

EDUCATION An online bargain

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The Florida Virtual School landed high marks in a recent study by a Florida taxpayer watchdog group.

Students in the school - celebrating its 10th year as an online option for middle school and high school students on the Internet - consistently outperformed their traditional school counterparts in Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test scores, Advanced Placement scores and overall grades, a Florida TaxWatch study found.

The school is free for students eligible to attend public schools, including home-schooled students. They can take about 90 credit courses online, at their own convenience, with credits applied to the normal public school requirements.

Teachers in the school are state-certified, with their pay tied to performance. The nonprofit Florida TaxWatch notes the arrangement makes the school the state's "only true performance-based education system."

The school is funded as a special district and receives no property tax money.

Students must be enrolled, receive direct instruction and successfully complete a virtual course in order to generate funds, the study notes.

TaxWatch also noted that taxpayers see a variety of benefits from the state-sanctioned school.

With no transportation, classroom, construction, maintenance of buildings or meals to provide, the school can deliver education at a lower cost per student than traditional schools.

In addition, the school has potential to offset some of the costs associated with Florida's mandated class-size requirements, which call for more space to be made available if necessary to meet limits of students in class.

The school has about 44,300 students and is growing rapidly.

It is not perfect. The TaxWatch report notes that about a quarter of students withdrew from the online school courses based on a two-year review of enrollment.

Obviously, the online option isn't ideal for everyone. The report notes that the Florida Virtual School recently hired a full-time person to focus on the withdrawal issue.

TaxWatch concludes the school is a bargain for taxpayers.

A good report always looks better when it comes from an outside, independent source.

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