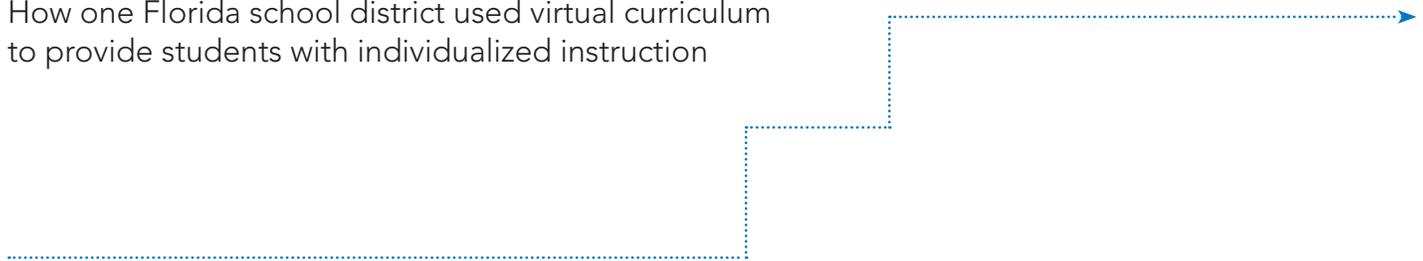


# Serving Gifted Students with Virtual Education in Elementary School

How one Florida school district used virtual curriculum to provide students with individualized instruction



# Introduction

A gifted learner is defined as “one who has superior intellectual development and is capable of high performance,” and in the state of Florida, based on the Department of Education’s Survey 2 results taken in October 2011, over 145,000 students were recognized and funded under the Exceptional Student Education rules as gifted and talented. Once students are identified as gifted and talented, a school district in the state of Florida is required to create an individualized Educational Plan (EP) for each student. These EPs establish goals for students and provide information to teachers to help drive the differentiated curriculum necessary to meet their needs.

## Current issues facing school districts providing individualized instruction for gifted students

Under the state rule for Florida, Educational Plans (EPs) are required for any student identified as gifted. This means that school districts must work alongside parents to create individualized plans of action for exceptional students. EPs document the current level of performance which includes “the student’s strengths and interests, the student’s needs beyond the general curriculum, results of the student’s performance on state and district assessments, and evaluation results” (FLDOE, 6A-6.030191 Development of Educational Plans for Exceptional Students Who Are Gifted). EPs also provide statements on goals, specially-designed instruction, and a plan detailing how the student will progress towards these goals.

With all that is involved in documenting individualized instruction for a student, school districts are under great stress in guaranteeing how they will achieve the goals of the EPs for each student. According to information released in April 2010, school districts across the state have several options to provide gifted instruction for students. The state has adopted several models from which school districts in Florida may choose:

- Full-time self-contained class
- Resource room
- Gifted content course
- General education class (includes virtual)
- Cluster grouping in general education
- Gifted (magnet) center
- Consultation
- General education Advanced Placement\*, International Baccalaureate, Dual Enrollment, Advanced International Certificate of Education

In 2010, more Florida school districts chose the full-time self-contained class and the resource room models for gifted students in grades 3-5 (*Florida’s Plan for K-12 Gifted Education*).

One of the largest challenges for districts in providing differentiated instruction for gifted students is funding. The question that surely arises during budget discussions is “how can we fund individualized instruction for one group of students and still meet the needs of other students?” In Collier County, Florida, the district administration began thinking of new ways to provide the needed curriculum for students and came up with the pilot to use a virtual course offered to fifth graders in the gifted program. The program was very inexpensive for each school and allowed the district to test blending virtual learning with the classroom.

# Florida Virtual School Middle School/Junior High Critical Thinking Skills course provides individualized instruction for students

During the 2010-2011 school year, the school district of Collier County piloted a program with four elementary schools which allowed 120 gifted and non-gifted fifth graders to enroll in a Florida Virtual School® (FLVS®) middle school course. The pilot was designed to provide “rigorous differentiated curriculum to students in blended gifted and non-gifted classrooms,” meet the EP goals for developing critical thinking skills, and provide the exposure of technology and online curriculum to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learners (Pickard).

