



Virtual High School Studied Students could take classes on the Internet.

By Andrew Dunn
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LAKELAND -- The Polk County School District may create its very own virtual high school for students in the area.

And in doing so, the district could funnel money now being sent to a state-run virtual school into Polk County.

According to plans, Polk would have a virtual public high school -- meaning students would take classes via the Internet. The district would franchise online courses from the state-run Florida Virtual School (FLVS) to be taught by local teachers. The new school, if approved by the Polk County School Board, could open this fall and would cost \$331,310 for the first year.

"The benefit to Polk County

. . . is that some of our outlying high schools could offer the full curriculum," said Bruce Tonjes, director of secondary and middle school education. "If they needed a French class, they could have French for three students, seven students at different levels without having to have the teacher hired."

Tonjes said students could take one course with the virtual school and the rest with their regular high school. He also said that a student could take a full load through the virtual school, something that may be attractive to home-schooling families.

FLVS is an online school run by the state. The courses are free for students and taught by certified teachers. Polk would pay \$20,000 to franchise those courses and materials for the first year and \$15,000 for subsequent years.

FLVS began in 1997 as a small, pilot high school program. Seventh- and eighth-grade classes were added. And the school's enrollment has soared to more than 10,000 students, according to last year's numbers.

Daniel Jenkins Academy in Haines City has been using the FLVS courses as its high school curriculum since 2000. The school has 130 students enrolled in its online high school. But it receives no money for those students.

More than 600 other Polk students take classes directly from the FLVS.

The real benefit of a Polk virtual high school could be financial. During the 1998-1999

school year, Polk County had only 13 students enrolled in FLVS. That number has grown significantly.

"I'm just thinking you've got 733 kids in Polk County taking online courses," DJA principal Sue Braiman said during the Polk County School Board's Thursday meeting in Lakeland. "And we're not earning a cent . . . for that. That's how Bruce (Tonjes) and I started thinking about the whole thing."

Under the Polk virtual high school plan, DJA would handle the administration of the new school. But School Board members thought it was necessary that the new virtual school would be considered a separate entity, just in case the academy went charter.

The district would earn money for each student enrolled at the new virtual high, just like every other public school in the county. But the school can only earn the money if the students are enrolled during the normal school day. Anything above or beyond, say night and weekend classes, the money would go to FLVS.

"We're hoping the Legislature will change, and we'll be able to get outside the school day, too," Tonjes said.

Based on the fact that a virtual school would have low overhead, Tonjes thought the district might even turn a profit on it. And he said teachers could benefit financially because, according to his plan, they would be paid on a per-student basis.

He said that at the beginning, the county's virtual school would likely be small but could grow into a major element of Polk's educational system.

"It could be in three or four years," Tonjes said. "It could be massive. It could be a huge school in itself that could graduate students and do everything that other schools do."

While there are issues still to be resolved and questions to be answered, the School Board Thursday received the idea of a virtual school idea favorably.

"I think we need to move forward," board member Hazel Sellers said. "And I think this is a good first step."