

School Isn't All It Used to be for Florida Virtual School

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'Schools these days just aren't what they used to be.' It's a lament frequently issued by older Americans, who sometimes feel educational standards have gone down, and children are no longer required to learn the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic. The evaluation isn't meant to be a compliment but in the state of Florida, students and teachers are taking great pride in the fact that for them, school isn't at all "what it used to be".

It's a sunny, Sunday afternoon in a suburb of Miami, Florida, and 14-year-old Kurt Durnberg is about to enter his Algebra Two classroom. "OK, so once you click on this page when you log in, it has this page, and you click 'enter course'. And once you click on it, they have all the information," he says.

Kurt's "classroom" is an internet website that he visits using his home computer. The eighth-grader is taking Algebra Two at the Florida Virtual School. The state-sponsored program began six years ago with just 77 students. It now includes more than 8,000 children from around the state. There are no traditional classrooms at the Florida Virtual School. Students take their classes on-line. Kurt Durnberg does have a "real" math teacher who's posted a picture of himself on the Algebra Two website. But Kurt's never actually met his teacher. Instead, he corresponds with the instructor by e-mail and occasionally over the telephone.

Kurt Durnberg says there are some definite advantages to learning on-line. "It's more done at your own pace. You have a certain number of assignments, and you have to complete them by a date," he says. "And you can do them when you want, so that makes it more flexible, but it also kind of puts more responsibility on you."

The ability to have students work at their own pace definitely sets the Florida Virtual School apart from a more traditional classroom. At so-called "brick and mortar" schools, students are required to spend one hundred eighty days in class. If a student is particularly bright like Kurt and he's able to grasp concepts right away, he still has to wait one hundred eighty days before he can move on to the next level. And if the student is having trouble, and hasn't learned everything by the end of the required period, he fails and has to take the class over.

That doesn't happen at the Florida Virtual School, where students work through their assignments until they've mastered them, and then move on. Of course, this can be a lot of work for on-line teachers, who often have to juggle more than one hundred students working at more than one hundred different rates.

But instructor Matt Vangelis says he prefers the on-line classroom to the more traditional environment he taught in for six years. "In the traditional school, a large portion of my time was spent with distractions classroom management, fire drills, and it actually took away from my passion of teaching," he says. "In the virtual school, the contact that I have with students is all curriculum and course-questions related. The kids will contact me because they want to learn. They're not raising their hand to ask if they can go to the bathroom or if they can sharpen their pencil."

Most of the eight thousand students enrolled at the Florida Virtual School also attend classes at traditional schools. The virtual school isn't meant to be a replacement for the brick and mortar classroom. It's a supplement. For example, in a traditional school, students will sometimes find that two different classes they want to take are scheduled to meet at the same time. They used to have to choose between the two. But now, they can study say art or music in a traditional classroom and English or history on-line. Julie Young is executive director of the Florida Virtual School.

She says when the program was initiated in 1997, scheduling conflicts weren't the only problem educators wanted to address. "Over half of the geographic population of Florida is rural. And our rural districts in Florida have notoriously been at a disadvantage in terms of being able to attract teachers and offer some of the upper level courses," she says. "So there was also a desire to create equal access across the state."

And so long as a child has access to a computer as most American children do, either at home or at their local public library they can sign up for an on-line course. Right now, the biggest challenge facing administrators at the Florida Virtual School is finding enough teachers to meet the growing demand. But does the average teenager really have the discipline and intellectual maturity to learn from a teacher who isn't right there in the room with her? Julie Young admits the environment isn't for everyone[degrees] but she also says that question would only ever occur to someone who hadn't grown up in the internet age.

Sixteen-year-old Lynda Trujillo, who's taking two courses on-line, agrees. "I love the way that I can communicate with my teachers at any time of the night or the morning. They're very supportive. I can talk to them through e-mails, instant messages, which is the new technology for teens," she says. "It caters to students now and how we're evolving. So teenagers I think really do appreciate that [because] we grew up with that."

Because the Florida Virtual School is funded by the government, classes are free for any child living in the state. So far, 12 states have established on-line high schools for their residents, and at least five others are developing them.