

Florida Virtual School Paves the Way in Distance Education

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HISTORY AND MISSION OF FLORIDA VIRTUAL SCHOOL

Florida Virtual School (FLVS) has experienced remarkable success since it began in 1997 with only 77 students. The most recent student enrollment data projected FLVS to enroll 100,000 full and part-time students for the 2007-2008 school year. This remarkable growth serves as a model for other states wishing to duplicate one of the nation's largest virtual high schools (Johnson, 2007).



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In 1997, two Florida counties, Orange and Alachua, were awarded the "Break the Mold" grant that approved funds for innovative teaching and online learning. This progressive initiative helped pave the way for Florida to become the first statewide Internet-based public high school. Florida Virtual Schools pulls its student population from a variety of sources, with 75% from public school, 20% home school, and 5% private school (Executive Summary, 2008). Today, FLVS not only serves all 67 Florida districts but also students, schools, and districts around the nation. Some examples of nationwide districts involved include Monmouth Ocean Educational Services Commission, Appleton Area School District and Kiel School District, Wisconsin; West Virginia Department of Education, and the Alabama Department of Education (FLVS Facts, 2008).

Florida Virtual School is built upon the notion of providing personalized instruction for students. Emphasis is placed on offering courses that are interesting for the student and can be completed at an individual pace. This is evident through the mission statement of FLVS that has a "commitment is to deliver a high quality, technology-based education that provides the skills and knowledge students need for success in the 21st century" (What We Provide for Students, 2008). To accomplish the mission, FLVS is structured around the idea that every student is unique and that

← Au: reference indicates 2006. Which is correct?

learning must be flexible, engaging, and dynamic. This dynamic instruction will occur in an integrated learning environment with parents, students, community members, and schools all sharing responsibility for learning. This responsibility can only occur when students are given choice in their learning along with knowing how to present and use what they learn. When students can present and use what they learn it demonstrates the success and challenges that must be examined to improve the implementation of future instruction and curriculum design (What We Provide Students, 2008).

FACULTY

Florida Virtual School employs 400 full time and 176 adjunct teachers who live in the state of Florida and throughout the nation. These FLVS teachers are certified in the subject they teach and possess a valid Florida teaching certificate (FLVS Facts, 2008). To help keep teachers innovative, FLVS rewards teacher for their achievements in the classroom. Per-student bonuses are awarded to teachers who exceed minimum set requirements for student performance. Meeting these requirements is aided by the professional development and support programs offered by the school (Johnson, 2007).

New teachers receive “just in time” (p. 3) mentoring and lasts for the duration of their first year. This mentoring is provided by experienced FLVS teachers. Instructional supervisors oversee both new and veteran teachers and are present to monitor both teacher and student progress. These supervisors can view all aspects of a course from when the last set of papers were graded or the last time a phone call home was made (Johnson, 2007). The mentoring, teacher specific data feedback, and ongoing training has been welcomed by the teachers at FLVS. A turnover rate of less than 3% demonstrates that teachers are willing to accept an annual contract

while giving up tenure for performance based evaluation (Johnson, 2007). Besides providing high quality instruction, FLVS also demonstrates leadership through the many research opportunities they offer.

The dedication to future research demonstrates the progressive stance of FLVS. Florida Virtual School has many areas of research interest. Primary areas of research include the use of multimedia like Flash, Podcasts, Wikis, or blogs into online courses. The importance of diagnostic assessments to support online and communication systems also holds possibility for FLVS. In terms of student success, FLVS is interested in ways of assessing student achievement through the connections between online learning and college success or the success in a home school environment. Research areas of interest for professional development involve examination of teacher training and support or finding techniques that work best with middle school students (Research Opportunities with FLVS, 2008). With the many areas of research, it is evident that FLVS is determined to provide research based quality instruction to all students.

← Au: not included in references.

GED PREP AND ADULT EDUCATION

Besides offering middle school and high school students’ online learning opportunities, FLVS also offers GED and adult education courses. These courses are designed to be appealing to adult students who wish to work at their own pace but are unable to utilize traditional GED classes. The self-paced instruction does provide instructor interaction with lessons in writing, literature, math, science, and social studies.

FLORIDA VIRTUAL SCHOOL AWARDS AND RECOGNITION

As a leader in online instruction, FLVS has received numerous awards at the state, nation, and international levels. Most recently, FLVS received the EdNet Pioneer

award. This award is given to those who move the business of education forward while addressing the challenges faced by schools who prepare students for the twenty-first century workforce. This was not the first EdNet award, as FLVS received the 2006 EdNet Impact award. FLVS was also a 2004 finalist in the EdNet Hero award.

Florida Virtual School was also received recognition by winning the 21st Century Best Practices Award from the United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA) in 2005. This award is the “highest award USDLA bestows upon distance education organizations, recognizes distance learning organizations for the innovation and excellence” (Current Events, 2008, p. 3). The USDLA has also recognized FLVS in 2003, with Executive Director Julie Young being inducted into the USDLA Hall of Fame along with other organizational awards recognizing excellence in programming and teaching (FLVS Awards, 2008).

Outside of the educational spectrum, FLVS has been recognized by *BusinessWeek* magazine as one of the web Smart 50 top organizations. FLVS shared this honor as “cutting edge” with companies such as Wal-Mart, Dell, P&G, and Cisco (FLVS Awards, 2008).

