



Virtual Schools Offer Freedom: Students get benefit of learning at their own pace, escaping peer pressure

By Julia Crouse

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HAINES CITY -- Daniel Jenkins Academy senior Mandy Gashaw says the only thing she missed in high school was the bad stuff.

Taking the bulk of her classes online, Gashaw said she escaped the peer pressure, bullying and negativity often associated with the crowded hallways of secondary school.

"The only things I missed out on were things I needed to miss out on," said the Daniel Jenkins Academy senior.

Gashaw is part of DJA's first class to graduate after taking four years of high school online.

Daniel Jenkins' high school students are enrolled in the Florida Virtual School, an online classroom.

On a computer, FVS students across the state do everything normally accomplished in the classroom. They read material, do assignments, watch lectures and take tests through the Internet. Any student in Florida is eligible to sign up for the free classes, which carry the same weight as a normal high school class.

But next school year, Polk's nearly 800 online students will get an extra benefit. Polk will be starting its own virtual high school.

The Polk school district has licensed FVS material and plans to hire teachers for local instruction, said Principal Susan Braiman.

FVS hires teachers all over the state to lecture and do science experiments. Occasionally, teachers visit schools for chemistry labs or biology dissections.

The district began thinking about starting a Polk-based online high school because of money, Braiman said.

With local virtual classrooms, Polk will receive more state money than if students were enrolled in the state-run classes, she said.

The district would earn money for every student enrolled in the virtual high school during the normal school day, just like every other public school in the county. DJA will host the school for at least the first year.

To franchise the courses and materials, the district will pay \$20,000 for the first year and \$15,000 every subsequent year, plus the cost of teachers.

To start, Polk licensed the most popular classes that Polk's online students already take, including personal fitness, English, world history, Latin and economics, Braiman said.

Now when Polk students sign up for any one of about 15 FVS classes, they will automatically be enrolled in the class through DJA, Braiman said.

Online high school offers students all the advantages of high school with few of the drawbacks, Gashaw said.

One of the biggest benefits is learning at your own pace and creating your own schedule, she said.

In ninth and 10th grades, DJA students go to eight hours of class, including Spanish and math taught at the school. But as they get older, students may come to campus less and less frequently.

As a senior, Gashaw said she checked into DJA every month or so and used her home computer for classes. The rest of her time, Gashaw said, she spends working or attending Polk Community College.

A plus with a Polk-based school is that teachers will be more accessible, said Ely Abrams, a ninth-grader at DJA.

One of the virtual school's main disadvantages is that communication with teachers is not immediate, he said.

Depending on the teacher, it may take a few hours or a day before a question is answered, he said. By that time, you've forgotten what it is.

Virtual students can get involved in clubs or sports at their local high school. Most online students take electives, such as band or art, at a nearby high school.

Gashaw was a cheerleader at Haines City High for three years, she said.

In the beginning, Gashaw said online learning was hard, especially getting assignments turned in on time.

"When you're a freshman, it's sort of thrown out to you," she said. "You're just expected to know how to manage your time."

But students can learn as fast or as slow as they want, Abrams said.

"It's easier for some to learn (online) because you're doing it yourself and can do it any time," he said.