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Virtual school a real success — so expand it

Mike Thomas

COMMENTARY

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We expect Florida to be on the cutting edge of roller coasters and SEC offenses.

But Florida as a trend setter in 21st-century education?

It's our best-kept secret because nobody would believe it anyway.

We have a shadow school system called Florida Virtual School. It has no walls and no football team. It delivers its product online and anytime. No other state has anything like it.

Parents love it. Many middle-school and high-school kids thrive in it. They can take Chinese or Latin, computer science or Advanced Placement algebra — all without an additional bus ride.

But up in Tallahassee, state legislators are planning drastic cuts to this program. They are cutting the future and prolonging an education model developed during the Stone Age.

Kids go to school 180 days a year, whether they need that much time or more.

They sit in a math classroom from August to June, even if they could finish in February given the chance.

We have created a standardized education format to make school cheaper and more convenient for adults.

We send kids to Flintstone High to compete in a Jetsons world.

They absorb information one way in the classroom and another way in the real world. They get more cutting-edge technology on their Wii or iPhone than in a school.

This wasn't a problem when we had a noncompete clause from the rest of the world, when we could take for granted our superiority in production and innovation.

But those days are over. The rest of the world is passing us in the classroom. And letting so much of our brainpower fall through the cracks is no longer an option.

We need customized education that maximizes the potential of each kid at an affordable cost.

We need to expand Florida Virtual School because it is the bridge to getting us there.

The school is a state-run public school. It has more than 700 certified teachers on staff trained to work in digital classrooms. Students learn at their own pace. If they can finish Algebra I in six months, they can move on to Algebra II.

They can take a class at 9 a.m. or 5 p.m. They communicate constantly with their teachers through computers and telephones.

White kids have dominated enrollment, but now minority kids are catching on. From 2007 to 2008, black enrollment grew by 49 percent and Hispanic enrollment by 42 percent.

Most kids taking classes also attend traditional public schools but want to make up a credit or take a class not available in their schools. Some want to graduate early.

A report by Florida TaxWatch said students in a digital classroom produced better test scores for less money.

Florida Virtual School has been so successful that demand has skyrocketed, with annual growth rates of 30 percent since 2003. It began in 1997 with kids taking 77 courses. In the past school year, students completed 137,450 courses.

Unlike traditional schools, Florida Virtual School doesn't get money if a student drops out of a class or fails it. And so teachers who cannot teach are not tolerated.

It is a true performance-based school.

And the future is limitless.

Imagine your math genius in a digital class, sharing thoughts and notes with the best math students from Tampa and Miami, taught by a math teacher from the University of Florida who specializes in prodigies.

The virtual and concrete classrooms could be merged, with a teacher from Tallahassee and a teacher from Winter Park, both specialists in early-education reading, collaborating on how to help a problem student.

Class time would depend on the time it took to master the material. Graduation would be based on courses completed, not years spent in a building.

You would not need a vo-tech school to introduce a student to auto mechanics, or a magnet school to teach engineering.

You would have a school system that could adapt quickly to new technology.

Instead of cutting Florida Virtual School, we should be looking at how to expand it.

Mike Thomas can be reached at 407-420-5525

or mthomas@orlandosentinel.com.

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