

More virtual school options available for Florida students
Online courses are now offered to ninth through 12th graders.

By Mary Kelli Palka
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GOING VIRTUAL Florida school districts are entering into agreements with providers to help provide the virtual classes beginning this school year – which in Northeast Florida is Aug. 24 for most counties.

Florida students interested in learning outside of a traditional classroom environment have another full-time option this year through their local school districts – virtual classes.

Last year, the Florida Legislature required school districts to offer full-time virtual programs by 2009–10. Initially, lawmakers allowed the full-time program for students only in kindergarten through eighth grade. Legislation was passed in May to expand the option to students in ninth through 12th grade.

How will districts provide virtual classes?

Most districts are contracting with virtual education providers. The setups vary by district. But in general, most districts will pay almost \$4,000 per student to the provider, or about \$500 more per student if computer-related equipment is needed. For students in a full-time virtual program, districts only pay the virtual schools if the student is promoted to the next grade level or completes all necessary credits, said Dana Kriznar, Duval's executive director of alternative education programs and behavioral support. The Duval district is contracting with two different providers.

Do some districts offer their own virtual courses?

Yes, at least for some students. St. Johns County has had a franchise of the Florida Virtual School for students in sixth through 12th grade for about a year and a half, said Mike O'Loughlin, St. Johns' director for alternative programs. Nassau is also starting its own franchise for ninth through 12th grades, said Sharyl Wood, executive director of administrative services. A franchise means the district uses curriculum from the Florida Virtual School but provides its own teachers. Both are contracting with providers for classes for students in early grades.

Who is eligible for the district programs?

Students must live in the district with the program, have been counted as enrolled in public school during the October 2008 and February 2009 surveys or are dependent children of a member of the military transferred to the area within the last 12 months. Students in kindergarten through

eighth grades who were enrolled in state–financed virtual schools for the 2008–09 school year are also eligible.

What if I don't have a computer, printer or other technology to fully participate in the district program?

The virtual course providers or district will provide the necessary equipment for those participating in the full–time program who don't have it.

If I take a virtual class, do I get to skip tests?

No. In lieu of sitting in a classroom and watching a teacher cover a lesson, students can take the courses – and exams – they need over the computers. Teachers are available to talk to parents and students on the telephone. Virtual teachers also have state certification and students are required to master state standards. Students who take full–time courses through a public school district program must still take the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test at a location determined by districts.

What if I only want to take one or two courses in addition to my public, private or home–school programs?

Just as before, part–time virtual classes are still available for free for any public, private or home school student in ninth to 12th grade in Florida from the Florida Virtual School, a public school district. There's no limit on how many classes students can take. Plus other virtual school providers offer classes. Many students choose to take the virtual courses in addition to traditional school to help them graduate on time or take a class they can't fit in their regular course load. The virtual classes include anything from economics to Advanced Placement.

What if I want to participate in sports or other extracurricular activities?

Students going to virtual school full–time can try out for sports or join an extracurricular activity, usually at the school in their attendance zone.

When do I need to sign up?

Contact your district to see if there's availability.

Baker County: K12 Florida (K–8), Florida Virtual School (9–12).
Information: www.baker.k12.fl.us.

Clay County: Florida Virtual School's Connections Academy (K–8); Florida Virtual School (9–12). Information: www.clay.k12.fl.us.

Duval County: K12 Florida (K-8); Florida Virtual School (9-12). Students already enrolled in the Florida Virtual School's Connections Academy can continue with course work. Information: (904) 390-2081.

Nassau County: Florida Virtual School's Connections Academy (K-8), district franchise with teachers using Florida Virtual School curriculum (9-12). Information: Edward Turvey, assistant superintendent of instruction, (904) 491-9904.

Putnam County: North East Florida Educational Consortium (K-12) For more information, visit www.putnamschools.org.

St. Johns County: District franchise with teachers using Florida Virtual School curriculum (9-12). Working on a partnership for other grades, not yet approved. Information: www.stjohns.k12.fl.us.