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Manatee to offer virtual class to grade-schoolers
By NATALIE NEYSA ALUND

MANATEE — For years, local parents who wanted their elementary age children enrolled in a virtual school had to use a private company.

But starting this fall, the Manatee County School District will offer a public virtual school for kindergartners through eighth-graders. Currently only ninth through 12th graders can take public online classes.

In virtual schools, students study at home using computers and textbooks, and can listen and talk to teachers using the Internet.

Schools are required across the state to make the online offering due to a 2008 law created to give parents more choice over how their children are educated.

During its last meeting, the school board chose K12 Florida LLC of Jacksonville to provide its K-8 Virtual Education Program. At the July 13 meeting, board members are slated to approve a contract that would run through 2014.

“This is a public school open to any student,” said Verdya Bradley, Manatee supervisor of innovative programs and parental options. “It will be as if we were opening another school in the district. The transition is changing it from a private option, making it available to everyone.”

The program is paid for by the district, which spends \$4,700 for each student enrolled, she said. The school has projected about 220 students will sign up.

“But if we only have a few children sign up, we only pay for those students,” said Superintendent Tim McGonegal.

So far, about a half-dozen parents have contacted the district interested in the program, said Sheryl Riker, district school choice specialist.

“But we will continue advertising through the start of the school year,” she said.

School officials are planning to set up community meetings to give parents more details about the program. By the end of this week, a link is

expected on the district's main Web page that will have provide more information.

A few hundred ninth- through 12th-graders are now enrolled in online classes provided by Florida Virtual School, the district's provider, Bradley said. There are seven Manatee district students enrolled in K-12 Florida Virtual Academy, a private virtual school. There could be more with other private schools though, Bradley said.

Students enrolled in the K-8 public virtual school participate in the same 180 school day calender year and take the same tests, including the FCAT.

"The first day of school a UPS truck will deliver all materials parents need, including books and manipulatives for math and science like scales," Riker said.

Benefits include flexibility, Bradley said.

Parents who choose virtual schooling need to know the program requires their time.

"This is not just put your kid on the computer," Riker said. "The parent has to make a commitment and monitor the child."

Bradley agreed, "It is very parent- or coach-involved."

Educators reaction to the school are mixed.

Although he agrees it should be available to high school students, McGonegal said he's not a fan of using online learning for elementary age students.

"There's a social acclamation that doesn't happen," he said.

In theory it's good, school board member Bob Gause said.

"Virtual school could be a real asset to parents who already homeschool their children," he said.

But the devil is in the details, Gause added.

Those who wish to have their child in public virtual school must first send their child to public school, he said.

The program comes at a cost to the district in a rough economic climate.

"At a time when money is tight, they've made it tighter," Gause said.

Although legislators control how much districts collect per child, they didn't mandate a limit on the amount the virtual providers can charge.

"We're gonna pay out more than we're gonna collect," Gause said. "It's a glitch. It would have been nice if they had prevented that from occurring."