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Local students' enrollment in Virtual School booming

By TaMaryn Waters DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER

On any given day, Joy Faus can pick a spot at her house and make it her classroom.

There are no crowded hallways, no bookbags to lug around and no bells. Some days, she's being taught as she sits on her deck overlooking a private pond in her backyard.

Joy, a 14-year-old home-schooled student, is one of thousands of students getting an education through the Florida Virtual School headquartered in Orlando.

It's the largest state-run online secondary school in the country, and students from the Big Bend are logging in. In Leon County alone, 2,119 students were enrolled in the 2006-2007 school, a leap from the 448 in the 2003-2004 school year.

"It's super helpful," said Rebecca Barnhart, an 18-year-old senior at Lincoln High School. "It's very one-on-one work, because you don't have to compete with a room of 30 other students." Barnhart has taken three courses through the online classrooms.

The virtual school has become an attractive alternative offering middle and high-school students a chance to work at their own pace. They take classes their assigned school may not offer, like advanced Algebra II and AP calculus. It also helps students earn credits if they failed a class.

Although the majority of the students are from public and private schools, 23 percent are home-schooled.

Bill Thomas, director of educational technology for the Southern Regional Education Board, said Florida created interest among other states when it first went online in 1997. Soon states like West Virginia and Kentucky, followed suit.

According to Florida TaxWatch, a state-wide organization that monitors how

taxpayers' money is spent, the student population is diverse with one-third of its students representing minorities, mostly black and Hispanic students.

"They are such a leader that, literally, people are looking at them as the incubator as to what other schools should be doing," said Thomas. Today, there are virtual schools in 13 of the 16 states in the southern region, many of them drawn to the cost-savings factor.

Florida Virtual is a school district of its own with teachers located throughout the state. Its current operating budget is \$58.3 million, but Young said its not immune to cuts like districts across the state. The school may have to trim 4.5 percent from its budget for the upcoming year. But the state has supported the school's cost-saving factor.

A TaxWatch report indicates the school has a better cost per student rate than most districts. It said, "Even without including capital outlay funding, FLVS spends much less per student than traditional schools — more than \$1,000 less in FY 2007. Capital outlay expenses make those savings even bigger."

The online concept is simple: Students are given assignments, and they work with a teacher, who is accessible by phone, e-mail and instant message. If a student doesn't do well on an assignment, he or she can continue to work on it until it's complete. Or, students can go to the next assignment if they understand the content.

"One of the coolest things about this environment is that it meets students where they are in their world," said Julie Young, president and CEO of the school.

But there's a lot at stake if the students don't perform well.

"If our students are not successful, we are not paid by the state," Young said. The online school uses a performance-based curriculum, meaning that each student must earn at least a D for the school to get state money. However, Young said most of the students are getting high grades and test scores compared to those in the public schools alone.

Although some say the school has its disadvantages, such as frustrations if a student isn't tech-savvy enough to maneuver through the site or temptation for students to wander on other spots, others say the advantages make the difference.

Brett Cucuel, a Tallahassee resident who teaches through Florida Virtual, said she lives for that "light bulb" moment, and she can see it even more now that she teaches online.

Cucuel said. "I feel like I have grown more as a teacher than I ever have."