



FLVS as an Education Solution for Students with Special Healthcare Needs

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Florida Virtual School (FLVS) offers free, personalized education to Florida students. Its flexible scheduling, broad range of course offerings, and attentive, well-trained teachers alone make it an excellent option for many types of students, including those with special healthcare needs. Despite the affordances online schooling offers, however, the breadth of research that considers how students who face healthcare challenges can benefit from online schooling has much room to expand (Fernandez, Ferdig, Thompson, Schottke, and Black, 2016).

As educators strive to ensure online learning addresses individual student needs, developing a stronger understanding of children with special healthcare needs and the benefits FLVS can offer them is crucial.

Available Research

Studies of online learning reveal that online schools have begun to consider the opportunities that their instructional delivery methods may have for addressing the specific needs of students with disabilities (Cavanaugh, Wayer, Repetto, & Spittler, 2013), which may include students with special healthcare needs. That said, children with special healthcare needs may qualify for the hospital homebound (H/H) designation in Florida. This means, in addition to being at increased risk for chronic physical, developmental, behavioral, or emotional conditions and requiring health and related services that go beyond

general requirements for children (McPherson et al., 1998), H/H students “[have] a medically diagnosed physical or psychiatric condition which is acute or catastrophic in nature, or a chronic illness, or a repeated intermittent illness due to a persisting medical problem and that confines the student to home or hospital, and restricts activities for an extended period of time” (Exceptional Student Education Eligibility for Students Who Are Homebound or Hospitalized §§ 6A-6.03020, 2006). Students facing circumstances that affect their wellbeing face the risk of withdrawing from school completely, and studies have found that students who could potentially drop out of school increasingly look to online school as another option (Cavanaugh, Repetto, & Wayer, 2011).

Some of the situations students with special healthcare needs may face can become problematic for their educational and personal wellbeing. Studies have shown that their frequent absenteeism from brick-and-mortar school, for example, results in missed opportunities for cognitive and psychosocial development and challenges with reentering school (Boonen & Petry, 2012). Such students may also experience limited social interaction (Petit & Patterson, 2014); additionally, parents of children with special healthcare needs may pose challenges for educators and contribute to absenteeism due to feeling overprotective of their children’s wellbeing (Emerson, Distelberg, Morrell, Williams-Read, &

Montgomery, 2016). FLVS seeks to serve students from all walks of life, and its flexibility and personalization may offer a viable option for students who would otherwise need hospital homebound instruction.

FLVS: A Valuable Choice

Florida Virtual School has the potential to provide the community, differentiation, and personalization that may be absent from H/H services (Repetto, Cavanaugh, & Wayer, 2010). Not only is online education “an equivalent and novel means with which to maintain educational progress” (Thompson, Ferdig, & Black, 2012), it can help students overcome or avoid educational and social barriers through “effective interdisciplinary and community coordination, development of policies, teacher support, inclusion of families, and technology” (Shaw, Clyde, & Sarrasin, 2014, p. 1). Further, personalization is a crucial element of online education that has been developed with the student at its center (flvs.net). Driven by research on the types of interventions that help alleviate the negative impacts chronic healthcare conditions can have on students’ school performance, mental health, and re-entry (Tollitt, Sawyer, & Barnett, 2015), FLVS may serve as a permanent intervention that comes alongside students in ways other interventions have fallen short.

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