

# HERNANDO TODAY

## Virtual School Gives Local Students Options

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BROOKSVILLE - School may be out for the summer, but for students like 15-year-old Brooksville resident Kiana Montero-Stube, it's far from over.

But unlike traditional "school," Kiana can complete her summer coursework in her pajamas, do assignments at midnight or take tests while on vacation out of the country.

In the age of cutting-edge educational technology, more and more Hernando County students are taking advantage of an emerging option for earning middle or high school credit: Online classes through the Florida Virtual School.

As a special school district, the school - commonly know as FLVS - serves all 6th-through 12th-grade public, private and home-school students, with credits transferred and recognized in schools across the state.

During the 2006-07 school year, 2,222 one-semester online courses were taken by students in Hernando County.

This is up from 1,273 in 2005-06, 938 in 2004-05, 337 in 2003-04 and 114 in 2002-03.

Founded in 1997 as a pilot project, the school is Florida's first Internet-based public high school, complete with online middle and high school curriculum. It is now a nationally recognized online model for virtual education solutions to students throughout the country, and served more that 54,000 students during the 2006-07 school year.

Most students are public school students who take one or two courses to supplement traditional school course loads, said the school's director of Florida services, Lori Gully.

"Our typical student comes from public school and takes a full content of credit with us in the calendar year," she said.

Kiana, who will be a sophomore at Hernando High in the fall, has been taking an online Spanish II course since April.

She said she has no accompanying textbooks, and instead gleans information by

accessing different modules online, completing online worksheets and assignments as she goes along. She typically spends approximately one hour each day completing coursework.

Kiana said she talks to her Orlando-based teacher via telephone - who is also working out of her home - at least twice a month, and stays on track by taking tests and completing frequent verbal assignments online through a special microphone.

"You have to be (online completing assignments) almost every day, but you get to work at your own pace," she said. "There's an estimated time of how long you will work on something, and most of the estimates are right."

FLVS offers more than 90 courses, including core subjects, foreign languages and electives. All courses are accepted for credit and are transferable, with courses delivered over the Internet in a variety of ways, including online chats, instant messaging and discussion forums.

The school employs more than 400 fulltime teachers and 175 adjunct teachers - all of whom must hold the same credentials as other Florida public school teachers - and obtains state funding from the Florida department of education. However, the formula is slightly different because there are no overhead costs, and the school only gets funding for students who complete and pass their classes, Gully said.

"We haven't done our calculation for the current school year because so many students are still active, but in past years that (percent of student completion) has been close to 85 percent," she said.

- By state law, guidance counselors are required to inform students about the FLVS program, which is how Kiana said she learned of the school.

Kiana, whose family is from Bolivia, said she did well in Spanish I at Hernando High, and decided to take the online version of Spanish II to earn extra credits and make space for other courses in her schedule during the school year.

"We need two years of a foreign language to graduate, and I wanted to get Spanish out of the way so I could take other classes that look interesting to me," she said. "Plus, I want to graduate early, so I figured the more classes I take, the closer I'll be to graduating early."

Parents can also log into the system and view their child's progress at any time.

In 2007, the Tallahassee-based watchdog organization group Florida TaxWatch found that students enrolled in online courses consistently outperform their peers, earning higher grades, better FCAT scores and higher marks on advanced placement exams than their peers in traditional high schools.

"They did a comparison, using our student data, and found that students taking an online class did better than students in traditional classrooms," Gully said.

Kiana said she would "strongly recommend" the online program to other local students, though she warned against technical problems.

"You do need speakers, headphones, a microphone and a good-running computer," she said. "But the best part is getting to work at your own pace and being able to be at home."

Next, she plans to take online Geologic Economics, a senior-level course, or Spanish III or IV, she said.

For more information, go to [www.flvs.net](http://www.flvs.net).