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**Florida Virtual School Clarifications to Tampa Bay Times' Article Published Jan. 8, 2012**

**Orlando, FL (Jan. 18, 2012)** – The following are clarifications which needed to be made as it relates to Florida Virtual School (FLVS) in response to the Tampa Bay Times article “Virtually Unmeasured” that ran Jan. 8, 2012.

**Time Staff Writers state: “It doesn’t get a grade from the state, and it operates free of the rules and scrutiny that dog most public schools.”**

Florida Virtual School does operate by the guidelines and policies set forth by the State of Florida.

FLVS is fully accredited by two major agencies:

- The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACF), which is approved by the United States Department of Education
- The Commission on International and Trans-Regional Accreditation

In addition, FLVS core course curriculum has been approved by the NCAA and all courses meet or exceed Florida Sunshine State and National Standards.

**Time Staff Writers state: “An enterprise with a \$166.3 million budget ...”**

Florida Virtual School is not an enterprise. It is a public school district within the State of Florida. Compared to other school districts in the state, the FLVS budget is minimal. Consider that both Orange and Hillsborough school districts had an operational budget for the 2010-11 year of approximately \$1.4 billion (<https://www.ocps.net/fs/budget/Documents/12%20Budget%20Summary.pdf> and <http://www.sdhc.k12.fl.us/BusDiv/Budget/pdfs/budget1011.pdf>).

Since FLVS is a designated school district by the State of Florida, therefore not a for-profit organization, the student is at the center of every decision made.

**Time Staff Writers state: “Florida Virtual bills itself as a bargain, educating for \$2,100 less per pupil than traditional schools. And it makes millions. How many public schools can say that?”**

An independent study by Florida Tax Watch concluded that the “cost efficiency for Florida Virtual School satisfies the basic expectation of taxpayers that the State will fund effective educational programs. FLVS gets solid student achievement results at a reduced cost to the state. Florida Tax Watch has extensively reported on the need for the State to direct Florida’s limited resources to those educational programs that are proven to increase student achievement in a cost-conscious way. Florida policymakers are honored for doing so through their support of Florida Virtual School.”

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Again, FLVS is a not-for-profit, public school district of the State of Florida, providing a free, educational choice for Florida students.

**Time Staff Writers state: “Florida Virtual’s for-profit venture, the Global School, brought in \$23.4 million in revenue between 2006 and 2011, according to the school.”**

In Florida statute 1002.37, 2c the government mandated that Florida Virtual School create a global services division. All funds from this division are allocated back to the school for research and development of new courses.

1002.37, 2c states:

The board of trustees shall aggressively seek avenues to generate revenue to support its future endeavors, and shall enter into agreements with distance learning providers. The board of trustees may acquire, enjoy, use, and dispose of patents, copyrights, and trademarks and any licenses and other rights or interests thereunder or therein. Ownership of all such patents, copyrights, trademarks, licenses, and rights or interests thereunder or therein shall vest in the state, with the board of trustees having full right of use and full right to retain the revenues derived therefrom. Any funds realized from patents, copyrights, trademarks, or licenses shall be considered internal funds as provided in s. [1011.07](#). Such funds shall be used to support the school's marketing and research and development activities in order to improve courseware and services to its students.

**Time Staff Writers state: “The firmest figures Florida Virtual offers are results from the college-caliber Advanced Placement exam showing that over time, online students have done about as well or better than the state average in most subjects. Students, however, were not required to take the exam until 2010, making comparisons hard.”**

Florida Virtual School students were required to take the AP exam beginning in January 2009. The first full school year AP students were required to take the exam was 2009-2010.

FLVS provided the publication with AP exam result data for 2009-2010 and 2010-2011. Based on the reporters’ statement above, there is actually two years’ worth of data that indicate how well FLVS school students have done in comparison to the state average.

In the 2010-2011 school year, Florida Virtual School offered 15 Advanced Placement courses to all students interested in AP. The recently released 2011 AP Exam results revealed that FLVS students outperformed the state in overall averages by 12 percent and were equal to the global overall averages.

