



Online schools appeal to Georgians Virtual classrooms offer rigorous academics at a lower operating cost.

By Walter C. Jones
Friday, Aug. 21, 2009

NEWNAN, Ga. – At a time when the recession is forcing school districts across the state to find ways to tighten their belts, Georgia's largest public school operates at just 40 percent of the cost of traditional classrooms.

The Georgia Virtual Academy has 4,000 students enrolled from 163 of the state's school districts from kindergarten to eighth grade. Run by Virginia-based K12 Inc., the school operates under the authority of Georgia's first state-chartered school, Odyssey School in Newnan.

Partnering with Odyssey was a natural fit, according to Andy Geeter, Odyssey school director.

"What could be more innovative than being the first charter school in the state with an online school?" he said.

Last month, the State Board of Education extended the charter for Georgia Virtual and boosted the number of students it can enroll to 5,000. Some of the students transferred from traditional public schools, while others had been home schooled, and many live in remote parts of the state that have no private schools or charter schools nearby.

"Our parents often don't have a choice in their education," said board member Linda Zechmann of Waycross. "This is often the only choice they have."

Zechmann, the chairwoman of the board's Charter School Committee, favors lifting the enrollment cap once Georgia Virtual "works all the kinks out."

Meeting state requirements

K12 Inc. officials say that is happening. It tailors its curriculum to Georgia requirements, drawing on its experience in other states, making courses engaging while using technology to constantly monitor student performance.

As a charter school, Georgia Virtual receives funding from the state, eliminating tuition for students, but it receives none of the local money traditional "brick and mortar" schools get. Although it doesn't have to maintain a library, serve lunch or operate buses, its largest expense is still personnel since every teacher must be certified even if they work from home.

Eight percent of the funding goes as a fee to K12 Inc., a for-profit company. That bothers some advocates of public education.

"What it appears is they are trying to come in and privatize public education," said Jeff Hubbard, president of the Georgia Association of Educators. "That causes me concern."

He worries state oversight is less on a charter school run by a private company. And Zechmann said the state would indeed be more lenient with the pioneers in online education but not necessarily on the latecomers. Five more companies are applying for charters to operate in Georgia.

One of the country's biggest online school is Florida Virtual School with 250,000 students, including 50 from Georgia even though it's not connected with any schools here.

The state owns and runs the school, instead of a private company. But, the school only gets paid for the courses students pass.

It stretches its funding by using computer applications to monitor students' understanding, frequent phone calls to students and parents and by assigning an average of 175 students to each teacher. Georgia Virtual's ratio is 60 students to each teacher.

Those teachers may live in another part of the country, a feature that appeals to Rep. Brooks Coleman, chairman of the House Education Committee.

"The beauty is you can find the best teachers anywhere in the country. They don't necessarily have to be here in Georgia," said Coleman, R-Duluth.

The technological advances and the competition could also improve education in traditional classrooms, but they won't disappear as a result, he said.

"I don't think you will ever see it replace the teacher, just like they used to say about the overhead projector and the TV. It's just going to be another tool in the bucket," he said.