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More pupils finding their classrooms just about anywhere

By LINDA TRIMBLE

When Laykin Braddock's family rented an oceanfront condo for a month last summer, the Pierson teenager packed her laptop computer along with her swimsuit and suntan lotion.

Laykin had just started taking online classes through the Florida Virtual School to catch up on credits needed for graduation, and she couldn't afford to take time off while her family vacationed in Flagler Beach. Finished with her summer courses, Laykin now supplements her classes at Taylor High School by taking additional courses ranging from marine science to physical fitness online so she can get a standard diploma in May.

She's among a growing number of middle and high school students in Volusia and Flagler counties who are finding the "any time, any place" virtual school program fits their needs.

Some, like Laykin, use the program to add extra credits to those earned in a traditional classroom. Others, like Staci Leftwich of Deltona, use it as the basis of home-school studies. Still others use it to access advanced courses that might not be offered at their schools.

"I really believe online learning is for everyone at one point," said Pam Birtolo, chief learning officer for Florida Virtual School and a Flagler Beach resident. "You focus on student success and not on people being in a place."

The school has done a good job of that in its first 10 years while delivering a bargain for Florida taxpayers, according to a recent report from Florida Tax Watch.

"While there is always room for improvement in any organization, through this study, (Florida Virtual School) has proven itself to be a viable and innovative educational endeavor that works," said Dominic Calabro, president and chief executive officer of Florida Tax Watch, in releasing the report in November.

With no overhead for busing or classroom buildings, it costs the state -- which funds Florida Virtual School based on student course completions -- less for the virtual classes than traditional ones.

The school offers more than 90 courses that are matched to the same state academic standards that apply to traditional public schools. Florida students are served free of charge; those in other states or countries pay tuition.

All Florida Virtual School teachers, who work from their homes, are state-certified. Teachers are accessible to students by phone from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. weekdays and also by e-mail.

"They can call me as often as they want for assistance," said Meashell Steinwehr, a Florida Virtual School biology teacher who formerly taught at Flagler Palm Coast High School. "I actually have the time to talk with my students."

"They get an e-mail from me every day because I have questions," said Laykin, who turned to the virtual school after deciding last spring a standard diploma was within her grasp.

Until this school year, she was on track for a special diploma because of a learning disability that means she needs more time to process information.

But with her state test scores improving and college ambitions, Laykin and her parents decided to go after a standard diploma instead, meaning she had to make up missing academic credits in a hurry if she was going to graduate with her class.

Leftwich, the Deltona girl who depends on the virtual school for all her courses, is at the opposite end of the spectrum. She just finished courses for her freshman year of high school, which she started in early June, and plans to tackle her sophomore classes starting next month.

She likes the idea of being able to move through the classes at her own pace and expects to finish high school in less than the traditional four years. "I want to finish early, just to get it done," Staci said.

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