

Free online classes let Treasure Coast students catch up, get ahead

By Kelly Tyko

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Day or night, even during the summer, students can take remedial courses or additional classes to help them get ahead.

The number of Treasure Coast middle and high school students taking advantage of free Internet-based classes through the Florida Virtual School is on the rise.

"It's easy to get to, and I can take classes at home instead of having to find a ride to school," said Josh Leah, 16, who will be a junior at St. Lucie West Centennial High in August.

The Florida Virtual School "opened" in 1997 with 77 students and five courses. Today, the school with the motto — "Any Time, Any Place, Any Path, Any Pace" — offers more than 90 courses with 55,000 students in grades six through 12.

While six years ago, local students took 191 courses through the Florida Virtual School, last school year, local students took 3,625 courses — an increase of nearly 1,800 percent.

Most of the virtual school's students are enrolled in regular middle and high schools and take the online courses after school. Some students are home-schooled and use the virtual classes as a small or large part of their curriculum.

The school's physical headquarters is located in Orlando, where administrators, customer service staff and technical staffers work. However, like many of their students, the public school's 400 full-time and

166 part-time teachers work from home.

Teachers give students assignments and are accessible by phone, e-mail and instant message from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. The teacher and student talk by phone at least once a month.

"It's almost like you have your own teacher," Sebastian mother Angela Weathersbee said. "There are not the behavior issues in the classroom and the child can work at their own pace and at their own time."

Virtual education isn't new for Weathersbee's three sons. In 2002, the family was a test family for the Florida Virtual Academy, a K-12 online school.

Henry Weathersbee, 16, who will be a junior at Sebastian River High in August, is finishing up Algebra II honors through the Virtual School. He also took Algebra I honors online in eighth grade.

Weathersbee's eldest son, Albert, 18, was a full-time student at Sebastian River for ninth grade, but was homeschooled for his sophomore, junior and senior years of high school.

While Weathersbee said her children have only had good experiences with the school, she doesn't think it's for everyone.

"The child has to be motivated. There's no way kids can get through this if they're not," she said.

By the end of July, Josh Leah hopes to complete two courses — English II and biology — through the virtual school. He's retaking the classes that he took last school year at Centennial and hopes to raise his grade-point average.

Students and school officials say it's common for students to take virtual school classes to boost their GPAs, especially students vying for valedictorian and salutatorian.

But Gabrielle Lashley, 18, who graduated from Martin County High this month, warns that just because the course is online doesn't mean it is easier.

Lashley took physical education from the virtual school to make up for missing a few weeks of school during her freshman year. She said she should have taken another subject, like economics.

For physical education, each day she had to measure how far she could reach for a flexibility chart. She also had to log her exercise time, have her parents sign off and fax the log to the virtual school.

"It would have obviously been a lot easier taking it in school and running around with kids instead of sitting on the computer making PowerPoints about how fast your heart beats and why junk food is bad for you," said Lashley, who will attend Pennsylvania State University in the fall. "It's really easy to let it go because you don't think about going online to do your physical education."

HOW TO ENROLL

Students in grades six through 12 can retake courses they failed or take additional courses to get ahead at the Florida Virtual School.

More than 90 courses are available, including Advanced Placement courses and test-prep courses, at no cost for Florida students.

The school's Web site has "how-to" demonstrations to guide students and parents through the application process.

For more information, go to www.flvs.net.

VIRTUAL SCHOOL

- The school gets performance-based funding from the state. While the state pays other public schools based on attendance, the online school collects only if a student completes a course with a passing grade.

- According to Florida TaxWatch, a statewide organization that monitors how taxpayers' money is spent, the school has a better cost per student rate than most districts and spent more than \$1,000 less per student for the 2006-07 school year.

- Students start and finish classes — at their own pace — 365 days a year. Students typically begin courses within 60 days of registration.

- Students from other states can attend the Florida Virtual School but parents or home school districts pick up the cost. Florida students don't have to pay.

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