



## Online classes catch on in elementary, high schools

**By Bill Kaczor**

September 7, 2007

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — As a seventh-grader, Kelsey-Anne Hizer was getting mostly D's and F's and felt the teachers at her Ocala middle school were not giving her the help she needed.

But after switching to a virtual school for eighth grade, Kelsey-Anne is receiving more individual attention and making A's and B's. She's also enthusiastic about learning, even though she has never been in the same room as her teachers.

Kelsey-Anne became part of a growing national trend when she transferred to Orlando-based Florida Virtual School. Students get their lessons online and communicate with their teachers and each other through chat rooms, e-mail, telephone and instant messaging.

"It's more one-on-one than regular school," Kelsey-Anne said. "It's more they're there; they're listening."

Virtual learning is becoming ubiquitous at colleges and universities but remains in its infancy at the elementary and secondary level, where skeptics have questioned its cost and effect on children's socialization.

However, virtual schools are growing fast — at an annual rate of about 25 percent. There are 25 statewide or state-led programs and more than 170 virtual charter schools across the nation, according to the North American Council for Online Learning.

Estimates of elementary and secondary students taking virtual classes range from 500,000 to 1 million nationally compared to total public school enrollment of about 50 million.

Online learning is used as an alternative for summer school and for students who need remedial help, are disabled, being home schooled or suspended for behavioral problems. It also can help avoid overcrowding in traditional classrooms and provide courses that local schools, often rural or inner-city, do not offer.

Advocates say those niche functions are fine, but that virtual learning has almost unlimited potential. Many envision a blending of virtual and traditional learning.

"We hope that it becomes just another piece of our public schools' day rather than still this thing over here that we're all trying to figure out," said Julie Young, Florida Virtual's president and CEO.

Florida Virtual is one of the nation's oldest and largest online schools, with more than 55,000 students in Florida and around the world, most of them part-time. Its motto is "Any Time, Any Place, Any Path, Any Pace."

Struggling students such as Kelsey-Anne, who suffers from attention deficit disorder, can take more time to finish courses while those who are gifted can go at a faster speed.

Casey Hutcheson, 17, finished English and geometry online in the time it would have taken to complete just one of those courses at his regular high school in Tallahassee.

"I like working by myself because of no distractions, and I can go at my own pace rather than going at the teacher's pace," he said.

For all its potential, virtual schooling has its critics and skeptics.

"There is something to be said for having kids in a social situation learning how to interact in society," said state Rep. Shelley Vana. "I don't think you get that if you're at home."

But virtual students get a different kind of social experience that is just as valuable, said Susan Patrick, president and CEO of the North American Council for Online Learning in Vienna, Va.

"We should socialize them for the world that they live in," she said, suggesting that people spend much of their time interacting via computer these days.

Many policymakers approach virtual learning with dollar signs in their eyes, expecting big savings from schools that do not need buildings, buses and other traditional infrastructure.

"We should not, as stewards of public money, be automatically paying the same or even close to the same amount of money for a virtual school day as we pay for a conventional school day," said Florida Senate Education Committee Chairman Don Gaetz.

Florida Virtual this year is slated to get \$6,682 for every full-time equivalent student, just slightly less than the average of \$7,306 for all of the state's public schools. Young said her school has expenses that traditional schools do not.

"Our data infrastructure is our building," she said.

Teacher unions have opposed spending public dollars on some virtual schools, mainly those that are privately operated or function as charter schools.

Indiana lawmakers this year refused to fund virtual charter schools. Opponents argued they are unproven and would have siphoned millions of dollars from traditional public schools.

Florida Virtual's Young said she plans to recommend that her state follow the example of Michigan, which passed a requirement that students complete some type of online experience to earn a high school diploma.

If "we do not give them an opportunity to take an online course, we're doing them a tremendous disservice," she said. "It's become the way of the world."

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