

Education Next: State Legislators Consider Bill to Restrict Florida Virtual School Despite Growing Enrollment

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Legislation to limit course offerings and funding for the state-run Florida Virtual School (FLVS) is making its way through the state Senate despite the fact that the online education program continues to see dramatic increases in enrollment, especially among minority students, according to a new article published in the summer issue of Education Next and available online at www.EducationNext.org.

In the 2008–09 school year, approximately 84,000 students will complete 168,000 half-credit courses, more than a tenfold increase since 2002-03, points out Bill Tucker, managing director at Education Sector and author of the Education Next article. Between June 2007 and July 2008, African-American enrollments grew by 49 percent, Hispanic enrollments by 42 percent, and Native American enrollments by 41 percent.

The legislation under consideration would eliminate enrollment in any elective courses through FLVS as well as funding for any courses beyond a standard six periods. FLVS officials have warned that the provision could cut enrollment by as much as 24 percent.

"If this bill passes, students would no longer have an option to take electives, including some AP courses, beyond those offered at their traditional schools nor could they enroll in extra courses to catch up on graduation requirements," Tucker said.

FLVS is a supplemental education program that allows students to customize their learning. Students attend brick-and-mortar schools and take FLVS courses in addition to their traditional classes. The school employs more than 715 full-time and 29 adjunct teachers -- all Florida-certified and "highly qualified" under the federal No Child Left Behind law. Given the school's flexible pacing, there isn't a set class size, but full-time teachers are limited to 150 students each.

While the vast majority of FLVS students come from district schools (82 percent in 2007-08), the school is open to charter, private, and home-schooled students. Students choose an accelerated, traditional, or extended pace for a particular course, taking extra time if needed to review and receive additional guidance on lessons. Additionally, FLVS students don't have to wait for the semester to begin to start their learning; they can choose the month in which they would like to start.

With its focus on customized learning, online education in the United States is growing at a fast pace: According to the North American Council for Online Learning, enrollment in online courses in 2000 totaled 45,000. In 2007, enrollments reached 1 million, about 70 percent of which were for high school courses.

Popularity of online education courses is also growing. According to a 2008 national survey conducted by Education Next and the Harvard Kennedy School Program on Education Policy and Governance, more than two thirds of American parents say they would be willing to have their children take some of their high school courses over the Internet. And in most instances, the American public supports public funding for online courses that high school students take for credit. The breadth of their support, however, depends on the purpose of the online education.

A majority favor funding for high schools offering advanced courses for students online and for high schools that offer rural students a broader range of courses online. A plurality of 40 percent support funding online classes that help dropouts gain credits.

Read "Florida's Online Option" now available online at www.EducationNext.org :

Bill Tucker is managing director at Education Sector.

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