

## **Soaring enrollment marks Florida Virtual School's first decade**

### **Virtual campus drew skepticism at launch 10 years ago -- now it's mainstream**

By Leslie Postal

October 19, 2007

The Latin teacher at Lyman High School never sets foot on the school's Longwood campus. She lives in Wisconsin and works from home. Most of her 100 or so students are in Florida, though one girl lives in Japan.

They all do lessons, submit homework and take tests via computer or telephone.

"I think it's the wave of the future," said Latin teacher Gail Holiday, who now lives in DeForest, Wis., but used to teach at Lake Highland Preparatory School in Orlando. "I feel like I'm on the cutting edge."

Holiday teaches at Florida Virtual School, an Orlando-based online school that celebrates its 10th anniversary this fall. In the past decade, it has grown from a small pilot project to a public school that has put Florida at the forefront of online learning.

Enrollment has shot up from about 75 students to more than 54,000 from around the state and beyond.

"Ten years ago, I don't think anyone quite imagined it would grow as fast as it has and be as successful as it is," said Frank Brogan, Florida's education commissioner when the school started in 1997.

Once controversial, the school is now seen as a fixture on the educational landscape, and good preparation for the increasing number of online options in college.

"It's been very exciting watching it grow," said Brogan, now president of Florida Atlantic University.

Home-schooling parents have latched on to the free classes, as have students with unusual schedules.

For now, most virtual-school students are moonlighters enrolled full time in traditional schools. They use the virtual school to get ahead, catch up or free up time in their daily schedules for classes such as band.

They like the one-on-one interaction with teachers and that the school with the motto "Any time, any place, any path, any place" lets them take courses when they want.

Jade Budowski started taking virtual-school classes because they accommodated her family's travel plans. Last year, she did some of her middle-school work from Guatemala.

Now Jade is taking a full load at Dr. Phillips High School in Orlando, plus extra courses at the virtual school.

"It made it a lot easier to do the things I wanted to do."

But not everyone would do well left alone in front of a computer, she said.

"There are some kids who would just do MySpace all day."

The virtual school started as a partnership between Orange and Alachua county schools, with the thought it could help ease crowding, teacher shortages and access problems for rural students.

Julie Young, the school's chief executive officer, said some people had another thought: "You're crazy."

But Young and other advocates saw the appeal.

"It can be a very rich experience," she said. "We see students really blossom and excel."

An array of classes

Nationally, some 700,000 students in kindergarten to 12th grade took online courses last year, double the number from three years earlier, according to a think tank called Education Sector.

This year, Florida Virtual School offers more than 90 middle- and high-school classes, from algebra to Advanced Placement literature to American history.

All meet Florida standards and are taught by certified teachers.

Students usually need just a computer with Internet access to enroll. Teachers call students and parents at least once a month and are available daily by e-mail or phone.

Parent LaJuana Malloy said she has been impressed with how much information she can access about her daughter's virtual work -- online she can see assignments, grades and notes from teachers -- and with the course quality.

"The amount of knowledge she's retaining is unbelievable," said Malloy, who lives in the Panhandle town of Chipley.

The school caters to a wide range of academic abilities, but students do best with a good dose of self-discipline. About 10 percent to 15 percent of the students who start at the virtual school drop out, often because they find it requires too much work.

Self-motivation a must

"I believe you have to be very independent," said Olivia Schmitt, 14, a home-schooled student in Deltona.

Tiffanie Brunson, 16, finished eight virtual-school classes and feels better-prepared for the dual-enrollment courses she is taking at Valencia Community College.

At the virtual school, "you don't have anyone to stay on you about your school work," said the Winter Garden teenager. "College professors are not going to stay on you to get your schoolwork done. If you're not prepared, tough."

Brandi Welch, a Lyman student taking virtual-school Latin, said she is more comfortable talking to her teacher in Wisconsin than speaking up in regular classes.

During a recent call, the two chatted about pronunciation and about her homecoming dress, she said.

That personal touch is what makes virtual learning work, Holiday said.

"I'm not the Latin robot."

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