

## Naples News

Collier, Lee students can now get diplomas without ever going to a classroom

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NAPLES — This fall, the first generation of Florida students will be able to earn their diplomas from the public school district entirely online, without ever setting foot in a classroom from kindergarten through 12th grade.

The Collier County and Lee County school districts will open virtual schools for students in kindergarten through 12th grade. The districts are opening the schools to comply with a Florida Legislature requirement that districts offer full-time virtual programs by the 2009-10 school year.

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.

For the past several years, students have had the option of taking classes on a part-time basis through a handful of providers.

Kay Lorinc's 16-year-old son, Thierry, will attend the virtual school in Collier County this fall.

Lorinc said her son tested the waters last year, taking three virtual classes.

"In the beginning, it was scary for me," she admitted. "It wasn't a traditional classroom. But it has exceeded all of my expectations."

Lorinc said there are many positives to the school, including a stable schedule and giving her son the ability to move through his classes at his own pace.

"One of the very positive things about it is that it is almost like having your child enrolled in private school," she said. "The attention he receives is wonderful. A lot of people think it is just online work, but his world history teacher had been to Yemen and spoke to the

students about that. She was so creative. ... It is a tailored school system.”

Lorinc said she was contacted by Thierry’s teachers once a month by phone and e-mail.

There are caveats, though.

Parents of any child applying to join the program must sign a contract agreeing to act as a “learning coach” a minimum of five hours a day. That’s 25 hours a week, Al Shilling points out.

Shilling, the principal of the Lee Virtual Instructional Program, thinks evolution is going to move a lot faster in the digital age; the education system, compared with what we know now, will be unrecognizable in another generation.

“I’d bet my mortgage on it,” Shilling said.

To ensure that parents are living up to their commitment, teachers make contact with them on a regular basis through phone calls and e-mails.

“These teachers probably have more parental contact than most teachers do,” Shilling said. “Virtual teaching is a difficult job. They’re trained and most of them have been doing this long enough that they are very in tune with the home environment.”

As for the requirement that the child have a learning coach, which is a responsible adult who can monitor the student’s computer access and provide support and further discussion, Lorinc said it wasn’t a hardship.

“He does need supervision, but it is not as hard as I thought it could be,” she said. “Some mornings, I would get up and he would be in his pajamas, eating cereal and working on geometry by himself.”

The Collier County School District’s program allows students attending virtual classes to participate in sports and clubs at their home schools, but Lorinc said she isn’t worried about her son’s socialization.

“There are wonderful opportunities for socialization outside of the public school system,” she said. “There is a sailing program through the parks department that is open to kids in virtual school. Besides, he

is getting more out of class. His GPA has skyrocketed. He is challenged.”

Bill Spano, principal of the Collier Virtual School, said parents need to be careful about selecting the virtual school model for their children.

“The curriculum is particularly rigorous,” he said. “Students will actually be spending more time working on school work because of the demands of the curriculum.”

The program’s appeal lies in its ability to adapt to and encourage a non-traditional learning environment, Shilling said.

“I’ve talked to all of the parents that have come into the program,” Shilling said. “At first, I was looking at: ‘What does this group have in common?’ And there really isn’t anything. It may range from kids who have semi-professional athletic interests to students who have serious learning disabilities.”

Students will have access to the program through the same state funding model used in regular public schools. Traditional public schools receive a certain amount of funding per student from the state; the base-rate this year is about \$3,630 per student. Schools receive additional funding for students with learning disabilities who fall below the poverty line or who are English-language learners.

The money that would have gone to a traditional school will be directed toward the provider running the virtual education program for that student, Shilling said.

Two providers will offer the classes in Lee County. Florida Virtual School, which serves 80,000 students in Florida, the United States and around the world, will offer classes for children in grades nine through 12 in conjunction with Connections Academy. Students in kindergarten through eighth grade will receive instruction from K12 LLC.

In Collier County, Connections Academy will provide services to students in kindergarten through fifth grade and Florida Virtual School will provide services to students in grades six through 12, Spano said. About 15 students have signed up to be part of Collier Virtual School, he said.

To be eligible, children must have been enrolled in a public school for at least the previous year, be the dependent of active military

personnel or have taken a class from an accredited Florida virtual education provider in the past.

The caveats continue, too. Students who are home-schooled, but never took any classes with Florida virtual education providers, aren't eligible. Furthermore, Florida Virtual School wasn't recognized as an officially sanctioned provider before now, Shilling said.

Students also will be responsible for taking the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) at their home school each spring while enrolled in the program.

Additionally, if a student doesn't complete a course or fails, the state provides no money for that child's education. A child who fails in a traditional school environment still earns district funding, and gets the extra year of instruction needed to remediate.

Still, Shilling expresses excitement about the possibilities of the program. He said the Lee district would like to take enough ownership of the program to have a local, "organic" virtual instruction program, taught by instructors based in Lee County. That doesn't mean traditional schools will go the way of the one-room-schoolhouse, though, Shilling said.

"I don't think virtual education is going to completely replace schools," he said. "I think the answer is somewhere in between."

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To sign up

The Collier Virtual School is accepting new students through Aug. 27. For more information, go to [www.collierschools.com](http://www.collierschools.com), look for the Schools tab at the top of the home page and click on Alternative Schools and choose Collier Virtual School. Or call (239) 377-1050.

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