COURSE OFFERINGS AND DELIVERY OF INSTRUCTION

Florida Virtual School courses are delivered over the Internet through a variety of Web-based and technology-based delivery formats. Access to traditional resources is also available and aid in the learning process. Communication between students, parents, and teachers occurs on a regular basis through e-mail, telephone, online chats, discussion forums, and instant messaging (FLVS Facts, 2008). The varied online format allows for the successful delivery of over 90 courses, from GED to honors and Advanced Placement (AP)

level courses. Courses range in topic from business technology, health/physical education, English, art, social studies, math, science, to drivers education (Course Offerings, 2008).

All FLVS courses are transferrable and are accepted for credit. FLVS is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), and all courses are NCAA approved (FLVS Facts, 2008). With accreditation and many course offerings, FLVS also must have a firm student placement policy. The priorities established by FLVS and the state of Florida include first preference for placing students who attend low performing public school, rural public school, a high minority school, or students who wish to graduate with only one semester remaining and need only one course. Prerequisites also exist for certain classes based on age or grade levels (Placement Priority Policy, 2008).

OVERVIEW OF LEADERSHIP

Providing an excellent instructional model and recruiting and retaining high quality staff reflects the leadership structure of FLVS. President and Chief Executive Officer Julie Young has led the organization since 1997. Her visionary leadership has guided FLVS into becoming one of the largest providers of Internet-based courseware in the world. Her role has led to many awards and recognition including induction into the USDLA Hall of Fame in 2003. With a faculty of 600, along with the accompanying support personnel, FLVS continues to provide the positive future direction and leadership for online learning (FLVS Staff Profile, 2008).

Young has been successful by creating influential policy instead of being bound by the typical bureaucratic school system structure. The driving force has become meeting the demands and needs of students along with following state standards. For instance, FLVS did something most districts do not; it got feedback from students.

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Au: not included in references.

This feedback was valuable in restructuring of programs that had a student completion rate of 50% to around 80% (Johnson, 2007). The spotlight has been on FLVS, and under the leadership of Young the school has been able to exceed expectations. This can only be accomplished through teamwork at all levels.

FLVS's Chief Learning Officer is Pam Birtolo, who helps to ensure that e-learning continues to provide individualized content through more in depth interactions (Johnson, 2007). Mark Maywell is chief governmental relations officer, Linda Peters is chief human resources officer, George Latimer is chief financial officer, Henry Boekhoff is chief financial advisor, Jay Smith is chief development officer, and Andy Ross is vice president-global services (FLVS Administrators, 2008).

This strong leadership team has adopted a business management model and has worked closely with outside business. Through a strong partnership with IBM, FLVS has been able to take a leadership role and contribute to industry while benefiting from the business expertise provided by IBM. This business expertise is critical for a field dominated by educators. The close partnership has allowed FLVS to become a key player in the e-learning market (Johnson, 2007).

Besides business partnerships, working with government funding and legislation can be seen as a barrier to the process. Fortunately, Young and her staff have been able to navigate successfully through the process. One of the biggest challenges Young has faced deals with the benefits of online learning and conflict that exists with school districts and their perceived levels of local control. To overcome this hurdle, Young and the FLVS leadership team were able to become the first school to be funded strictly based on student performance. Working closely with state legislation has allowed FLVS to guarantee free access to all students in Florida, which has

become a vital part of the school's success (Johnson, 2007).

STUDENT CLUBS

Besides offering high quality, rigorous educational programs such as Advanced Placement, FLVS also encourages students to become active in a variety of student clubs. The FLVS International Club offers students the ability to broaden their global horizons. The club is designed to promote an understanding of diverse cultures, languages, and heritages, and offers opportunity for international field trips.

On a "local" scale, the Newspaper Club takes advantage of technology and provides students with the chance to take part in a high school newspaper. One thing the newspaper may report on is an activity of the Science Club. The Science Club promotes many activities and projects from a Virtual Science fair to various conservation activities.

The History Club provides students with access to historical discussion groups, authors, and books, while the Junior Classical Language Club, otherwise known as the Latin Club, provides opportunity for students to compete against others around the state.

The Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) is available for business students who are interested in careers in business leadership. FBLA offers students many opportunities to travel, compete, get scholarships, and serve the community.

At the Spanish National Honor Society, club members promote understanding of Latino and Hispanic interests. The National English Honor Society provides a service project to upperclassmen to help sophomore English FLVS students. With the variety of student activities, FLVS provides levels of involvement that binds students together which is helpful in providing a positive learning experience (Student Clubs, 2008).

FLORIDA VIRTUAL GLOBAL SCHOOL

Besides offering quality instructional programs to students of Florida and the nation, Florida Virtual School Global Services has also been established to meet demands in the worldwide market. The Global School provides high quality instructors across the United States who are certified in the subjects they teach. The school provides opportunities such as expanded curriculum choices, choices for homebound students, flexibility in scheduling, and an alternative to make up credit (Florida Virtual School Services, 2008). These services are provided to students through several means.

First, high quality communication keeps progress up to date between parents, teachers, and students. The progress in a course is based on high quality instructional management. With the focus on student achievement, standards and expectations are set high. Support is provided to both students and teachers to ensure this occurs. Besides academics, the Global School provides opportunity for extra-curricular activities. Examples include the Science Club, FBLA, Newspaper Club, or various activities such as College Hub Webinar to the World Hunger Forum. These activities help to foster student interaction along with peer tutoring or involvement in the Socratic Café.

CONCLUSION

With such diverse offerings, one is left to wonder if the word "virtual" is the best fit to describe this dynamic online high school. FLVS has become an established part of the educational system in the state of Florida. The school has shown its potential and that has been harnessed under the strong leadership of Julie Young. Young is not alone in this quest. FLVS succeeds because it is based upon sound research

with instruction carried out by quality innovative teachers who are able to connect with their students effectively at a distance.

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