

# St. Petersburg Times

## High costs, low enrollment doom online school

### After one semester, the county discontinues its franchise agreement with the Florida Virtual School.

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Published August 13, 2006

INVERNESS - Earlier this year, about 70 Citrus high school students were able to browse course material online and e-mail their completed assignments from home. There were no waiting lists to get into classes. And if students needed help, a local teacher was readily available.

Not anymore.

The school district has dismantled a virtual school it created in January under a franchise agreement with the Florida Virtual School.

"It was the cost," said district administrator Richard Hilgert, who oversaw the pilot virtual school. "It just became too much."

Students can still sign up to take classes online through the Florida Virtual School. But now district teachers won't be able to offer those students help. The district also won't receive any state dollars for those students.

The Citrus County Virtual School was supposed to fill the district's coffers with more money by enrolling students who took online courses but were not enrolled in the county's public schools.

The population included students who were homeschooled, students who were expelled and at-risk students at the Cypress Creek Juvenile Detention Center.

Last year, Citrus received \$3,760 per student.

In November, the School Board voted in favor of the project and agreed to spend \$20,000 in grant money to launch it.

Board members were excited by the prospect of collecting as much as \$940,000 the first year.

They were also eager to support the program, believing it would help ease overcrowding at the high schools.

At the time, the board was considering a controversial plan to redraw attendance boundaries.

Students who signed up for the virtual school could take a class that was over-enrolled or didn't fit into their schedule. There would also be a dozen or so local teachers who would be trained in distance learning and receive extra pay to help those students.

When the school opened in January, students could pick classes in math, government, science, business and Spanish.

One course even helped students prepare for the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. Students would be able to complete the course at their own pace.

But word about the program got out late to students.

By the time it did, most students had already signed up for spring semester classes at their regular schools.

School officials, who initially hoped to enroll several hundred students in the virtual school the first semester, netted about 70. About a third of those students were already in the school system. Each took an average of one or two classes online.

"We could have had more kids," Hilgert said.

But unforeseen costs, not under-enrollment, ultimately doomed the project, Hilgert said.

The district expected to pay \$15,000 in annual fees.

But Florida Virtual School, which has franchise agreements with other Florida districts, also asks for maintenance fees. Hilgert said the district would have had to pay almost \$100 for every half credit earned by a student who took an online course. That fee was in addition to the annual fees, he said.

In June, the district decided against renewing its franchise agreement with the Florida Virtual School.

Board members learned about the failed venture during a regular meeting last week.

Hilgert said students with scheduling conflicts are still being encouraged to sign up for online courses with the Florida Virtual School. The school is an accredited, state-funded program that opened in 1997 and now enrolls at least 21,000.

"I wish we could have continued the program in Citrus," Hilgert said. "Perhaps the district will reconsider it in the future."