

Baker County Press

'Virtual classroom' learning on fast track

By Kelley Lannigan

Thursday, 17 January 2008

More and more students in Florida are taking advantage of an Internet-based learning system which originated in the state over a decade ago and has since gone nationwide.

That was the message delivered by Mary McCool, public affairs liaison for Florida Virtual School (FLVS) headquartered in Orlando, as she addressed the Macclenny Rotary club at its weekly meeting January 10.

FLVS, founded in 1997, is the nation's first state-wide Internet-based public high school. It serves middle and high school students and provides more than 80 online courses.

FLVS is designed with an interactive component between students, parents and teachers which sets it apart from much of the isolated online correspondence instruction so common elsewhere. Flexibility regarding the time and availability of courses is a key feature of the instruction.

"The motto of Florida Virtual School is 'any time, any place, any path, any pace,'" said Ms. McCool.

FLVS started as a grant-based cooperative program between a few Florida School districts and served 66 students. Today, close to 65,000 students are being served. The program grew out of a recognized need to provide students access to classes that were unavailable due to their rural location or the small size of their enrollment.

According to Ms. McCool, what sets the program apart from the typical isolated correspondence-style online courses is the interactive dynamic between teachers, students, guidance counselors and parents. Flexibility and accommodation are the hallmarks of the Florida Virtual School, along with exceptional, state and nationally certified teachers who monitor every step of a student's progress.

The program serves a wide variety of public and home-schooled students. Athletes or band members whose schedules can conflict with classes use the online instruction to complete coursework. It is a great advantage to disabled students or those with health problems that often keep them at home.

A broad curriculum is available and includes more traditional courses like English, math and language arts, science, and reading, plus more specialized ones like foreign languages, economics and geography. SAT and FCAT study skills focusing on critical thinking and reading are also offered.

Each course begins with a welcome call during which parents and students speak via telephone with the instructor. There are monthly progress reports and students

experience regular contact with instructors and with other students.

Teachers communicate frequently with their students and parents by telephone and other electronic means. Grading falls under the standards of the school where the student is enrolled. Parents and students can access courses and grades at anytime.

According to Ms. McCool, 32 such virtual school programs exist nationwide and Florida has been the model for all. Currently, six students from Baker County are enrolled in Florida Virtual School courses.

“The Florida Virtual School is completely funded by tax dollars and is available to any student,” she said. “If you want to see your tax dollars at work in an optimum way, this program is a wonderful example.”

A winner of numerous awards from such organizations as the United States Distance Learning Association, the FLVS is fully accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, the accrediting institution for all public schools in Florida.

“Floridians really don’t know what they have in this program,” said Ms. McCool. “It’s an invaluable education resource.”

To learn more about the Florida Virtual School go online at www.flvs.net or call 407-317-3326.