

VIRTUAL EDUCATION; Online school provides students freedom, flexibility

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PALM COAST — Tori Gibbs is running short on time. The 17-year-old is taking a full load of honors classes, serves as an editor for her school newspaper and plays on the girls softball team at Flagler Palm Coast High School.

Yet she still had to fulfill Florida's graduation requirement to take one year of physical education.

With softball practice everyday, that seemed like a waste.

Instead, Gibbs signed up for Florida Virtual School, and used her workouts at softball practice to fulfill the required exercises for the PE class.

"I'm out on the field playing 10-plus hours a week, so I thought it was silly to take a gym class in addition to that," she said. "Before I took (the class online), I didn't know it was actually possible and legitimate, but it's really neat to be able to do that now because you can do it on your own time."

Gibbs is one of a growing number of students in Flagler and Volusia counties who are taking advantage of Florida Virtual School, the state's nine-year-old pilot program that offers online classes to high school students here and well beyond its borders.

The program started off small, but this past school year 263 Flagler students earned high school credits through Florida Virtual School and 718 earned them in Volusia County. Many students around the state now have to sign up on waiting lists for classes, said Julie Young, Florida Virtual School's president and chief executive officer.

"When we began taking students in 1997, we had 67 students," Young said. "We're expecting to complete 30,000 to 35,000 students this year . . . the growth is mind-boggling."

The classes are geared toward students who either don't do well in a traditional classroom, those who want to take courses their class schedule does not allow or those who want to take classes not offered at their school.

Flagler administrators caught on to the benefits of the program about five years ago, said secondary education director Diane Dyer. At a recent meeting, the Flagler County School Board voted to spend \$38,000 to become a Florida Virtual School franchise. The designation means that starting in March, Flagler students will be taking their online classes with Flagler teachers. It also means the district will offer classes they know Flagler students need, such as the high-demand personal fitness class Gibbs took.

Currently, virtual classes are taught by certified teachers from their homes across the state. At the start of each class, teachers plot out an assignment timetable with students, then they go online each day to go over e-mailed assignments or to grade tests and student projects.

The teachers also talk to students — and their parents — regularly through instant messages and over the telephone to make sure their pupils are on task. It's that personal attention they are able to give that makes Ormond Beach virtual teacher Lisa Fraine hope she never has to return to a traditional classroom.

With the flexibility of Florida Virtual School, Fraine said she provides individualized instruction and feedback to each of her American government students in between raising her two young children.

"There's no reason a student can't get an A or a B if they get constructive criticism on their work," said Fraine, who taught in Flagler and Volusia high schools. "That really helps them to be successful."

The classes are no less demanding, students and teachers said. Fraine often checks the integrity of students' work through an online plagiarism monitor. She also makes calls to parents when a student is falling behind.

Motivating students to keep them on track is a crucial goal of the country's first state virtual school. That's because funding is only awarded to the Florida Virtual School when a student completes a class. Under the franchise system, those dollars will go directly to the school district, which will help the district recover its up-front costs.

"We're more like a business and the students are treated like our customers," Fraine said. "Their success is our success."

Students and teachers don't seem to mind the unorthodox format.

Josh Lynch, a sophomore at Flagler Palm Coast High School, comes home from his job as a bus boy at Dockside Restaurant in Flagler Beach and often logs on at midnight to work on his Algebra 2 lessons. Having the flexibility to do his assignments during any spare time available makes the virtual school attractive to Lynch because he said he has trouble concentrating in a regular classroom.

"I was having a hard time in middle school, so I tried it and now I'm hooked on to it," said Lynch, 15, who is taking four classes to help him graduate early from high school.