

St. Petersburg Times

Teachers prepare to juggle e-job, day job

By Jeffrey S. Solochek, Times Staff Writer

Sunday, August 9, 2009

LAND O'LAKES — Becky Mait — land tapped on her school district-issued MacBook, enrolling a fake student into a ghost virtual class.

Every step along the way, the system prompted Maitland to note exactly what she had done, and when.

"I like learning new things and trying to figure them out," the Gulf Middle special education teacher said Thursday as she worked her way through the scheduling program. "I like that we can do it to a pretend student before we do it on a real student. That would be scary."

In less than a month, those real students will appear as part of Pasco County's venture into online education. To get ready, 23 of the 26 teachers for Pasco eSchool gathered this week at Sunlake High School for a day spent learning the ins and outs of running a virtual classroom — something they'll be doing in addition to their regular classroom duties.

David Ester, a Shady Hills Elementary teacher, expected a "huge learning curve" to figure out the computer programs where the classes take place. But he and others had plenty of other tactical and practical questions, too.

Such as, how do you convince a student who's struggling that a traditional classroom environment might be better? And, is there wiggle room in the time allowed for a student to complete a course? And, when do teachers get paid?

One issue that prompted a fairly lengthy conversation centered on the matter of teacher availability.

All of the educators have to be in school for the regular workday, and most did not relish the idea of carrying their laptops or cell phones with them while grocery shopping or attending their kids' soccer games so they don't miss student calls.

As Maitland, who has held a second job before, noted, you have to be able to separate work from home life so it doesn't consume you.

ESchool principal JoAnne Glenn offered this advice: "Available doesn't mean you answer on the first ring. But you need to be aware that students get nervous, and parents get nervous, if they feel like you're not there."

The rule of thumb will be to respond to all correspondence within 24 hours.

That's especially important because the contact that most virtual teachers and their students have is not face-to-face. They have only one required phone meeting monthly. Everything else gets done remotely, although the option to get together at a school is always available.

Different setup

"I would like to meet my students," said Darcy Cleek, a Long Middle science teacher. "Sometimes you don't get the nonverbals, unless you are Skype-ing with them."

Cleek also wondered how she could make sure that the students are taking advantage of the hands-on explorations that she considers so essential to understanding science. But she expected the class to be motivated enough to explore, just as students do in a regular course.

Like the others in the training, Cleek had limited exposure to online courses — mostly in the form of taking one. Still, she found many similarities to what she already does with her classes, thanks to the changes in technology that have come to schools over the years.

"I have a blog," she said. "We post questions that are an extension of the lesson. (Students) will talk back and forth on the blog. And sometimes I'll have students who will e-mail me."

The big difference will be in the level of individualized attention that the teachers can give each child.

Students can take the honors level of any course, depending on their interest and ability. The teacher can focus feedback on a single student without taking up the time of everyone else in the room. Because unlike in a regular classroom, students can work at their own pace, and seat time is not a factor, although classes do have pacing

schedules and ending dates. Students can work at midnight if they wish, or take lessons on a Sunday afternoon.

Tips from others

"This is about helping students be successful and master content," Glenn reminded the teachers. "It is not about meeting deadlines."

Some experienced Florida Virtual School teachers also attended to offer some tips they have learned along the way.

They recommended teachers use a hands-free headset when talking to students, to keep their hands free for typing or taking notes; protect their class exams with passwords before the first student is enrolled; and keep the kids from jumping into the tests before they're ready.

The teachers in training welcomed all the advice. They said it would all come in handy as they get started.

"I like working with students. I want to be able to do something different and something new," Maitland said.

"This is certainly going to be a challenge."

© 2009 • All Rights Reserved • St. Petersburg Times