

Online Classes Not For Everyone

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June 23, 2007

To compete for higher class ranks, graduate early, improve a grade, take a course that might not otherwise be available or free up a schedule for more electives, Hillsborough County students are increasingly turning to online courses.

'With class-size reductions mandated by the state, it helps to offer online courses,' said Claire Mawhinney, assistant superintendent for curriculum at Durant High School. 'If there's no room for a student to take a certain course, we want to be able to offer them something online.'

But be warned: Virtual school is not for everyone.

Experts offer the following information and tips for online courses:

- The Florida Virtual School exists as a school district under state law. Courses are free and taught by certified teachers throughout the state.
- Hillsborough Online is one of seven Florida Virtual School franchises. Courses are free and taught by state-certified teachers in Hillsborough County. Students may enroll in either Florida Virtual School or Hillsborough Online.
- Online courses are not an easy way out. 'These are not summer-school courses you can finish in three weeks,' said Kay Johnson, marketing manager for the Florida Virtual School. 'Students choose when to work and where they work, even from a coffee shop, but it's going to take a commitment of time. You will work differently and with some flexibility, but you won't work less.'
- Start slowly. Too many online courses might be too taxing for some students. 'Online learning is a different way of learning,' Johnson said. 'There's a learning curve for students to learn how to learn online.'
- Online school requires strength of will. 'The self-discipline it takes to make the time to do this work is really crucial,' said Jodie Pozo-Olano, spokeswoman for Florida Virtual School. 'Students have to be self-motivated to get online and to follow through with their assignments.'
- Online courses involve lessons arranged in 'modules.' Students compare their work against a 'pace chart,' which details how long an assignment should take.
- Don't be blind-sided, or overly confident. Use the 28-day grace period to make an honest assessment of its demands. Once the grace period is over, a student is required to finish the course.
- An online grade counts as much as an in-school grade and will appear on a student's official transcript. In Hillsborough, seniors who take required courses online, including health and economics, will not be allowed to participate in graduation ceremonies if that class is not completed in time for the online grade to process before the ceremony's

date.

- Feedback is timely. Grades are required to be posted by online teachers within 48 hours.
- Parents have access to online courses and grades. 'You can check your child's progress at any time,' Pozo-Olano said. 'Florida Virtual School teachers are required, at a minimum, to communicate with parents once a month by phone, and with students a minimum of once a week.'
- Some online courses offer field trips. Extracurricular clubs also are available, including honor clubs in English and Spanish and a newspaper club

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