

JACKSONVILLE Business Journal

Florida TaxWatch to assess online virtual school

October 13, 2006

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TALLAHASSEE -- Florida TaxWatch will begin a full assessment of the Florida Virtual School this month to determine how efficient the school is as an alternative educational system, including how the school performs academically and operationally.

Florida TaxWatch was charged with the assessment after the BellSouth Foundation awarded the nonprofit, tax-dollar research group a \$40,000 grant to study the educational, operational and financial strengths and weaknesses of the school.

Florida TaxWatch is a private organization focused on researching the use of Florida's tax dollars.

Florida Virtual School was started through a Florida Department of Education grant. Now, because it is categorized as a school district, it is funded by the state.

The BellSouth Foundation was created by BellSouth Corp. in 1986 to help improve the quality of education in the Southeast.

Florida TaxWatch's assessment is expected to begin this month and finish by the end of the year, according to a press release on the project. Florida TaxWatch officials will look at student demographics and achievement, course development and delivery and will perform a teacher assessment and a financial analysis.

The BellSouth Foundation also awarded the school a \$98,000 grant to assess its instructional and operating systems to determine what information technology improvements would help increase student performance, and how much they would cost.

The school was founded in 1997 and was piloted for two years as a joint effort between Orange and Alachua counties before becoming a separate entity.

As a separate entity, FLVS is classified as its own school district and therefore funded by the state. FLVS services every county in the state and is free to students, like a public school.

Since 1997, FLVS has grown from 77 students to 35,000 and offers courses for high-school and middle-school students, according to the FLVS Web site. All classes, curricula and instruction are done over the Internet.

It offers 80 different courses, including 10 advanced placement courses. The school is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and employs 174 full-time and 106 adjunct teachers, all Florida board certified. Sixty-four percent of the teachers hold advanced degrees. Seventy-five of the teachers are also nationally certified, according to the FLVS web site.

FLVS also works with students in 26 other states and internationally, on a tuition basis.

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