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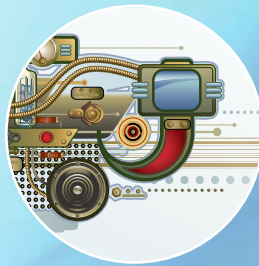
Virtual Success

Transforming Education Through Online Learning

Imagine how thrilled Florida Virtual School (FLVS) chemistry teacher Amanda Kitson was when Martin, one of her students, left the following voicemail message:

I'm just calling to say shame on you and everyone at FLVS because you guys have destroyed me. You have turned me into a monster. . .because this is probably the first time I've ever actually spent time actually wanting to go ahead on my work because I was into it. And then I realized it was, like, 7:30 p.m., and I'm like, wow, I've been in school all day. Shame on you guys because you messed up my head.

How many times do educators receive such an affirmation from a teenage student who is so inspired to learn?



FLVS WAS A PIONEER IN VIRTUAL LEARNING

Florida Virtual School (FLVS) was the first statewide Internet-based public high school in the United States when it was founded in 1997. Today, FLVS serves nearly 64,000 middle and high school students.

The school draws students from every region of Florida as well as many from out of state and around the world. It offers 90 courses in core subjects, world languages, electives, and honors classes. Students also can choose from more than 10 Advanced Placement courses.

The school offers activities such as history club, international club, Junior Classical League Club, Future Business Leaders of America, National English Honor Society, newspaper club, and science club.

FLVS employs more than 530 subject-certified teachers; 82 are national board certified.

In 2000, the Florida Legislature established FLVS as an independent educational entity with a gubernatorial-appointed board. FLVS is the only public school in the United States where funding is directly tied to student performance. The program is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

FLVS courseware is used in more than 30 states across the United States. In 2008, the Pioneer Institute presented FLVS with the Better Government Award for creating equitable access to instructional excellence for students.

At FLVS, which became the first statewide public virtual school in the United States in 1997, we have realized that success in education is all about understanding who the customer is and finding the sweet spot between customers' wants and needs. For more than 10 years, FLVS has given students a unique learning experience. The days of teaching all students to follow along on the same page in the textbook are over. Funneling all students into a one-size-fits-all education is no longer acceptable.

Students want to learn science and math through real-world problem solving, by visiting places where science is in action, by talking to professionals in those fields, and by using technology as the vehicle. Whether they realize it or not, they are developing a deeper understanding of the core academic subjects.

At FLVS we understand that students are drawn to the communication tools they use daily to interact with their peers—cell phones, e-mail, and text messaging. We are effectively using these same tools to inspire students to reach for higher levels of academic achievement, and we are seeing true school reform.

We have reinvented the educational delivery system with the end user—students—in mind, using tools, content, and teaching strategies that help students develop critical-thinking skills, build global awareness, and gain 21st-century skills.

Virtual Schools Offer Alternative

Ten years ago, nearly all students attended secondary school during the daytime, with time-structured periods, in often crowded brick-and-mortar buildings. During the last decade, however, new schools appeared. These schools have no set schedules and no bells indicating when it's time to leave the classroom. In fact, there are no classrooms. Teachers work a new shift—24/7/365—to meet the needs

We must **commit ourselves** to make education as engaging, interactive, and participatory as the immersive video games students spend hours mastering.



vidualized attention from teachers. Deliberately woven throughout the virtual learning environment are 21st-century skills—critical thinking, collaborative communication, and global awareness.

Teachers coach our students, either one on one or in small group sessions, and permit them to resubmit work until they have perfected it—much like a real-world situation where employees continue to refine their work product until it is polished.

Last year, FLVS economics teacher Patty Sibson organized the Global Economic Summit, a cross-curriculum exploration of global issues that brought together hundreds of participants from around the world to engage in dialogue and creative problem solving.

Virtual schools provide students with opportunities to embrace leadership roles and to demonstrate social responsibility and enhanced social skills. At FLVS, students participate

of students. These are virtual schools where students experience any-time, any-place, any-path, any-pace learning.

These virtual schools, including FLVS, provide students with a high-quality, technology-rich educational experience to gain the knowledge and skills for success in the 21st century.

The curriculum is delivered via the Internet, and teachers employ innovative instructional practices to offer an individualized learning experience for students.

The result: Students gain time, more learning-pace flexibility, more engaging course materials, and more indi-

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FLVS students consistently earned higher grades, received better state assessment scores, and achieved higher marks on AP exams than students in traditional schools.

in a range of student activities from online literacy fairs to awareness forums on topics such as hunger and AIDS. They can join clubs that focus on history, science, international affairs, and other topics.

Virtual learning environments give students opportunities to work together in small groups to develop problem-solving, communication, and creative collaboration skills.

Last year, the staff of the school's online newspaper, *News in a Click*, worked as editors for PEARL World Youth News, an international Web-based student news service sponsored by iEARN and the Daniel Pearl Foundation. The students collaborated with other students around the world as they created and edited the news service using Web conference rooms.

New Skills to Learn

Some critics worry that focusing on 21st-century skills is impractical when so many of our students cannot read or do math at their grade level. However, building these skills means strengthening the foundation of

competencies in core subjects (English, mathematics, science, social studies, and foreign language) while also building an understanding of issues critical to community and workplace success—global awareness; business, financial, and civic literacy; and health and wellness.

