

Virtual classes face real challenges

Becky Farber/Report Card
16 November 2003

It is public school paradise. Students can watch TV during class.

There's no dress code, so it's OK to wear pajamas to biology lab.

Go ahead and answer that cellphone; the teacher won't notice.

Welcome to the educational nirvana now available to Florida's public school students: the online classroom.

State lawmakers have included virtual education in the funding formula for public school education, which means the classes can be part of every student's curriculum.

Legislators have even allocated \$4.3 million to pull kids out of the classrooms as early as kindergarten, developing a generation of students whose teachers are just a mouse-click away.

The Florida Virtual School, or FLVS, became Florida's independent public cyber-school in 2000. With a current enrollment of more than 11,000 middle and high school students, FLVS has made it to the big time.

The school offers 65 courses from language arts to Latin. Besides the basics, there are classes in business, computer science, health, FCAT and SAT prep and physical education.

Ambitious cyber scholars can even enroll in Advanced Placement, or college level classes. Most FLVS students pass the AP exam, according to Sharon Johnson, the schools' director of curriculum.

"Three years ago, our qualifying rate was 73 percent. Two years ago, our qualifying rate was 60 percent," Johnson says.

The pass rate isn't available for last year, she says.

I can think of plenty of reasons why teachers would run for the hills -- or to the keyboard -- to get out of the public school classroom, but there's nothing virtual about the FLVS faculty qualifications.

The 150-plus educators must have a bachelor's degree in their fields and are required to be certified in their subject. Here's how it works:

The student registers for the course of their choice. The student's counselor and principal must approve the request for the online class, making certain that course prerequisites have been met.

According to Chris Master, the administrative director for institutional technology at Miami-Dade County Public Schools, there aren't many other limitations for students when it comes to signing on for Virtual School.

"We can't stop kids from taking a class. We're not allowed to stand in the way of a student's choice to take an online course," Master says.

Not every college admissions officer sees the value of a high school transcript padded with virtual credits.

Daniel Walls, Emory University's director of admissions says Advanced Placement courses are more valued when they're taken the old-fashioned way.

"I would say that taking a traditional course with other competitive students would be much preferred over online courses in these types of advanced classes," he said. "The rigor of a traditional class and the interaction of these students in a classroom situation, I believe, could not be duplicated in an online format."

Online courses are acceptable when the particular class isn't offered at the student's high school, he adds.

Last summer, I had way too many plans for the 10 weeks of summer vacation. I figured taking the health elective online would be the easy way out.

Getting started was trickier than I expected.

Between adjusting my Internet settings and understanding the course set up, I spent an embarrassing amount of time just getting the hang of things.

Attaching files to my FLVS homework folder took some practice. My first three homework submissions were blank.

Sometimes the mouse got the better of me. I accidentally clicked on a test I wasn't ready to take.

This is a big FLVS no-no since you can only open a test once. Suddenly, I missed the comfort and convenience of having the teacher nearby.

One e-mail and four panicked-filled hours later found my problem resolved. My understanding teacher reset the exam.

FLVS sure knows how to pile on the work.

The half-credit health class was crammed with 24 graded assignments and 19 exams, not including the final.

We even had to become CPR certified, which involved spending a Saturday morning at Baptist Hospital.

There's no doubt online classes are cheater-friendly. One pair of friends took quizzes together over the telephone, sharing answers.

While students must sign the FLVS honor code, some kids find creative ways to break it.

Then there are the FLVS classes that lend themselves to logistical and ethical challenges -- like online physical education.

I'd like to meet the creator of this gem.

One girl I know decided to play fair and actually run the mile for her first assignment. It was torture, but she crawled to the finish line in the 95-degree summer heat.

When assignment number two required her to repeat the feat, the student began to weigh her options.

I can just imagine a scale with a television on one side and running shoes on the other.

Needless to say, the student chilled with Judge Judy instead of sweating at the track, and submitted a phony score that showed a 10-second improvement.

Florida's legislators have given public school students one sweet deal. Online classes are a great way to complete course requirements. I'm taking a newspaper class now because I was able to take health over the summer.

FLVS is mandated to recruit students in outlying areas and those in D and F schools, which helps broaden those students' curriculum.

The idea of little kids taking online classes takes a good idea too far. Younger students need to be with teachers and other students, not alone with a computer.

Critics say virtual education is a \$4 million giveaway to the home-schooled students who wouldn't have been part of the public school system anyway.

I suspect our lawmakers see benefits beyond our bliss. Virtual education is the less costly solution to those irritating Amendment 9 mandates, costing the state \$200 less per student.

Plus there's no need to build more classrooms or hire more teachers if kids are learning at home. Not many public schools can make the big bucks like FLVS because the school charges tuition to out-of-state students.

According to the Florida Legislature's Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability, FLVS cleared almost \$13,000 on each 30-student class of non-Floridians.

I wonder if the gig will be up if online education doesn't empty classrooms. We won't make headway if kids enroll only to beef up their transcripts.

The state may tire of paying for students twice; those who take an online class as part of their regular school day are being funded for both schools.

As for me, I'd like to see more classes added to the FLVS roster.

There's a fine arts elective I still need to complete. Virtual ceramics would be perfect.

Copyright 2003 Miami Herald Media Co. All Rights Reserved