**The pilot was designed to provide “rigorous differentiated curriculum to students in blended gifted and non-gifted classrooms.”**

Collier County’s gifted program in the elementary schools uses the cluster model which places gifted students and non-gifted students with a gifted-endorsed classroom teacher. The goal of the district is for the non-gifted students in the cluster to be high achieving students. However, a challenge in mixing various ability levels was making sure that gifted students were provided with differentiated curriculum. One way for Collier County to provide this curriculum, while still maintaining the cluster model, was to allow students in these blended classrooms to take an online course with Florida Virtual School. Students logged into the online course when they had demonstrated mastery of regular curriculum or had completed their classroom assignments. The students involved in the pilot also met with the district Gifted Specialists who were teaching the course for face-to-face workshops several times throughout the duration of the course. These students now had access to curriculum that would provide differentiated instruction and remove some of the burden from teachers under pressure to plan for this instruction.

Once the decision was made to use the Florida Virtual School M/J Critical Thinking Skills, Problem Solving and Learning Strategies course, the district then selected four elementary schools and established criteria for which students would be allowed to take the online course. A total of 120 fifth graders were selected for this pilot.

## **MJ Critical Thinking, Problem Solving and Learning Strategies Course description:**

This course is developed using four learning paths that students can complete in the order of their choice. Paths are devoted to the study of writing, reading, learning, and thinking. Each learning path is four weeks in length, with the exception of one (*Reader*), which is three weeks in length. A combination of traditional and authentic assessments is used to measure student achievement. Content is based on Quantum Learning material found in *The Quantum Upgrade Series*. Additional original content addresses gaps between the Quantum material and other content needed to completely assess the state standards for the course.

At the completion of the pilot study, the district’s Gifted Curriculum Specialist reported that these students were using “many [thinking] tools that they had never used before taking the MJ Critical Thinking Skills course” (Pickard) like Mind-mapping for planning writing projects. Students also learned new strategies for time management and goal setting. The students had the opportunity to learn about themselves as learners with lessons on left brain/right brain research. Teachers often witnessed students applying these learned skills to other coursework, practicing good study habits, and utilizing graphic organizers.

The course introduces skills that students could apply to their everyday lives as well as their academic lives. For one assessment activity, students used a Life List they created to “determine how their values match[ed] their goals. They then edit[ed] goals on the Life List as necessary to ensure their values match[ed] their actions and behaviors” (Perkins and Williams). Students also applied what they learned about their own study habits to evaluate their study needs and to create a study schedule. One student from the study confirmed how this particular lesson in the course helped him to “stay organized” and went on further to say that the “online school has helped [him] to have a positive attitude that will be needed in the upcoming year of middle school” (Pickard).

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Because of the successful outcome from this pilot study, when the Digital Learning Act was passed in July 2011 allowing 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders who met certain academic qualification to take a Florida Virtual School course for acceleration, Collier County chose this same course to be the first a student could take for the 2011-2012 school year. Since initially piloting this course with students, Collier County attempted to compare the FCAT scores of students who participated in this study. However, the FCAT has been revised and improved to better measure whether students are meeting new standards. This new test is called FCAT 2.0. The year of 2012 is the first year that students have received FCAT 2.0 scores based on the more demanding standards. In some cases, this means that the student’s scores from 2011 appear to have gone down. The grading used for FCAT 2.0 is much more rigorous than what was used previously. Due to this fact, it is not possible to accurately measure gains or losses by comparing 2011 FCAT scale scores to 2012 FCAT scale scores.

## Quotes from students

**“I will use all the different tools that we have learned. For example, I will probably use the POW method along with the mind map, cluster, and fastwrite. So, to sum it all up I will be using the basic magic and the ultimate prevailing perfection of writing that I have learned in the course so far.”**

**“I love writing! I really want to become a writer when I grow up and I also take an interest in it. I love writing stories and I just started a series! I’m having so much fun on the writer path!”**

**“This course has really helped me to multi-task. Also, I learned how to talk to other people with respect and re-phrase my questions and conversation in different ways. Now, I have learned how to think things through and make reasonable decisions.”**

# For More Information about Florida Virtual School

Florida Virtual School (FLVS) is an established leader in developing and providing virtual Kindergarten through Grade 12 education solutions to students nationwide. **A nationally recognized e-Learning model**, FLVS, founded in 1997, was the country's first state-wide Internet-based public high school. In 2000, the Florida Legislature established FLVS as an independent educational entity with a gubernatorial appointed board. FLVS is the only public school with funding tied directly to student performance. Access the school at [www.FLVS.net](http://www.FLVS.net).



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