For more information on the 2011 AP Exam results visit

<http://www.flvs.net/areas/aboutus/NewsArchives/Press%20Releases/PR%202012%20FLVS%20AP%202011%20Results%20News%20Release.pdf>

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**Time Staff Writers state: “Last year, lawmakers approved expanding Florida Virtual, infusing it with \$119 million in tax revenues and requiring every student take one online class to graduate.”**

Every year, FLVS is funded by the State of Florida for half-credit course enrollments successfully completed by FLVS students. The \$119 million in tax revenues referenced in the above statement was not additional funding.

Lawmakers for the State of Florida have mandated that all incoming 9th grade students (Class of 2015 and thereafter) will be required to complete an online course before graduating.

Students have a right to choose from which school he/she would like to take their virtual course. FLVS is one of many options available for students.

**Time Staff Writers state: “Not bound by walls or a roof, students like O’Donnell are connecting with teachers nationwide, many working from their homes in other states. A foreign language instructor in Valencia, Calif. A health teacher in Fairmont, W.Va. A math instructor in Green Valley, Ariz. And so on.”**

All FLVS highly-qualified instructors possess a valid Florida teaching certificate. All are certified by the State of Florida for the subject matter they teach. FLVS employs more than 1,090 full-time instructors, of which only approximately 8 percent currently reside outside the State of Florida.

It is sometimes necessary to go out of state to find qualified instructors for specialized fields such as Chinese and Latin as the candidate pools for these positions are limited.

**Time Staff Writers state: “Virtual School teachers are on call from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., can work year-round and may handle about 150 students at one time. They are evaluated partly on the frequency of contact with their students.”**

FLVS instructors work one-to-one to personalize each student’s learning experience. The teacher to student ratio is 1:25 (25 students x 6 periods = 150 students total).

Students communicate with teachers regularly via phone, email, online chats, instant messaging, discussion forums, webcams, texting and social networking sites. Teachers also communicate monthly with parents to provide an update on what progress their child is making.

**Time Staff Writers state: “Between 2006-07 and 2010-11, according to the school, 81 percent of Florida Virtual’s courses were completed successfully. But that figure doesn’t reflect the thousands of students who enroll in courses but drop them within the school’s 28-day penalty-free period. According to Florida Virtual’s figures, 66 percent of students who enroll in a course don’t finish it. The rest stick with it, and 81 percent of those pass.”**

Florida Virtual School does offer students a grace period to withdraw from their course, just like a university does. Since, FLVS is funded only when a student successfully completes a course, FLVS receives zero funding for students that withdrawal within the 28-day grace period.

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**Time Staff Writers state: “Young, Florida Virtual’s CEO, calls the school’s educational model “mastery-based.” Controversial in some circles, it allows students to redo assignments and tests they find more challenging before moving to the next concept.”**

The mission of Florida Virtual School is to deliver a high quality, technology-based education that provides the skills and knowledge students need for success.

FLVS is here to educate students and make sure they have mastered the skills they need to move on to the next level. Through individualized instruction, teachers are able to provide feedback to students on skills they have not yet mastered. Prior to being able to retake an exam, students must receive remediation and assessment from their instructors.

**Time Staff Writers state: “As much as technology is improving or replacing school instruction, there are many classroom dynamics that are hard to duplicate, such as a student being inspired by their peers, said Cecilia Rouse, a Princeton University professor who specialized in the economics of education.”**

Student collaboration is an important resource for learning. FLVS courses incorporate a variety of collaboration activities as well as live sessions allowing students to interact. To enhance each student’s experiences, FLVS encourages students to get involved outside of the classroom in a number of ways.

FLVS provides:

- 13 online clubs, including honors societies and a virtual newsletter
- Face-to-face student Club Day
- Peer tutoring sessions
- Online events and fairs ranging from Shakespeare to world hunger, literacy and global economics
- The College Hub, a resource for students to meet with advisors and prepare for college in a collaborative environment

**The Time Staff Writers chose to only quote negative comments from students. Following are responses FLVS received from students and a parent as a result of the article.**

*From Celestial, FLVS student:*

My name is Celestial. I am 14 years old, a sophomore at Florida Virtual School, and a dual enrollment student. I have always been the type of student, who just gets what is being taught, and can master the tests without studying. I have a 5.0 GPA, which means I have never gotten anything lower than an A in my life.

