

## **In Florida, virtual school could make classrooms history**

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Thousands of Florida students may ditch public elementary and middle schools next year in favor of online classes at home -- an option that could change the face of public education.

A new law that takes effect next fall requires every district in the state to set up an online school for kindergarten through eighth-grade students. They won't have to get on the bus -- or even get out of their PJs -- to head to school at the family computer.

A handful of elementary- and middle-school students already are experimenting with virtual classes, withdrawing from regular schools and enrolling instead for online instruction. Students take a full range of courses, including reading, writing, math, science, history, art, music and even physical education.

"I am so excited about this that my goal is to go all the way through 12th grade," said Joni Fussell, whose 8-year-old daughter has been studying at the kitchen computer in their Altamonte Springs home since January.

Taylor Fussell is enrolled in the state's experimental online elementary school, which will be greatly expanded through the new law. The state has had online instruction for high-school students for 10 years, but it's mostly used by those who want to take an extra course they can't squeeze in at school.

The law passed by the Legislature last spring is designed to give parents more choice in how their elementary- and middle-school children are educated full time. Online instruction joins home schooling, charter schools and Florida's on-again, off-again experiment with vouchers to private schools as a way of broadening the selection.

"The beauty of this is it is another choice for parents," said Sonia Esposito, director of school choice for Osceola schools.

The state will pay for online instruction, providing districts about \$6,000 per student -- what they would get for a student who showed up at a regular school. But savings are expected in bus transportation, school construction and other areas.

### All-or-none option

For those who take advantage of virtual instruction in elementary and middle school, it's an all-or-none proposition. Unlike high school, if they sign up for online classes, they can't continue to take some of their courses in regular schools and can't compete in organized sports.

Fussell said she switched to online instruction at home because she was frustrated with her inability to influence Taylor's progress at Altamonte Springs Elementary. Taylor, who had fallen behind in reading, is rapidly catching up online.

"If I am struggling, I just practice more," she said. "And I get to stay home with my mom."

A teacher working out of her home at an undisclosed Florida location supervises instruction for Taylor and dozens of other elementary students across the state. She monitors their work, talks with students individually online and holds virtual class meetings to discuss particular topics.

Back in the kitchen, Joni Fussell keeps Taylor on task, although there is flexibility for running errands or doing chores, as long as Taylor spends about five hours a day doing schoolwork. The program requires an adult at home to aid with instruction.

Fussell has everything she needs to supervise her daughter's education. Last summer a delivery truck brought boxes of textbooks, work sheets, study materials and other classroom supplies, right down to a compass, magnifying glass and other nifty items for basic science experiments. Older kids even get microscopes.

Although the Fussells had a computer, it wasn't necessary for them to own one. Kids who don't have computers will get them free, along with free online service.

What's missing, says Fussell, is 18 kids competing for one teacher's attention, boring downtime in the classroom, distracting discipline incidents and playground bullying.

Students are tested, get report cards and must take the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. The virtual schools will receive letter grades from the state, and poorly performing providers will be weeded out.

Next year Fussell plans to have a second student at home, when her younger daughter Savannah, 5, a kindergartner at Altamonte Elementary, joins the virtual school. State law requires that students must previously have been in a regular public school before switching to the new virtual school, a provision that shuts out students who have been home-schooled for years.

'I miss my friends'

Students, parents and educators say one drawback of virtual education is that kids studying at home don't have the ready socialization opportunities they have at school.

"I miss my friends," Taylor Fussell said.

But her mother builds Taylor's social skills with outside activities such as church or playing with neighborhood children. The online school also has virtual clubs -- chess club is one -- and plans other activities such as spelling bees and science fairs.

Districts can come up with their own online elementary- and middle-school curriculum. But most districts, including Orange and Seminole, say the task is too daunting and they instead expect to contract the online instruction to existing virtual schools for a fee. Two now operate in the state: Florida Virtual School in partnership with Connections Academy, and Florida Virtual Academy, which the Fussells use. Others are expected to be approved by the Department of Education this winter.

Officials have no idea how many students will switch to the new online elementary and middle schools.

But if Florida Virtual School's online courses for high-school students are any indication, it could take off. That program went from students completing 6,765 half-credit courses in 2001 to 137,450 courses last school year.

Of 44 states with online learning, more than half offer full or part-time elementary programs, with as many as 45,000 students taking part nationwide. Florida is among states leading in the movement.

Districts say they will decide by spring who will get the contracts for online instruction and that parents will be permitted to sign up their kids soon after.

Who gets to learn online \*Students who are residents of the school district.

\*Those who have attended a Florida public school this year and been enrolled for both the February and October funding counts. Home-schoolers don't qualify. \*Students currently enrolled in the state's virtual-instruction program.

\*Kindergarten students, only if they are enrolled in public schools this year for both the October and February funding counts, including Pre-K disabled students, those in the babies-of-teen-parents program and those repeating

kindergarten. \*A child of a member of the U.S. Armed Forces who was transferred to Florida during the past 12 months.

-- SOURCES: Florida Department of Education, area school districts

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