

Editorial: Legislature's cutting of Florida Virtual School penny-wise, pound-foolish

By Editorial Board

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Unfortunately, the nearsighted Florida Legislature still lacks a clear vision for online education. Lawmakers slashed \$21 million from the operating budget of the Florida Virtual School — the nation's largest virtual school, based in Orlando — during the 2009 session.

At a time when school districts throughout the state are cutting their budgets and laying off employees — in effect, eroding educational opportunities — the Legislature should be expanding, not reducing, students' access to virtual learning, which provides opportunities local districts often cannot.

At the very least, cost-conscious lawmakers should recognize the potential of virtual schooling to save money.

Researchers at the University of Florida's College of Education surveyed 20 virtual schools in 14 states, comparing the cost of full-time online learning with regular schools. Here's what they found:

The average yearly cost of online learning per full-time student was about \$4,300 compared with the national average of \$9,100 for a traditional public school.

Virtual education programs allow school districts to provide instruction before, during and after school. Because virtual schooling lengthens the school day — potentially to 24/7 — and makes use of existing facilities, it drastically reduces the need for new buildings.

“Online programs have little or no cost for instructional facilities, transportation and related staff,” said Catherine Kavanaugh, associate professor at UF’s College of Education. “The value of distance education also increases when considering the broad range of available online courses.”

Now is the time for the Florida Legislature to make substantive, annual investments in virtual education. Given the potential upside of these programs, the recent funding reduction for the Florida Virtual School is inexcusable.

“Policymakers and educators have proposed expanding learning time in elementary through high school grades as a way to improve students’ academic performance,” said Kavanaugh, “but online coursework hasn’t been on their radar.”

That needs to change — and soon.