The problem I had when I was in public school was that I would complete assignments, but would not be able to go ahead, because I had to wait for my classmates. When I joined Florida Virtual School two years ago, I finally had the ability that I could go at my pace, and complete as many assignments as I wanted to. This allowed me to complete all of my seventh grade and eight grade courses, in just two semesters, getting an A in every class I completed.

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When I read the Tampa Bay article about Florida Virtual School, I couldn't believe what I was reading. They were saying that Florida Virtual School makes millions, but doesn't have the data to back up their success. I believe that even though data and statistics are important to see how well a school is doing, that is not all that it is about.

The students are the most important part of any school, and I believe, if the students are happy with the way they are learning, then that shows that the school is successful. You see, the one thing that the article didn't show, was how the students liked Florida Virtual School. They were stuck on how the administrators didn't have proof in the form of data, but they didn't ask students about how Florida Virtual School has helped them.

Florida Virtual has helped me be able to go at my own pace, and complete courses at speeds that I wasn't able to with regular public school. Florida Virtual School has given me the option to do my work at any time of the day, and not be stuck in a classroom for eight hours for five days a week. Not only are the courses interactive, but the teachers are great, they want to see you go at your own pace, and they love to see you succeed. If you have troubles, the teachers are there to help work you through the issue.

Florida Virtual School is more than just a school with data; it is a school that has opened new doors into the realm of education.

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*From Angel, FLVS student:*

My name is Angel. I'm a 16-year-old Junior with Florida Virtual School. Growing up, from Pre K - 5<sup>th</sup> grade, I attended a normal brick and mortar school. As a young student, I was bullied multiple times by various students around the school. There were a lot of times that I would come home crying because of the mean things kids would say, or the few times they physically bullied me. Eventually, I told my mom and she spoke with the principal of my school. In the process of speaking up, and reporting the events that had occurred, I felt like I was the one being punished. Actions were taken to "prevent" future bullying, but it only became worse. The certain students who had been bullying me continued, even more vigorously than before.

Towards the end of my 5<sup>th</sup> grade year, my mom heard about a program called FLVA. She then sat me down and told me that there was this program that would allow me to go to school online, so that I could do my work from home. Immediately I jumped at the idea of not having to go to school with my bullies any more, and by the end of that grade I was transferred into Florida Virtual Academy. I completed my next three years of schooling through FLVA, and as I graduated to a high school level I was transferred into Florida Virtual School (FLVS). I'm now a dual enrollment with FLVS and my local community college. At the rate that I am going I will graduate high school in the Spring of 2013 with my Associates Degree.

Florida's online schooling programs have done wonders for me, personally. Not only did they take me out of the hateful environment I was in, but they have helped give me that extra push forward. From the positive learning environment to the teachers who are personally involved with each student, FLVS taught me how to enjoy school again.

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*From Macaila, FLVS student:*

My name is Macaila and I am a junior at Florida Virtual School. This is my third year, not consecutive, with FLVS and I still feel that it has helped me learn more, accelerate and successfully pass my classes. I first attended Florida Virtual in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade because I missed more than 35 days of school due to an illness. I admit that the first few months were a bit difficult because of the transition from public school to total and complete home schooling. As soon as my mother and I found what worked for us, the home schooling and Florida Virtual experience for us was fantastic. I was able to work at my own pace, whether that was staying behind to get extra help or accelerating into higher level classes. They tested me to see where my academic knowledge was so I could be placed in the appropriate classes. They found that I was ahead of my peers and was able to begin eighth grade level courses while being in only seventh grade. This gave me a leg up and the ability to move ahead faster than expected.

