

## Fla. Virtual School doing more with less

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The Florida Virtual School is doing more with less due to a new law that cut its funding while expanding online learning to every school district in the state.

A national leader in virtual education, the Orlando-based school's budget has been reduce nearly 10 percent with more cutting set for next year while most other public schools have received a modest increase.

Enrollment, though, is expected to go up at least 50 percent. A small part of that is from expanding its scope to include full-time virtual students from kindergarten through the 12th grade under contracts or franchise agreements with most of the state's 67 local school districts.

The bulk of the increase is coming from its customary role of providing dozens of supplementary online courses to middle and high school students enrolled in conventional schools – a program now dubbed "Florida Virtual School Classic" – operating as a statewide 68th school district.

"We're not just coping, we're embracing it," said Sarah Sprinkel, director of Florida services for the school, which also has students outside the state.

The new law phases out – over two years – the state funding Florida Virtual had been getting to meet class size limits. Conventional schools still are getting class-size money.

"We really worked diligently to make the point that class size was not about walls and bricks and desks, that it was really about teacher-pupil ratio," said Florida Virtual President and CEO Julie Young.

That argument failed to sway budget-conscious lawmakers who see online teaching as a way not just to enhance education but as a cost-cutting tool.

As a result Florida Virtual will lose \$22 million – half of that this year and the full amount next year – leaving it with an annual budget of \$122 million this year.

Young said her school joined other districts in planning for a threatened spending cut of at least 10 percent this year but federal stimulus money is helping other districts avoid that reduction.

That exercise, though, is helping Florida Virtual deal with the lost class-size money. Young said it also has saved \$1 million through self-insurance for employee health coverage, increasing student-teacher ratios as it is exempt from the state's class size limits, outsourcing some services and urging teachers and other staff to find ways to cut costs.

"The limitations have pushed our creativity," Young said.

Before the cut, the private budget watchdog group Florida TaxWatch had estimated Florida Virtual spent about \$1,000 less per full-time equivalent student than conventional schools do. That will now probably increase to about \$1,500, Young said.

Most of the Florida Virtual's students are part-timers attending conventional schools while taking one or more online courses. The school gets state funding for each half-credit enrollment.

Young is anticipating about 250,000 half-credit enrollments this school year compared to 175,000 last year. She's expecting to serve up to 190,000 students overall, an increase of about 60,000.

Most will be taking "classic" classes ranging from American history to Chinese. Students can enroll at any time and continue at their own pace.

The new law requires all school districts to have full-time online programs and most are contracting with Florida Virtual, which also has a private partner for the elementary and middle school grades, to provide that service. Some districts employ their own online teachers but have franchises to use Florida Virtual's curricula. Other options are to contract with private vendors or a combination of contracts and franchises.

Friday is the deadline for enrolling full-time online students in districts with Florida Virtual contracts – 45 districts for kindergarten through eighth grade and 51 for high school – except Sarasota, which is getting extra time because it signed up later, Sprinkel said.

She said Florida Virtual's contract enrollment is getting off to a modest start with about 250 full-time high school students and 1,000 in the lower grades so far. These classes are open only to students who attended public schools last year, which shuts out those who were home schooled.

The full-time participants must attend online classes for 180 days during the school year and take the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test just like any other public school student. They also can participate in sports and other activities at public schools.

The state previously offered full-time virtual teaching in kindergarten through eighth grade through contracts with two private vendors. Those have now been dropped, but one of the vendors, Connections Academy, is partnering with Florida Virtual.

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