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Virtual School offers unusual student options

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Students learning in a virtual school might sound like something out of a science fiction movie, but it is reality for over 31,000 Florida students, who supplement the courses they take in regular school. Florida Virtual School (FLVS) supports students and public schools throughout Florida. All courses meet Sunshine State standards and courses are taught online by Florida certified public school teachers.

FLVS, founded in 1997, was the country's first state-wide, Internet-based, public high school. Starting with just 77 enrollments, a dream and a group of educators brave enough to try online learning, FLVS today serves middle and high school students with more than 90 course offerings.

In 2000, the Florida Legislature established FLVS as an independent educational entity with a gubernatorial board. FLVS is the only public school where funding is tied directly to student performance. It provides online solutions for grades six to 12, as well as GED alternatives.

Initially, educators assumed that online learning would appeal only to students in advanced computer classes or to those who are extremely self-disciplined, but from 2005 to 2006, Florida Virtual School delivered more than 68,000 individual course enrollments to over 31,000 students.

Online learning meets many needs, including credit retrieval, advanced placement courses, GED fulfillment and honors courses, as well as providing access to courses not normally available.

FLVS classes are taught by over 400 full-time and 180 adjunct teachers, who reside throughout Florida. All possess a valid Florida teaching certificate and are actively involved in the student's learning and provide feedback on assignments through phone calls, e-mails, chat rooms, the classroom's home page and instant messaging.

Samantha Lucas, of Naples, is a 9-year Florida Virtual School instructor who is teaching Spanish I and II. "I was teaching at Community School and I needed a more flexible schedule to allow me time with my new baby," stated Lucas. "I heard about the FLVS from another teacher who advised me that this was a great way to teach."

FLVS courses are accepted for credit at other schools and are transferable. Diplomas are not granted. Instead, credits are transferred back to the student's local school to count towards their graduation requirements. The FLVS is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, as well as the Commission on International and Trans-Regional Education. The courses are also approved by the NCAA.

Parents have total access to students' grades, which are updated regularly. "One of the best things about the FLVS is that as a parent, I have telephone access to teachers from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. every day, including weekend hours," stated parent Jodie Waterloo. "You just need that as a busy parent."

In addition, parents have full access via e-mail to teachers and they can expect a reply within 24 hours or less. "The entire system is built to work," added Waterloo.

One big draw for students is the opportunity for personalized instruction. For the student who wants choices and wants to feel like more than a number, FLVS might be the right choice.

FLVS was built on the belief that every student is unique, so learning should be dynamic, flexible and that studies should be integrated, rather than isolated. For more information on the Florida Virtual School contact www.flvs.net.

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