

New state law will allow more Treasure Coast students to attend school online

By Kelly Tyko

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More Treasure Coast students soon will be able to ditch classes at bricks-and-mortar schools.

Instead, they'll head to class without leaving the house.

Starting with the new school year in August, all Florida school districts are required to offer virtual schools because of a 2008 law created to give parents more choice over how their children are educated.

On the Treasure Coast, three new virtual schools will launch on Aug. 24, the first day of school.

"It is a school for the district, just like any other school," said Teresa D'Albora, Martin County School District's director of school improvement and curriculum. "It just doesn't have a building."

While districts can come up with their own online elementary and middle school curriculum, many districts including the three on the Treasure Coast are contracting with existing Florida virtual schools, Florida Virtual School and Florida Connections Academy. School districts pay the virtual providers about \$5,000 per student, which provides for textbooks, supplies and salaries for teachers that the virtual schools employ.

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

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

"Virtual education may be a good match for a variety of learners, especially independent, self-directed learners," said Owen Roberts, St. Lucie County's assistant superintendent for accountability and assessment.

Parents who choose virtual schooling need to know the program requires their time, school officials said.

“This is not something that a child does without adult involvement,” said Sue Curtis, Indian River County School District’s executive director of core curriculum, “The parent really has to be an active participant.”

For those who take advantage of virtual instruction in elementary and middle school, it’s a full-time program. The Florida Virtual School also offers classes to help students get ahead or do remedial work, which is not part of the school district’s virtual schools at this time.

And virtual school students still take the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test along with traditional public school students.

“I think the positives for virtual school is that it does give students an opportunity to work at their own pace, an opportunity to experience different types of learning,” D’Albora said, adding the downside includes lack of socialization with peers.

The virtual schools do have clubs and other activities and occasionally have field trips.

But not every local student is eligible to attend the Martin Virtual School or its counterparts.

State law requires students to have spent the prior year at a Florida public school. Students also can enroll if they are the dependent child of a member of the United States Armed Forces who was transferred to or from another state or overseas.

While home school students aren’t eligible for the school district programs, they can still attend virtual school directly through the state.

“It’s hard for those of us who have been in education for a long time to envision just exactly where this will go,” Curtis said. “But we’re excited about the opportunity to give our students lots of choices.”

## MORE ABOUT FLORIDA’S VIRTUAL SCHOOL

Starting with the new school year, Florida school districts are required to offer virtual schools because of a 2008 law created to give parents more choice over how their children are educated.

Students study all day at home using computers and textbooks, and can listen and talk to teachers through the Internet.

School districts are required to monitor local students’ progress. The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test scores of students in virtual schools will count toward the district’s overall grade from the state.

Some low-income students who don’t have computers at home will receive a loaner computer along with free online service.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Indian River County School District will be hosting a parent information session about full-time virtual instruction in kindergarten-through fifth-grade at 6:15 p.m. Monday in the School Board meeting room at 1990 25th St., Vero Beach. For more information, call (772) 564-3067.

Both Martin and St. Lucie school districts are planning to hold information sessions in the coming weeks. For more information in Martin, call the School Improvement Office at (772) 219-1200, ext. 30420. In St. Lucie, call the Student Services Department at (772) 429-4510.

For more information, log on to the Florida Virtual School Web site at [www.flvs.net/k8](http://www.flvs.net/k8).  
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