Eventually, after the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, my parents decided that I should return to public school. My immune system was rebuilt and I was okay to be back with my classmates. I began high school in a regular, public school like almost all ninth graders. Again, the transition from two very different schooling systems was difficult for me. In a classroom setting, I was unable to have a one-on-one conversation with my teacher if I was having difficulty. The lessons were cut short due to various questions and interruptions from other students. I wasn't able to get the full impact of the lessons my teachers were poorly attempting to teach. There were a few courses here and there that I found to be a great learning environment for me, but the overall experience was terrible. As a homeschooler with Florida Virtual, I was getting straight A's on every assignment and in every class. When I entered public school, my grades began to drop over the course of the school year. My teachers slowly stopped accommodating to each student's needs and my chances of getting that much needed one-on-one was decreasing. It became harder and harder for me to learn in a teacher-and-30-students environment. My needs weren't being met because of the overwhelming size of the classes.

I began the 10<sup>th</sup> grade in a public school and it wasn't an easier one for me. As a shy and reserved type person, I found it really hard to make friends. I realize that most adults who assess the success of a school and its students don't view the social scene as a contributing factor, but it really and truly is. I was constantly dealing with the daily ridicule from other teenage girls. At the beginning of the sixth grade I had become extremely depressed and found it hard to connect with others. As a new student in a public high school, it was even harder to find and make friends. My depression and various anxiety problems became worse and I found it even more difficult to concentrate and focus on my school work. I was constantly trying to cope with depression, learn in a different way, and work my way into the circles of people. Socialization is an important part of the learning and growing process and if a teenager can't find acceptance, it makes it difficult to even function normally. My closest friends, to this day, are also home schooled. We all found common ground on the inability to be accepted by those in our age group.

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*From Sevan, FLVS student:*

Hello, my name is Sevan. I am 12 years old. I have been going to Florida Virtual School for two years now. This school is a very organized school, where you get the one-on-one attention that you need. I am a student who gets distracted very easily, but when I am at home with in a quiet house it is very easy to concentrate instead of being in a class room with 20 to 30 other students.

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Florida virtual school gives me my way to get my work done in a timely fashion. Instead of other students who have to come home and do more school do to the distractions in class room. The minimum you have to get done is five assignments a week to keep pace. Its slogan is any time, any place, any path, any pace. You can go as slow or as fast as you want and the teachers make you look forward to coming to class in the morning. That's why I think that Florida Virtual School is great for me.

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*From Nancy, FLVS parent:*

I am the mother of three children currently attending Florida Virtual School. There are many benefits to the virtual classroom environment. It benefits my family because they can work at their own pace. My middle child is very gifted. In public school, she would get bored and instead of embracing her gift the teacher would complain about not having enough work for her. I feel that a gifted child should always be challenged and we should embrace their gift and push them to excel as far as we can without slowing them down. The Florida Virtual School provides this avenue.

We have also encountered many issues with normal public schools. One primary concern was during the months of November to about February and March, no new materials were being taught. Instead, during this time frame, the teachers were pounding into the children on how to master the FCATs. With this tactic, children will always be behind on what they should have been learning and never on a proper education pace.

I have friends who are teachers in the public school district and when I hear stories of the bullying and the out of control students that were in the system, I appreciate even more the opportunity that my children have to learn in a home school environment. Teachers can be just as much victims as the students. Being in a virtual environment allows the students to focus on their studies and teachers to focus on education instead of the few students in a classroom environment that disrupt the group.

I also found it extremely difficult going from a stay at home mom to a working mother. I also had to do quite a bit of traveling for work. I soon learned that my job had the flexibility to allow my children to travel with me. This was exciting for me since it would give them the adventures of learning about new places and seeing new things. We had some friends that were involved in virtual school but we did not want to sacrifice the social aspect of a classroom environment for the freedoms that virtual school offered. We quickly learned that there are many avenues for socialization within the Florida Virtual School through collaborative interactions on a daily basis to school functions as well as groups of parents and students in the Virtual School program that facilitate outings for the students as well.

FLVS.net was the best discovery to our family and has allowed my children to not only continue, but to excel in their education while having the freedoms of self-pacing, lack of distractions and still maintaining a healthy educational environment.

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