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## **Rethinking popular online schools**

**By DEIRDRE CONNER**

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When Kim Spencer recalls the day her middle-schoolers performed a reading of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, she grins almost as wide as the smiley-face icon on her computer screen.

The teacher at the Jacksonville-based Florida Virtual Academy had the students, each one from a different part of the state, read aloud from the play using software that allows them attend school over the Internet.

"They all had the sad-face icon [when they finished]. They wanted to read it again. I couldn't believe it," she said.

The preteens' typical distaste for centuries-old British comedy melted away, she said, with an age-old teaching technique made possible by a 21st-century technology that's catching on - and catching the attention of state lawmakers.

The popularity of the schools, a futuristic novelty when the Legislature first agreed to pay for them, is soaring in Florida and nationwide. That's why it's time for a reality check on publicly funded virtual schools, some legislators say.

That doesn't necessarily mean restricting enrollment growth, but it does mean taking a comprehensive look at the virtual-school system, said Sen. Stephen Wise, R-Jacksonville. He said he and Don Gaetz, R-Fort Walton Beach, talked Friday about the need to gather the state's scattered virtual school programs for a closer examination this year.

"It might have been great five or six years ago, but the technology has changed," Wise said. "Now you're talking about a lot of money. It's a lot of money."

The governor's proposed budget includes \$7.2 million for the kindergarten through eighth grade virtual-education program, a big boost over past years. Florida Virtual Academy and Florida Connections Academy, the two schools paid for under the pilot program introduced by former Gov. Jeb Bush, could soon have competition. The Florida Department of Education is taking applications from companies that want to get in on the virtual-school market here until March 31.

Patty Betoni, head of the Florida Virtual Academy, said the school is constantly full.

"We haven't done a lot of marketing or information sessions simply because there's been too much demand," she said.

Florida Virtual Academy's sister school, the California Virtual Academy, has more than 5,000 students in kindergarten through grade 10, she said.

The two K-8 academies are often confused with the Florida Virtual School, the state-run virtual school that operates on a per-course basis and this year received about \$37 million. It is run by a board of directors appointed by the governor and offers classes for free to students in grade six through 12, plus adults seeking a General Educational Development designation. The school gets no money if a student fails a course or withdraws early.

Florida Connections Academy and Florida Virtual Academy, on the other hand, are run by for-profit companies and enroll only full-time students in kindergarten through grade eight. The schools are each capped at 692 students, all of whom must take the annual Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.

All three schools are funded on a per-student amount that is almost as much as school districts get, disproving the notion virtual schools are cheaper than their brick-and-mortar counterparts.

Betoni said she didn't know whether Florida Virtual Academy, a division of Virginia-based K12 Inc., has yet become profitable in Florida.

Representatives of Florida Connections Academy, which is also part of a nationwide company, did not respond to requests for comment.

The schools generated heated controversy when they were first introduced in 2003, with critics saying the program was funneling millions into private companies that catered to homeschooling families.

A year later, it was discovered that the schools had illegally enrolled students who did not attend public schools the year before, which is a requirement in state law.

"I think that debate essentially has quieted down considerably," said Rep. Joe Pickens, R-Palatka, a longtime supporter of the schools.

Pickens is in favor of expanding the number of kids eligible to enroll in the schools and wants to keep the House budget provision that puts the schools into the state funding formula instead of making them wait for the year-to-year grant from lawmaker.

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