

## EDITORIAL

### **Saving virtual school Why are legislators undermining a successful innovation?**

Leave it to the Legislature, in its backward quest to close deficits without raising taxes, to demolish some of public education's best — and most cost-saving — innovations.

Florida Virtual School, the Internetbased public school district ([flvs.net](http://flvs.net)), started as a grant-funded project between Alachua and Orange counties' school districts in 1997. Back then, the Internet was still more of a specialized novelty than a universal tool. The virtual school started with 77 high school students. The venture's organizers thought it would grow slowly and primarily to accommodate specialty students — computer geeks or extremely self-disciplined students who don't need constant supervision to get their work done.

The virtual school district's estimates were wrong. It grew fast, broadening its appeal to a variety of students at every grade level in almost every discipline, typically providing more options than what any single school can provide. And it got state funding. By last year, with a budget of \$62.8 million, Florida Virtual School (known almost exclusively by its acronym, FLVS, to its community of users) offered 90 online courses, including electives, honors and Advanced Placement courses, with an enrollment of 63,775 students — more than the current total enrollment in Volusia public schools — who took 137,450 classes.

The majority were not full-time students. On average, a student takes two virtual classes at a time, with 70 percent still enrolled in traditional school.

Some do it to accelerate their way through high school, to add to their Advanced Placement tally, to erase a bad grade or take electives that they either cannot fit into their regular school schedule or that aren't available there, or to keep studying through summer.

Some students get their schooling online for a host of personal reasons that may include medical, psychological or family circumstances that make traditional schooling more difficult. Virtual school students on average, and as a district, score better than almost all other districts on standardized tests and better than the state or national average on most Advanced Placement courses.

It was an indication of the program's success that, last year, the Legislature passed a law requiring all 67 school districts to incorporate virtual schooling into their curriculum, as part of students' options, beginning next school year. (Districts wouldn't necessarily have to contract with FLVS).

Much of that success is now in jeopardy.

A bill that cleared the Florida Senate Education Appropriations Committee this week would rewrite FLVS' rules, eliminating many of the options that made virtual schooling such an attractive addition to students' options. The new rules would force the virtual district to eliminate all but core-curriculum classes while forbidding students to enroll beyond a strict credit limit.

Supposedly a money-saving measure, the proposed rule assumes that, because the state pays districts a set amount for each full-time student taking six credits per year, students who take more than that cost the state more.

Local districts may provide that extra funding. The state won't.

The Department of Education defines core-curriculum courses as anything in math, science, language and social studies. A quarter of Florida Virtual School's students take noncore classes, however. That option would disappear.

So would using virtual schooling to accelerate through the curriculum — an option lawmakers should encourage, because it ultimately means that students are moving out of the system faster, therefore, requiring less funding in the long run.

The proposed rules contradict the inherent cost-saving in virtual schooling. Even though 70 percent of students at FLVS still attend regular school, the virtual system reduces overhead costs overall, saving the state, according to a 2007 Florida Tax Watch study, about \$1,000 per student. Savings aside — because education shouldn't be defined by bottom lines — the proposal contradicts the idea of individual choice and academic variety that are hallmarks of quality learning.

In 1997, Florida was an innovator in virtual schooling. Today, almost every state provides a similar option, though Florida is still a leader. Legislators have a good thing going in Florida Virtual School by every benchmark — academic achievement, cost-savings, student satisfaction, freedom of choice.

This isn't the sort of program to sacrifice in the name of more cost-savings, but to invest in further.