

# Orlando Sentinel

## SELF-STARTERS LIKE FREEDOM OF STUDYING IN CYBERSPACE

Christopher Sherman

16 November 2003

HAINES CITY -- Spending most of the day staring at a computer screen rather than at a teacher has distinct advantages that are attracting growing numbers of students to Daniel Jenkins Academy of Technology.

Pace seems to be the big selling point with high-school students who can tackle an assignment at any time of the day or night and put down one course's work and pick up another's at the click of a mouse.

"I don't have to deal with slow teachers," said freshman Adam Hulsman, 14, of Davenport. "I can work at my own pace."

That is not to say that Adam does not have teachers. They just happen to be in other parts of the state, working from their homes.

Adam is taking world history, Earth-space science, English, Spanish and business-systems technology online through Florida Virtual School, an Orlando-based school operating with a gubernatorial-appointed governing board since 2000.

He also takes a drafting class at Haines City High School and competes on that school's swim team.

Jenkins Principal Sue Braiman is the first to admit the format is not for everyone.

"It can be frustrating for students looking for constant reinforcement," Braiman said. "It's another learning choice for students, not an end-all for all."

But for many students, the flexibility makes sense.

"A lot of high-school-age students are more savvy with computers than we were, so it makes sense for them to tap into the curriculum that way," Braiman said.

## RESPONSIBILITY IS REQUIRED

Students in the program must be able to take responsibility for their own learning, she said. They do not have to be straight-A students, but they have to be able to pace themselves and work at times outside the traditional school day.

Grades and work are available at any time to the student and administrators, allowing for constant monitoring.

The Florida Virtual School curriculum is "labor intensive," with an emphasis on application of what is learned. Students may have two to four assignments per week for a course but are often working on longer-term projects as well.

There is still plenty of contact and communication. E-mail is always an option, but the school's labs also have telephones if teachers and students need to speak. Each lab has a facilitator who acts as the on-site go-between for teachers and students.

Facilitator Ana Ambrose helps students organize their schedules, deals with hardware or software glitches, and gives a helpful nudge if minds wander too close to a deadline.

"It's easy to get distracted on a computer," Ambrose said.

Students work in one of three computer labs, and Florida Virtual School tries to group them with the same teachers so they can work on projects together.

Once they reach their junior and senior years, some students have the option of not coming to school every day. But administrators can always check their progress online and reel them back in if they are not progressing satisfactorily.

## INTEREST GROWS

Jenkins has only used the Florida Virtual School program since the 2000-01 school year, but its numbers are growing. Last year, there were about 75 students. This year, that rose to about 135, and through September there were 263 students on a waiting list for grades nine through 12.

No other school in the state uses Florida Virtual School curriculum to the extent that Jenkins does, said Bruce Friend, the virtual school's chief administrator.

Friend anticipates 18,000 to 20,000 course enrollments statewide this year.

"Jenkins is unique because all of their classes were with us," Friend said. "It's almost a test group for us."

Daniel Jenkins Academy of Technology will receive its first letter grade under Gov. Jeb Bush's A-Plus Plan for Education next year. It had been lumped together with middle schools and was too small to have its own grade last year.

## MEETING FEDERAL GOALS

But the school was one of only about 400 statewide that met the "adequate yearly progress" goals outlined in the federal No Child Left Behind Act, regarded as more stringent than the state's grades.

Ryan Bryant, a 15-year-old freshman working on an assignment for an Earth-space science class, said he learned about the program as a middle-school student at Jenkins. His parents agreed it would be a good fit for him.

He is taking American history, English and the science class online, but math with a regular teacher at Jenkins.

"I like not having teachers," he said. "I like working at my own pace."

Copyright © 2008, Orlando Sentinel