Online learning can give students opportunities to demonstrate mastery of academic concepts while using today's tools and resources. In addition, teachers incorporate life skills into their pedagogy.

Traditional Schools Get Low Marks

In a national poll by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 80% of the U.S. registered voters who were polled said the public education system is not preparing young people to compete in the global market.

Another survey conducted by Project Tomorrow, a California-based education advocacy group, reached a similar finding. The group's 2006 Speak Up Survey found that just 23% of students polled said they believed their school was doing a good job preparing them for future jobs.

These results indicate that something needs to change. We must commit ourselves to make education as engaging, interactive, and participatory as the immersive video games students spend hours mastering.

In education, whether virtual or face to face, the authenticity of the interaction between a student and a teacher matters more than anything.

FLVS Students Outperform Peers

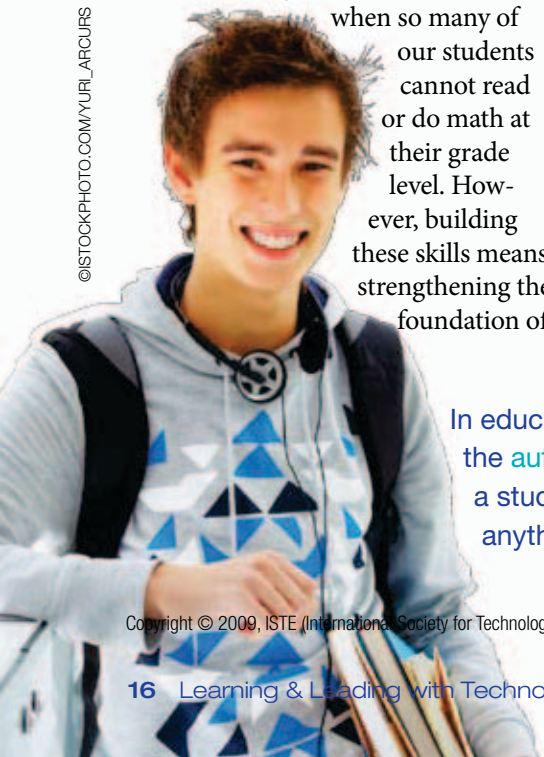
In some communities, change is starting to take hold. The advent of the Internet and the fast-growing pace of virtual schooling have presented students with educational options. Today, 44 states have either significant supplemental or full-time online learning programs, according to a 2007 study *Keeping Pace with Online Learning, A Review of State-Level Policy and Practices* by Evergreen Consulting.

A 2007 report by Florida TaxWatch found that students who were enrolled in online courses outperformed their peers in traditional schools. The report noted that FLVS students consistently earned higher grades, received better state assessment scores, and achieved higher marks on Advanced Placement exams than students in traditional schools.

Why do our students fare better than kids in traditional schools? Because we have spent the past decade getting to know and understand our customers, and we have deliberately structured their learning environment to take advantage of things they value the most. Being virtual means that we can allow students to work when it suits their schedules.

But most important is the one-on-one student-teacher engagement that we provide. According to FLVS external survey data of our parents and students, 95% of all students say that their teacher shows a special interest in them. In education, whether virtual or face to face, the authenticity of the interaction between a student and a teacher matters more than anything. It is commendable that FLVS has managed to garner such high marks for caring, even in a virtual environment.

When asked to comment on the interaction she has with her students, FLVS language arts teacher Cindy Knoblauch said:



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My students quickly learn that I am available to them whenever the need arises. My attention is focused on their questions, and I value and validate the interaction. Our communication is authentic, timely, and focused on an immediate need or concern. When working with a group of students in a collaborative activity, social interaction occurs between the students, but it is the task at hand that is most important to them, and most assuredly, they will keep me focused on the objective and engage me in discussion that helps achieve their goal.

As educators, if we want to create a dynamic learning environment to serve future students, we must listen to what students are saying about what excites and motivates them.

We must start by changing our approach to how we deliver education and instruction. We must nurture students and give them opportunities to explore, learn, and create. Education must offer students a chance to achieve their dreams.

Resources

- 2006 Speak Up Survey. Project Tomorrow. www.netday.org/speakup/speakup_2006.htm.
- A *Comprehensive Assessment of Florida Virtual School* (October 2007). Florida TaxWatch Center for Educational Performance and Accountability. www.floridataxwatch.org/resources/pdf/110507FinalReportFLVS.pdf.
- Keeping Pace with Online Learning, A Review of State-Level Policy and Practices* (2007). Evergreen Consulting Associates. www.inacol.org/resources/docs/KeepingPace07-color.pdf.
- Survey on 21st-century skills (October 2007). Public Opinion Strategies and Peter D. Hart Research Associates. www.21stcenturyskills.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=369&Itemid=64.

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Julie Young, president and CEO of Florida Virtual School, helped launch the online school. She is a former classroom teacher and has served as an administrator and leading e-learning expert and advocate.



Pam Birtolo, chief learning officer of FLVS, was previously a regional coordinator for the school. She was the founding principal of the Sagemont Virtual School and has taught in high schools and colleges.



Raven McElman is a learning specialist supporting leadership development programs and Web-based educational technology initiatives. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania.

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