

Districts prepare full-time online K-12 schools under new state law

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Next school year, the first generation of Florida students can begin to earn a diploma from local public schools entirely online, without ever setting foot in a classroom from kindergarten through 12th grade.

A new state law requires districts to create their own full-time virtual schools, collaborate with other districts or contract with providers approved by the state.

The law is believed to be the most wide-ranging virtual mandate in the nation.

"The rest of the country will be watching to see how it goes," said Julie Young, president and chief executive officer of Florida Virtual School and a board member of the North American Council for Online Learning.

By August, school superintendents must settle everything from how to provide the needed technology to how to engage squirmy kindergartners who lack the attention span to sit at a computer for hours.

The state already funds two online schools catering to students in kindergarten through eighth grade as well as the Florida Virtual School, which offers middle and high school courses.

During the 2007-08 school year, more than 57,000 students took at least one Florida Virtual School course. But very few committed to an all-online experience.

The new law is expected to bring Web-based education to many more students and increase the number who take all of their classes in a virtual world.

But the law provides only a vague reference to providing computers and Internet access to students "when appropriate." Each district can decide what that means, raising concerns that the program may not benefit students whose families cannot afford home computers and reliable Internet access.

In Palm Beach County, district officials said it would be too expensive to provide computers to all virtual students to use at home. Administrators have proposed opening school computer labs.

Shemifhar Freytes is one of Palm Beach County's few full-time online students, finishing her senior year at Palm Beach Gardens High School without entering a brick-and-

mortar classroom.

A night owl who does some of her best work at 2 a.m., she likes the flexibility of Florida Virtual School.

"You don't have to be stuck in one lesson that you perfectly understand because the rest of the class doesn't get it," Freytes said.

She also likes the variety of ways in which lessons can be taught online.

In her Advanced Placement government class, Freytes attended a Web seminar about constitutional amendments. Students logged on at a set time and viewed slides of photos and text that the teacher created on the right side of the screen and chatted via instant message on the left side.

"This is a new world, and children have different learning modalities," said Debra Johnson, principal of what will become Palm Beach County's virtual school. "We need to be preparing ourselves for not only the future, but we need to be addressing students' needs now and providing different opportunities."

This school year, the district is starting with 12 county students in kindergarten through eighth grade who are registered for online school through a state program.

Administrators will interview the students, their parents and teachers to learn what works and what doesn't as the county crafts its program.

At first blush, the law appears to be a boon for school districts that will get to pocket student funding without having to build schools to house them. But districts still must pay teachers, revamp their curricula for the online world and buy new technology. They also can pay a private company to do that for them.

The law cites several companies approved by the state, which some view as a back-door invitation to for-profit companies to get a foothold in public schools.

"I can't see how (districts) would make money with it," said Bill Thomas, director of educational technology for the Southern Regional Education Board, which serves 16 states from Delaware to Texas. "The only thing I've heard is the frustration from superintendents about the requirements to implement it."

In Palm Beach County, Johnson said the district likely will buy online curriculum but oversee its own school, run with county teachers. Virtual students must meet state standards and take the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.

Susan Patrick, president of the North American Council for Online Learning, said it would be a mistake for all 67 Florida counties to create virtual schools from scratch.

"There's a lot of planning money to reinvent the wheel that may not be necessary," Patrick said.

Angela Specketer, principal of the Minnesota Virtual Academy, knows what Florida districts are facing.

In 2002, her school district launched its full-time virtual program. It bought the curriculum from a proven virtual education vendor, but there still was a lot to learn. That included grappling with how different it is to teach a high school junior and a first-grader online.

"Whereas a high schooler can be very independent - they can have a conversation or work on the computer or phone - with an elementary student, you need to bridge that gap," she said.

Specketer sends plastic tubs full of books and teaching materials to the homes of elementary school students. Only 20 percent of the curriculum is taught online, and parents must commit to walking their children through the rest of their lessons.

"Not every parent wants to be engaged at that level," Specketer said.

For some students, she said, virtual education can rekindle their love of learning.

"It has more to do with whether this is a good way for (each) student to learn. To me, I look at online learning not as something that's going to be the savior of education," she said. "This is one alternative."