

Englewood Sun and Weekly Herald

Cyber classes popular

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Students look to Virtual School for high school credits

When it comes to completing school assignments, 16-year-old Shelby Dunlap does it at any time, at any place and at the pace she needs.

That's because the high school junior has curbed the traditional high school scene of school bells, lockers and filled classrooms by taking high school credits online with Florida Virtual School.

For the last 10 years, this online public school allows high school and middle school level students across the state to take required courses for graduation from the comforts of a home computer, where they receive personalized instruction from certified teachers.

In fact, the program allows students to choose from more than 90 courses, including those offered at honors and advanced placement levels, varying from English, history and math classes to more diverse subjects in art, physical education and foreign languages, including Latin and Mandarin Chinese. Because the online school is an Internet-based public high school, credits earned by students through Florida Virtual are accepted by colleges and all 67 Florida school districts.

Since beginning Florida Virtual a few months ago, Dunlap has completed driver's education, English and a world history course, all while balancing a job doing yard work for a neighbor.

She even completed a life management skills course she began at Hardee Senior High School.

"There was such a big difference between the two life management classes I took," she said. "I learned while at the regular school, but not as much as I did when I made the switch. With Florida Virtual, you get more time to investigate stuff so you can look into things that really interest you, and you can do more research on it."

And just as she has avoided walking into a classroom at 7 a.m., Dunlap said she has also dodged the inevitable drama that follows teenagers.

"Whenever I took classes on the computer, it gave me that break I needed from the ignorant and immature people at my school," she said. "My school was just

filled with drama. I think Florida Virtual is better than regular high school, at least for me."

Her mother, Andrea Dunlap, agreed.

"Florida Virtual has been a huge blessing," she said. "It's another option for the kids other than public school or private school. The kids can work on it at any time and work at their own pace while learning how to be independent and how to tackle things on their own."

However, the students aren't abandoned in their studies.

Regular contact is made between students, parents and the course instructors, said Sarasota County's Kay Johnson, a former Riverview High School English teacher, who briefly taught English for Florida Virtual before transferring into the communications department.

In fact, she said students and their parents are called by course instructors after signing up for a class, welcoming them to the online program. This is on top of the course demonstrations, which give the students and parents a preview of two lessons from currently offered courses

As courses progress, students submit assignments by voice files, PowerPoint presentations and Word files, while instructors call the students for an oral assessment to see how they were able to reach their conclusions while checking for comprehension.

At the very least, she said, students hear from their teachers once a month.

"It all depends on the student, but the students are definitely working with a teacher, who very actively tracks the student's progress through a course," Johnson said. "This is very active, hands-on teaching, with web conferences, phone calls and (real-time chat on AOL Instant Messenger)."

Earth and space science instructor and Rotonda West resident Kathleen Perkins agreed, saying teachers can be reached from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday through Sundays.

"If a student needs assistance and needs to depend on an instructor, we can work with that, and we're here for them," she said. "If a student is really independent and will knock out his assignment, that's fine too."

In fact, Perkins said she will be working from her desk at home with piles of papers around her when a student will contact her by Instant Messenger.

"I have students that will IM me and say they're having a problem understanding a part of the module (chapter) or that they don't understand how to do an assignment," she said. "I tell them to call me, and I pull up the file, so I can work through it with them."

Because of the attention each student is able to get, Perkins said the program is great for anyone, regardless of if they are trying to get ahead in school, catch up or find more personalized instruction because of known learning disabilities or because the student is a speaker of a language other than English.

As Johnson explained, the program completed about 100,000 enrollments last year, which equates to about 80,000 students.

Florida Virtual measures course enrollments and completions with half-credits because not all courses are worth full credits. Just like regular public middle and high schools, electives like personal fitness and macroeconomics are considered half-credit courses and last for one semester. However, core studies in math, science, foreign languages and history are considered full-credit classes, as they last two semesters -- or one full school year.

In Charlotte County, 1,057 half credits were completed in the 2007-08 school year, up 426 since last year. Sarasota County rose from 1,811 last year to 2,602 this year, while DeSoto County also saw a slight increase of 104 to 181 half-credit completions.

Hardee County was the only local county to see a declining position in completions, as they dropped from 65 to 52 this year.

But despite the falling trend in Hardee County, Dunlap said she plans on sticking with Florida Virtual for the rest of her high school career.

"I love Florida Virtual," she said. "It's my school now."

For more information about Florida Virtual School, visit the Web site www.flvs.net/index.php.

School Total Half Credit Enrollments By Year

| District | 2004-05 | 2005-06 | 2006-07 | 2007-08 |
|-----------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Charlotte | 300 | 653 | 631 | 1,057 |
| DeSoto | 64 | 70 | 77 | 181 |

| | | | | |
|----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Hardee | 5 | 10 | 65 | 52 |
| Sarasota | 1,197 | 1,374 | 1,811 | 2,602 |

Information gathered by Jodie Pozo-Olano, the president of Sequoia PR, the firm representing Florida Virtual School.

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