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What we think: Help dropouts online

Consistency typically is regarded as virtuous. Yet, there is nothing remotely redeeming about Florida's consistently dismal high-school dropout rates.

The latest black eye comes at the hands of a bruising new national report that reveals the state trails only Georgia in percentage of dropouts.

It's indefensible that more than one in five 16-to-24-year-olds in Florida have departed high school without earning a diploma. It's indisputable that the state must ramp up a re-enrollment program to help thousands of reading, writing and arithmetic refugees claim those basic building blocks of success. In doing so, the state should leverage one of the few things it is doing right in education — online learning — as a primary plank.

An estimated 22 of 67 Florida school districts operated in 2007-08 what the state dubs "dropout retrieval" programs. Programs vary by district, but most focus on life and job skills, or are alternative schools that offer traditional classroom-lite. And while providing dropouts a second go at a sheepskin is a good thing, reprising the one-size-fits-all learning experience for which many previously weren't a good fit often again spells f-a-i-l-u-r-e.

The new study, "Left Behind in America: The Nation's Dropout Crisis," notes successful re-enrollment programs are small and offer a coziness with the instructor often lacking in traditional classrooms. You get both in virtual classrooms. For example, for the past three years, Volusia County has operated storefront virtual schools for students who dropped out for reasons including teen pregnancy or home woes, or because poverty compelled them to work.

The courses, delivered online, are enhanced with links to related text and video, incorporate self-assessments, and adhere to state and national standards. Students proceed at their own pace, meaning accelerated students aren't idling while other students struggle to get up to speed. Through individualized digital instruction, classes of 30 students become 30 classrooms of one.

As Clayton M. Christensen and Michael B. Horn wrote in a recent BusinessWeek article, "we each have different intelligence strengths and learning styles.... Standardization in schools therefore will not do the

trick. We need customization. Technology allows for the possibility of an escape from this standardization."

Yet, Florida Virtual School — a state-run public school whose stock-in-trade is providing customized learning with enhanced teacher interaction for students in schools or through their home PCs — doesn't currently serve dropouts. Why not create virtual alternate schools similar to its newly minted learning recovery center, which serves disenfranchised students who struggled in traditional learning milieus?

The study notes that "having at least a high-school diploma is a critical step for avoiding poverty." Given that minorities already trail whites in income, the gap increasingly is exacerbated by their disproportionate dropout rates. Nearly one in three Hispanics quit school, while one in five blacks do. The fallout is certain to grow as the percentage of minority-group members becomes a majority, as it has already in Orange County.

The costs are high — both to dropouts and the state. Dropouts earn \$400,000 less than high-school graduates over their working lifetimes. On the other hand, students who re-enroll and graduate can save taxpayers upward of \$250,000 through reduced social costs.

Through Florida Virtual School, the state could reclaim lives and realize those savings relatively cheaply. The University of Florida recently put the average online cost per student in 14 states at \$4,300 — compared to \$9,100 for traditional brick-and-mortar public schools.

The state long has reduced dropout rates by playing fast and loose with the numbers. It would be wise for the state to make a real dent in the dropout rate by booting up an online learning program to connect with the students it continues to fail.

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