

Florida Virtual School chips away at brick and mortar

By Kenric Ward

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As more students go online for instruction, teachers are discovering professional benefits. A recent national study of virtual school teachers found:

- 75 percent said that becoming an online instructor had a positive impact on their face-to-face teaching.
- Teachers generally reported that after teaching online, their ability to promote student participation, independent learning and effective use of questioning was enhanced.

As Florida Virtual School celebrates its 10th birthday this year, it's delivering a gift to the Sunshine State.

For every grade 6-12 student it enrolls — 31,000 at last count — the cyber school shaves education budgets and expands academic choice.

The savings come from a unique funding model that reimburses FLVS only after a student successfully completes a course. At \$1,054 per earned credit, the virtual school is more accountable and cost-efficient than its bricks-and-mortar counterparts, whose budgets run \$25,000 or more per pupil.

The choice comes via 90 courses ranging from Latin to macroeconomics. All are taught by certified faculty who lead virtual classes of no more than 25 students, each of whom receives one-on-one instruction.

“The motto is ‘any time, any place, any path, any pace,’ ” says Bill Tucker, chief operating officer at Educational Sector, an independent education think tank based in Washington.

While virtual learning is nowhere close to replacing conventional schools — nor should it — technology is driving a structural revolution in education that's supplementing and enriching academics in America. At a time when this country's public schools are struggling fiscally and scholastically, the demand for cyber campuses is growing.

In 2001, Florida Virtual School students completed fewer than 10,000 courses. In 2006, that figure swelled to was 68,000. Nationally, more than 700,000 students are taking online classes, doubling the figure of just three years ago.

Quantity has been accompanied by quality. Contrary to popular perceptions that online learning is only for brainiacs, Florida Virtual School's student body is increasingly diverse — and successful. Some 49 percent of pupils are eligible for reduced-price lunches at their neighborhood school. More than 70 percent of the lowest-scoring quartile of students scored gains in reading, earning the program an "A" in Florida's school grading system.

So how does FLVS do more with less? In a word: entrepreneurship.

While Florida provides modest, performance-based compensation for completion of accredited coursework by state students, the online educator also shops its courses nationally and worldwide. Outside students (or districts) pay fees ranging from \$1,500 to \$6,500. This enables the virtual school to train teachers, update software, upgrade hardware, etc.

And since FLVS functions primarily as a supplement to conventional schools, it isn't saddled with building classrooms, cafeterias and football stadiums, or funding "resource" officers and multi-layered administrators. But by peeling off students, the cyber school is incrementally defraying those public-education costs as it grows.

Because the cyber system is open to all, the customary critics of school choice, such as the Florida Education Association, have been muted. Indeed, Barbara Stein, online coordinator for the National Education Association, acknowledges that computer-driven curriculum can actually be "much more one-on-one intensive" for both teachers and students.

Of course, avatars of the old school harp on the necessity to "socialize" students. This is a valid concern, yet the standard, one-size-fits-all educational experience (think: socialism) isn't for everyone. For families that don't appreciate the condom-based sex education, crowded campuses, multicultural indoctrination and the distraction of over-hyped team sports, a little distance (learning) can be a good thing.

Like the "real world," the virtual school provides a richly diverse alternative to youngsters who want to work faster — or slower — than what's arbitrarily dictated by the standard curricular calendar. By customizing instruction to a particular pupil's

interests, FLVS can kindle a spark in those who might otherwise slip through the cracks.

With barely 60 percent of this state's high school students graduating "on time," there's never been a better time, or greater need, for Florida Virtual School. Happy birthday — and many more to come.