

Not your average day at school; An accredited online school allows young students to go to class from the comfort of home.

By BIANCA L. CRUZ
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Most Miami-Dade students are back in school, but not teens Nicole Muy and Gabriel and Priscilla Cordones.

For them, school is in their own Kendall homes on their laptops.

The children attend a free online public school, available to students year-round, called Florida Virtual School (FLVS).

The Florida Legislature included FLVS in the state's funding years after the school took off as part of a grant-based project. Students in grades 6 through 12 can enroll free of charge. Courses offered include math and science, but also electives, such as personal fitness and art.

Last school year, FLVS served 31,000 students, according to its website, and is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The courses are NCAA approved and the website lists awards given to the school, including one from Business Week magazine.

Priscilla's parents didn't want her to attend Richmond Heights Middle. Her aunt, Patty Cordones, a counselor for FLVS, suggested they try the online education. "We started, me and my brother, when I was going to sixth grade and he was going to eighth," said Priscilla, 13.

Online courses at home seem to work for her.

"Priscilla is not a morning person," Cordones said. "Her brain doesn't function in the morning. She's ready in the afternoon."

"Now I wake up at 10:30 a.m. and go at my own pace," Priscilla said.

Cordones said FLVS students have one-on-one attention, and are achieving more than if they had stayed in a typical classroom setting.

Students who take courses online score higher on state exams, Cordones said, and their grades improve dramatically. She accredits the one-on-one attention from teachers who are state and nationally certified, and the fact that they're readily available to help the students via e-mail and cellphone until 8 p.m.

"I improved because I was bad at reading and writing and now it's my favorite," Priscilla said.

Gabriel Cordones, 15, runs laps in his neighborhood as part of his personal fitness course, and then he enters the time it took him to run a specific distance into his workout sheet online. Later, his teacher will ask him very specific questions over the phone as part of an oral exam to make sure that Gabriel isn't cheating.

Nicole Muy, 12, who takes art online, said it's not just about drawing, but also learning art history and vocabulary.

"I scan my artwork or take pictures and then I turn it in," Nicole said. "Then, my teacher gives me a grade."

"I used to get mostly C's and B's and one A and a D once in a while," Nicole said. "Now I get all A's and one B."

But what about social interaction and making friends?

The three students said they've made friends on the discussion boards and field trips that FLVS offers, but they hope to return to a regular classroom setting in a couple of years.

"I want to go back from 11th to 12th grade," Nicole said.

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