

Virtual School a success? Student opinions differ

By ERYNN CARR

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Stephen Koren has never met his macroeconomics teacher, rarely speaks with his computer science professor and does not have the vaguest idea of what his government teacher looks like.

He's one of the 6,900 students currently enrolled in an online class through Florida Virtual School, a six-year program designed to alleviate overcrowding and give students a chance to study a topic not offered at their school.

On paper, Virtual School looks to be a success -- the number of participating school districts has increased from six to 65 and the students' passing rate on Advanced Placement exams is well above the national average, according to the program.

But student response to the program isn't quite as flattering.

"I decided to enroll in Florida Virtual School because there are certain classes that are not offered at my high school," explained Koren, a senior at MAST Academy.

He said he expected to encounter the same level of intensity in his virtual school classes that he has had at MAST.

"But I was thoroughly disappointed," he said. "The assignments are easy to complete with very little effort and resulting in even less knowledge retention."

Koren is not alone in his criticism of the program.

"I expected to be fully prepared for the AP exam at the conclusion of the course, but instead I do not feel that I will be able to pass the test," said Rachel Dacks, a senior at MAST Academy who is taking Advanced Placement Government and Microeconomics classes, which are not offered at her school.

"I have decided not to even attempt to take the exam," Dacks said.

The Internet-based public high school was initiated by the state legislature under Gov. Jeb Bush in 1997. The \$1.3 billion pilot project has since expanded from 77 students to more than 8,000. Courses ranging from Latin to computer science and physical education to physics are offered via the Internet to both public and home school students alike.

Here's how it works:

Students access their assignments through the Florida Virtual School's homepage at www.flvs.net which provides course-related links to websites, a virtual grade book, online discussions and even personal profiles to better acquaint the students with their classmates. Students are encouraged to contact their teachers frequently either by phone or e-mail.

Phyllis Lentz, the director of Global Services at Florida Virtual School, said the program has grown because it successfully meets the needs of the individual student, but cautions it might not be right for everyone.

"In comparing it to traditional schooling, people should look at it as just another choice," said Lentz, who has been involved with the program since August 1997. "It really isn't an either or selection, but rather a different way of delivering information."

Lynda Trujillo, a junior at Braddock Senior High, would agree with that claim.

"It's a better education in my perspective, because I feel liberated from traditional classrooms that rely on externalities for my success such as who is in the class, the pace the teacher chooses and if deadlines are reasonable," Trujillo said.

Enrolled in honors economics, honors biology and Advanced Placement Macroeconomics, Trujillo calls the Virtual School "the ultimate college preparation."

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