



Blazing new trails

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By Derierde Connors

A special Florida public school celebrates its 10th anniversary this fall. But you won't find the campus on any map, and there are no hallways, cafeterias or restrooms.

It's the Florida Virtual School on the Internet - and it's a great option for students and families.

It allows middle school and high school students to take about 90 credit courses online, from Latin and geometry to Spanish. Instructors are state certified. The credits count toward the normal public school requirements.

Students can use the courses to retake failed classes, bolster their Advanced Placement and honors credits and take courses that their school either doesn't offer when they need them or offer at all.

Home-schoolers and charter school students also can use the convenience and flexibility of the courses to their advantage.

Students can learn in a safe environment at their own pace and interact with their teachers either online or by phone.

There is a technical support number to call in case computer glitches arise.

There is no cost for the courses, and enrollment is open to anyone who qualifies for enrollment in a public school.

They can apply for the courses online and fill out paperwork with their normal school guidance counselors to arrange for the courses.

Students cannot, however, obtain a diploma from the school or use it to take the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.

Enrollment has grown dramatically among the five First Coast counties since 2002-03, and the state now has about 44,300 students engaged in the online courses. They are joined by 1,300 others from outside Florida who pay tuition to participate.

The money goes back into the school for items such as teacher training, hardware and

software updates. And it costs less per credit to teach a student online than it does in a conventional school where classrooms, gyms and other costs are a factor.

The Florida Virtual School is based in Orlando.

It is the older cousin to the Florida Virtual Academy, a Jacksonville-based online elementary school that was one of two pilot schools of its kind in the state.

Students in both the Florida Virtual School and the Florida Virtual Academy have made impressive showings in academic achievement.

But online learning isn't intended to replace public schools or their broader range of experiences, and it isn't ideal for everybody.

It is, however, an attractive option for students on a variety of fronts, and it capitalizes on a learning method that has proved to be an enhancer of education.

Here's wishing the school many more happy birthdays ahead. LEARNING ONLINE
Clicking with kids Half-credit courses taken through the Florida Virtual School by First Coast students have increased dramatically in recent years: School 2002-03 2006-07
Baker 30 50 Clay 230 2,100 Duval 460 4,600 Nassau 92 1,000 St. Johns 190 1,600
Source: Florida Virtual School For details: Visit Florida Virtual School: www.flvs.net or call (407) 317-3326.

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