

THE TAMPA TRIBUNE

A virtual about-face on school funds

By ADAM EMERSON

April 15, 2009

For five years, the fast-growing Florida Virtual School has enjoyed millions of dollars from a pot of money available to reduce the size of crowded classrooms.

Now that the Legislature must close a \$3 billion deficit, lawmakers say it's time to cut the flow of money.

The Virtual School, which draws 88,000 students to its online course offerings, received nearly \$14 million in class-size reduction money this year, an amount that has grown nearly 4,000 percent since it first received the funding in 2003.

Why, some legislators are asking, would a school with no classrooms need money to cut crowding?

"When you look at this logically, you have to wonder why it's getting class-size reduction funding," said Rep. Anitere Flores, R-Miami, who is chairwoman of the House Pre-K-12 Appropriations Committee.

The state recognizes the Orlando-based Virtual School as a public school district, making it eligible for money to hire more teachers to keep class sizes lower.

For the Virtual School, that money has become a critical part of its budget and represents about 15 percent of its \$93.3 million in state funding. In 2003, the school received a state allotment of \$8.6 million, with just 4 percent coming from class-size reduction money.

With an enrollment that surges 30 percent to 40 percent annually, it's the fastest-growing school system in Florida. It also has become an easy target for lawmakers scrounging for dollars, say school officials and researchers who study online learning.

House and Senate proposals call for seizing as much as 15 percent of the money directed to the school to soften the hit to traditional public education.

Lawmakers, however, need to consider how online learning relieves pressure on traditional schools, said Cathy Cavanaugh, an associate professor of educational technology at the University of Florida. Increased enrollment in the Virtual School reduces enrollment in crowded classrooms.

"This cut in funding would send the state backwards," Cavanaugh said.

Julie Young, the Virtual School's chief executive, said the class-size money has allowed the school to maintain its student-to-teacher ratio of 170-to-1. The ratio would increase to 200-to-1 if lawmakers took away the money, Young said.

"Class size has nothing to do with bricks and mortar," she said. "We were designed to be a solution to the class-size amendment."

WHAT'S NEXT

Lawmakers will be negotiating their education proposals this week, including whether to limit curriculum at the Virtual School or cut its class-size funding.

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