural students

## Jumping into multiple roles

Two years ago, Dr. Mary Jo Holmes was a traditional high school principal with almost a decade of service under her belt for Robertson County Schools in Springfield, Tennessee. Now she's "everything" as principal of Robertson County Virtual School, the district's full-time, online academy for students across the state in grades 3-12.

"I'm the administrator, the registrar, the counselor, you name it," said Dr. Holmes, who wears multiple hats for the school as a resource always available to students.


## Track record of success

Five years ago, Robertson County Virtual School launched serving five students, and has since exponentially grown. In the 2017/18 school year, the school grew to 53 full-time students for the first semester and had 43 students for the second semester. As part of a rural school district that serves families from a variety of backgrounds, the virtual school typically enrolls up to 45 full-time students who attend school online. Students are taught by licensed virtual teachers specially trained in online learning.

The virtual school boasts a 100% graduation rate, and five students are poised to earn district diplomas and participate in a traditional high school graduation ceremony this year.

## Providing students personalized learning

Dr. Holmes credits Robertson County Virtual School's success to its ability to provide students with personalized learning environments that are unique and flexible.

**100%**   
Graduation rate

Robertson County Virtual School in Springfield, Tennessee, provides military families and rural students full-time learning opportunities that meet their diverse needs. The flexible learning opportunities the school provides has helped the school maintain a 100% graduation rate.

"Whether five years ago or today, students come to us for the same reasons. Students are learning differently and they need a different learning environment, a different climate — flexibility," said Dr. Holmes.

Students are required to mark their attendance daily, but do not have to log a certain number of hours in school weekly. They are granted the individual flexibility needed to complete coursework at their own pace.

"The beauty of this learning environment is that it's personalized. Some students are very gifted and it may not take them that long [to complete schoolwork], while other students may take several hours to complete schoolwork," said Dr. Holmes, who added that roughly 15% of her current students are enrolled in honors classes.

In addition to honors classes, Robertson County Virtual School offers a variety of online courses like world languages, which Dr. Holmes said gets students get very excited. Students are also able to participate in the district's band, choir, and ROTC organizations.

## Meeting and supporting each student where they are

With an online learning environment, students can work at a pace that they feel comfortable with and choose classes that meet their learning needs and interests. Licensed virtual teachers give students more options in what classes they can take, so that students have the flexibility to choose classes that suit their needs.

Dr. Holmes and volunteer teachers are also available to provide the in-person support students may need. Struggling students are welcome to complete schoolwork during the day in a computer lab alongside Dr. Holmes or after school hours with volunteer teachers.

"Time-wise, I just want to see that my students are making progress, that they're on track, and that their grades are what I would expect based on their academic history," said Dr. Holmes.

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## Pushing students to the next level

Dr. Holmes believes that students must be problem solvers and critical thinkers in order to succeed in virtual school.

"You have to problem-solve and persevere. That's a life lesson, and those are the kinds of skills that you have to have in virtual school. 'I don't know' is unacceptable. You will learn and take it to the next level," she said.

One student in particular comes to mind when Dr. Holmes thinks about the dedication, focus, and drive students need to succeed in a virtual school. This student traveled to Haiti to study abroad, and graduated while in service as a missionary.

"Talk about perseverance. In Haiti, this student didn't have 24/7 access to the internet, but she's academically gifted and managed her time by picking certain days to go into town to do her schoolwork," said Dr. Holmes.

"When she went into town in Haiti she would visit with me [virtually] and we'd go over things," said Dr. Holmes. "If she needed something she would just email me — no different than a student down the street."

