

Virtual Class Lets Students Remain Home

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TAMPA - Would you like to teach full time or part time from your home?

Does your child need to prepare for the SAT college prep test or the GED?

Or maybe he or she needs an extra credit in personal fitness or world history to graduate in May?

Spring registration opened Wednesday for classes that begin Jan. 7 at the state's virtual school, and it's free for state students.

Florida Virtual School, which opened in 1996, is funded by the state as its own school district. The courses include books and even lab supplies, but they are taken over the Internet with e-mail and telephone contact with teachers.

All courses are led by certified instructors using curriculum developed by the school, which is where teaching opportunities result. The school hires full- and part-time teachers who are certified in their field, and it is "always looking" for highly qualified instructors, says Chief Administrative Officer Bruce Friend.

Most of the 75 course offerings are for high school students, but the number of courses for middle schoolers is growing, says Friend, as is the program, which started in 1996 with 100 students.

So far this academic year, students have been enrolled in 14,312 classes, with 741 being taken by students in Hillsborough, 351 in Pasco and 805 in Pinellas, said Heidi Hollowell, the school's communications manager.

"The vast majority are full-time students taking courses at a local high school," Friend says. That's 72 percent, he says, with 22 percent being home schooled and 6 percent in private schools.

Students must have approval of their parents and local school counselor, although schools cannot deny participation if a student is academically eligible, Friend says.

The students must be self-motivated, although an assigned teacher maintains contact via e-mail.

Students must show progress and complete a half-credit course in about 24 weeks or a full-credit course within a year, Friend says. They may complete courses much sooner, but few are able to in less than two months, he said.

"This is a real course," Friend says. "This is probably more rigorous than what they get in local schools most places."

Honors and advanced placement classes are offered, but the fitness classes are the ones that have captured media attention. Students log in their physical activities and take tests, but some can't imagine the concept even though parents must be involved.

If a student doesn't drop a class within 28 days, it can become a failing grade and will affect the student's grade point average, Friend says.

Teens in specialty athletic or arts programs, those working full- time and those with scheduling conflicts who want or need certain courses are likely candidates for the classes.

Spring course offerings for high school are: English III, English III Honors, English IV, English IV Honors, Physics, Physics Honors, Computer Programming Basic I, Computer Programming Basic II, Spanish I, Algebra I, Global Studies, World History, American Government, American Government Honors, Economics, Economics Honors, Personal Fitness, Life Management Skills, Fitness Lifestyle Design, Business Systems Technology and Web Design. Advanced Placement courses in American Government, Microeconomics and Macroeconomics also are offered, as is SAT prep for college entrance and FCAT Prep - 10th Grade Review for the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.

Spring course offerings for eighth-graders are FCAT Prep - Eighth- Grade Review; Orientation to Art 2-D and keyboarding.

Some classes fill early and then have waiting lists. Registration is ongoing.

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