

Web classes save cash, study finds

Next year, all Florida school districts must begin offering virtual school to students.

By Christopher Curry

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Online learning has been around in Florida since at least 1997, when the Florida Virtual School began a statewide Internet-based high school.

Since then, the state-run program has gone K-12 and become the largest online school in the country, with an approximate enrollment of 90,000 students this year.

But even Florida hasn't seen anything like the cyber schooling that's coming next school year.

Under a requirement of the Florida Legislature, all 67 public school districts must begin offering a virtual school option to students.

Some may choose to set up a curriculum and run it themselves. But most districts, including Alachua County, plan to contract with Florida Virtual School or a private firm to run the online curriculum.

"We're all treading on new territory," said Pam Birtolo, chief learning officer of Florida Virtual School. "It will be interesting to see how this evolves."

But as with all things public education these days, virtual school raises money issues.

A Florida Tax Watch report from late 2007 and a recently released University of Florida study concluded that virtual school is a way for schools to save money in hard times.

Catherine Cavanaugh, a UF associate professor of education, said the savings come because online schools do not have to deal with building and transportation costs and have fewer employees. The UF study looked at 20 virtual schools in 14 states and determined the average per-pupil cost was \$4,300.

The Florida Legislature reduced per-pupil spending at the Florida Virtual School by 10 percent, but the cost for each full-time-equivalent student – \$5,600 – still exceeds the 14-state average.

But it's still below the per-pupil costs in Florida's traditional public schools – \$6,873 in the upcoming 2009–10 school year.

Birtolo said she believes the numbers show you get more "bang for the buck" with virtual school.

Still, the proliferation of virtual school programs might present some money concerns for local school districts.

Sandi Anusavice, the director of secondary curriculum for the Alachua County School District, said districts still will have the overhead costs of operating schools but will lose some student enrollment funding to virtual schools.

At this point in time, some school districts "might look at virtual schools as competition" for students and funding, Cavanaugh said.

She said she believed that working together, they could create a hybrid educational system with traditional classroom learning augmented by online work and "become partners to the benefit of students."

Ryan Couch, 18, a St. Francis High School senior, recently took through the Florida Virtual School an Algebra II class he needed to graduate. Besides the written curriculum and teaching webinars, teachers stay in touch with students via e-mail, Couch said.

"You have to be self-disciplined, and it's not for everyone," Couch said. "For the majority, it's very useful. Most people can get the hang of it."

Couch, whose father is a Florida Virtual School economics teacher, said he had noticed more students gravitating to the program, at least for some of their classes, and that the ranks of teachers continued to grow.

In fact, as some districts face teacher layoffs, Florida Virtual School continues to hire. Birtolo says there are approximately 800 full-time teachers now and expects there to be 1,000 on staff by July.

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