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County to join virtual school franchise

Education officials hope to enroll students, from the homeschooled to the at-risk, in a variety of online classes.

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INVERNESS - When the new semester starts in January, there's a good chance that a couple hundred students won't show up to class - that is, a class inside a traditional brick and mortar school building.

Instead, those students will be home, at the library or even at a McDonald's that offers Internet access, browsing course material online and e-mailing their completed assignments.

The Citrus school system ushered in a new era in education last week with the announcement that it's creating a virtual school under a franchise agreement with the Florida Virtual School.

The school, which will use Citrus teachers certified in their subject areas, will offer online classes in math, government, science, business, Latin and Spanish. One course will even help students prepare for the all-important Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.

"It's a little bit spooky," said district administrator Richard Hilgert, who has been tapped to oversee the pilot virtual school. "It's thinking about education outside the box.

Hilgert has reason to be a little cautious.

The Citrus County Virtual School will be opened to any student, including homeschooled children who are typically among the most self-motivated and highest achieving. But the district is also betting on one unlikely group of students benefiting from online learning: at-risk youths.

In the coming month, school officials will spread the word to students with behavioral and emotional problems at the Renaissance Center and the Cypress Creek Juvenile Detention Facility, as well students who have been expelled and young people who are coming out of foster care.

"We're hoping this will be that extra thing that might click for that kid who's having trouble with school and that helps him get that diploma," Hilgert said.

Statewide, more than 21,000 students have taken online courses through the Florida Virtual School, an accredited, state-funded program that opened in 1997 with 77 students.

The school says it has an 85 percent success rate, meaning most students complete the courses with a passing grade. But most of those students are self-motivated, independent learners, computer literate, and possess good time management and communication skills, according to the "profile of an online student" on the school's Web site.

Hilgert acknowledges that online course work can be highly rigorous, even though it offers students the flexibility to go at their own pace, and sometimes teachers can give students more individualized attention.

"Some kids think online course work is easier," Hilgert said. "It won't be."

Other school districts that have created their own franchises are Brevard, Broward, Hillsborough, Lee, Marion, Miami-Dade, Okaloosa and Polk counties.

Students won't need to pay to participate in the program, but they will need to have access to a working computer with an Internet connection. School officials say they will consider lending needy students computers. Otherwise, students can make arrangements to use computers at a library or a school's media center.

It will cost the district \$20,000 to offer online courses the first semester and \$15,000 every subsequent school year.

The money will come from a state grant that the district secured earlier this year to help at-risk young people find better jobs. The district will have to show that some of those students successfully completed courses through the online school to continue to receive funding to support the school.

"If we can show that we met those expectations, then we can reapply for the grant," said district coordinator of vocational, adult, and community education Denise Willis, who will help oversee the pilot virtual school.

School officials said they were sold on the idea after considering the success of virtual schools in other counties.

In Miami-Dade, 1,200 students will have taken online courses, including advanced placement calculus, geography and even physical education, at the end of this year, according to the *Miami Herald*. That's tenfold the number of students who were enrolled when that school opened in 2000.

The paper also reported that Broward County's virtual school enrolls about 1,500 students. Many of them have been taking online courses through the school since the district eliminated summer school several years ago.

Similarly, Hillsborough school officials began offering summer online courses through its own virtual school for students who need to repeat a class they failed during the regular

school year. The online classes give those students an opportunity to raise their grade point average.

Hilgert and others believe the Citrus County Virtual School can also help struggling students here. And there are other student populations the school district hopes to attract.

About 230 students who live in Citrus are homeschooled, including 90 who are taking online classes through the Florida Virtual School. The state, however, doesn't give Citrus any money for those students.

By enrolling those students in the local virtual school, the district could collect as much as \$940,000 the first year. That's if all 10 courses each enroll 25 new students both semesters. The state pays \$3,760 annually for each student attending a public school.

Hilgert has already made the pitch to those families, including a local Christian homeschooling association. He said most families responded favorably.

The virtual school could also help boost student enrollment at the Academy of Environmental Science, which traditionally has struggled to draw students.

The academy offers courses in only science and English, so many students who would like to spend a year at the academy must return to their home high school after one semester to take precalculus or U.S. government.

Now those students can take a U.S. government course online without having to leave the academy. Ben Stofcheck, the academy's director, said he will push for the virtual school to offer precalculus next semester.

So far, the district hasn't hired or trained any teachers. Hilgert said he is busy getting the word out and expects to line up 15 teachers by mid December. Once selected, teachers will receive a full day of training and be assigned a mentor from the Florida Virtual School who will be available to offer technical assistance. They will be paid \$50 for every student who completes a nine-week course with a D or better.

All online courses will be guided by a teacher who must be available until 8 p.m. daily to answer students' questions online, by phone or in person. Teachers will also keep parents informed with monthly progress reports.

If students are struggling within the first 14 days of a course, they can drop out without the course appearing on their permanent transcript. But school officials don't guarantee enrollment will be available in equivalent courses offered at their home high school.

Also, it's not clear if all the course work will be submitted online or in person. Hilgert envisions a scenario where a student must physically meet with a teacher for an oral exam.

"It's a whole different thought process," Hilgert said. "We're trying to get our feet wet."

