

August 25, 2009

Online school is a cheaper way to educate
Florida Virtual School has less overhead and higher test scores than
average public schools.

By Stacy Teicher Khadaroo | Staff writer of The Christian Science
Monitor

Miami

It's a sultry summer day, and Andrea Bryant is holed up in the chill of
the public library, clicking her way through an online science course to
make up for the one she failed in sixth grade.

Offering online summer-school classes instead of face-to-face
teaching has been a popular way for school districts facing budget
cuts to save this year. But Andrea's state has long been racking up
savings through its year-round Florida Virtual School (FLVS), often
cited as a model of efficiency.

Based in Orlando, it serves everyone from home-schoolers to
traditional school students who need an extra course for catch-up or
enrichment. The state treats it as a school district of sorts, but funds it
at a significant savings over its bricks-and-mortar counterparts.

The state doesn't have to pay for busing, food, or building
maintenance for this "district." Its per-pupil costs are lower as well.
About 54,000 Florida students completed a total of 116,000
semester-long courses through FLVS in 2007-08. That translates into
just over 9,600 "full-time equivalent" students - and for each of those
the state saves about \$1,000, according to a study by the nonprofit
group Florida TaxWatch. Enrollment has been growing fast.

Schools save indirectly, too, because of this option. A small group of
students might be able to take Latin or an advanced biology course
through FLVS, for instance, rather than their school having to hire
teachers with those specialties. And every time a student is promoted
to the next grade because they pass a class through FLVS that they
failed in the regular classroom, a year's worth of costs are saved on
that student.

The funding model for FLVS is particularly innovative. The school gets state dollars not for every student who enrolls, but only for those who complete their course with at least a D.

"When it works at its best, [online learning] is outcome-based rather than based on seat time.... That's a huge change from the factory-model system" of most schools, says Michael Horn, coauthor of "Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns."

While many schools add computers into standard classroom practice and only marginally improve the status quo, the "anytime, anywhere" approach of online learning better taps into the technology's potential, he adds.

Students enrolled in FLVS courses achieve higher test scores than those in the state's traditional public school courses. In 2006, 70 percent of FLVS sixth-graders earned a passing score in math on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, compared with 53 percent of all public school students; in reading, the figures were 80 percent versus 64 percent; and on college-level Advanced Placement exams, FLVS students scored an average of 3.05 on a five-point scale, compared with 2.49 for all public school students.

The teachers – who communicate with students via e-mail, instant messaging, and phone (especially when it's time to conduct oral tests) – earn high marks in surveys of students and parents.

"Everybody likes the computer ... [and] I can do this on my own time," says Andrea, an aspiring thespian. Her mother, Angela Bryant, however, is concerned about the time lag of a day or so between Andrea's sending a question and her receiving the teacher's answer the next time she gets to the library (they don't have high-speed Internet at home). "I'm sure the virtual class is ... an affordable situation [for the district], and that's fine, but it needs tweaking," Ms. Bryant says.

The number of K-12 students taking online classes nationwide grew 10-fold between 2001 and 2007, to nearly 2 million students, according to University of Florida professor Cathy Cavanaugh.

"Three years ago, online learning was simply a choice program in many [education] leaders' minds," says Julie Young, president and CEO of FLVS, which also contracts services to districts outside Florida.

"This year it's a staple," she continues. "Students are demanding it ... and schools need gap fillers."

<http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/0825/p25s03-ussc.html>

www.csmonitor.com | Copyright © 2009 The Christian Science Monitor. All rights reserved.