Florida Virtual School

Blended Learning

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Introduction

Florida Virtual School (FLVS) is synonymous with distance learning in the state of Florida. It is the first completely online public high school in the state and is widely recognized as the most efficacious online school in the United States. In 1996 in Orange County, Florida a "web school" was set up as a pilot. Later in 1996 the Florida Department of Education awarded a $200,000 grant to Alachua County in Gainesville, Florida and Orange County in Orlando, Florida. After the two counties partnered, the program officially began as Florida High School with 77 students, in 1997. The online high school began with six courses and seven staff members. All courses abide by current state standards and the school is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools/AdvancEd.

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Florida Virtual School Today

FLVS is comprised of five schools. Their part-time schools consist of Florida Virtual School Part Time K–5, Florida Virtual School Part Time 6–8 and Florida Virtual School Part Time 9–12. All students in charter, public, and private schools in all 67 Florida districts in Grades K–12 can participate. The part-time schools enroll students who take courses as a supplement to their courses in a traditional school. The enrollment is a on a rolling basis and the school runs year round (FLVS, 2013b).

The other two schools reside under the Florida Virtual School Full Time umbrella. These schools are Florida Virtual School Full Time K–8 and Florida Virtual School Full Time 9–12. Students who enroll in FLVS full time make FLVS their school of record. These schools have the calendar of a traditional school and award diplomas. In addition, FLVS offers clubs, activities, and scholarships (FLVS, 2013b). FLVS Global was created in 2000 to serve international students (FLVS Global, 2014). In the 2002–2003 school year the online high school began an in-state franchise program. As of the 2012–2013 school year, 57 districts in Florida were part of the FLVS franchise program. Through this program districts are trained in FLVS policies and

procedures and operate as a component of FLVS (FLVS, 2013b).

In the 2012–2013 school year FLVS offered more than 120 courses across all grade levels and varying academic levels inclusive of regular, honors, and Advanced Placement level courses. In the same school year, part-time FLVS students finished 410,962 half-credit courses and FLVS full-time students finished 51,409 half credits. By the end of the 2012–2013 school year FLVS had 1,702,811 part-time completions and 76,281 full-time completions in its entire history. As of August 2013 FLVS employed 1,140 full time faculty, 485 support staff, and 45 adjunct teachers (FLVS, 2013b).

Funding

As of the 2003–2004 school year the FLVS program became funded as a statewide virtual school in the Florida Education Finance Program. According to this model, the school receives funding only if students complete courses successfully. In 2013, the state legislature made changes to virtual school funding. Prior to July 1, 2013 brick and mortar schools were given a specific amount of funding for offering six classes per student, although FLVS was given one sixth of that for every supplemental course the students took online. However, since July 1, 2013, FLVS now earns the same amount that has historically been given to brick and mortar schools. So now if students enroll in additional online courses the brick and mortar school loses funds and FLVS experiences lower funding. The funding change is equal to one seventh instead of the original one sixth. Therefore, as a result of funding issues in addition to lower enrollments FLVS experienced its first reduction in staff. A total of 177 full-time and 625 part-time employees lost their jobs in the summer of 2013 (Associated Press, 2013).

Leadership

Julie Young, who was the founder and chief operating officer of FLVS, announced her retirement on February 5, 2014, after 17 years as its leader (Clow, 2014). On March 1, 2014, Ronald Blocker became the interim president. Blocker previously served as superintendent of the Orange County Public Schools district before retiring in 2012 (Postal, 2014). The FLVS Board of Trustees is currently conducting an international search for a new chief operating officer.

Innovation Led by Legislation

Innovation in this case was led by transformative legislation otherwise referred to as the Digital Learning Act. This was signed into law by and was effective as of July 1, 2012. The legislation was incorporated into House Bill 7197. Beginning with the 2011–2012 cohort (that is, the class of 2015) Florida students are required to take one high school credit course online in order to graduate. Students can take the online course in either middle school (6–8) or senior high school (9–12). Students who have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) can be exempt from this requirement if their IEP states that online courses are inappropriate for them. Also students who have an IEP and have less than one year left prior to graduation can also be exempt (FLVS, 2014b). However districts cannot require students to take the online course in addition to the courses they are enrolled in during the traditional school day (FLDOE, 2012).

All FLVS courses count toward the online graduation requirement credit. Students can earn the online credit if they take a one-credit course and they have completed both segments. However, if students complete only one segment of a one-credit course they will not earn the online credit. However, students who take a .5 credit hour course and complete that one segment will be awarded the online credit

(Florida Virtual School, 2014b). In essence, the Digital Learning Act made online learning mandatory yet accessible for all students.

Blended Learning

Schools are battling budget constraints and small numbers of teachers. This has led many schools to consider the implementation of blended learning. According to the United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, with the "new normal," schools are going to have to provide more educational opportunities for students with fewer resources (Horn & Staker, 2011, p. 2). Essentially blended learning may fill that void. Blended learning is defined as: "any time a student learns at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home and at least in part through online delivery with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace" (Horn & Staker, 2011, p. 3).

The concept of blended learning is broken down into six different models. The first model is called face-to-face driver. This model consists of a traditional teacher providing all of the instructional content with face-to-face contact with students. Web-based learning is used on an as-needed basis in addition to the regular instruction. This usually takes place either in the classroom or the computer lab. The model is being successfully implemented in Leadership Public Schools, a group of public charter high schools in California. This district uses this model with their Hispanic, English for speakers of other languages students. These students use computers in the traditional classroom to learn the curriculum in a self-paced environment. The textbook is online and has also allows students to read content with a translation capabilities (Horn & Staker, 2011).

The second model is Rotation. In this model students alternate using a set schedule between being in a traditional classroom and experiencing online learning on an individualized basis. In this case the traditional teacher reviews the work students complete online. Carpe Diem Collegiate High School in Yuma, Arizona allows students to use one period for online learning and another in a face-to-face classroom environment. This is done for each course at the school. Each day the students have two to three rotations (Horn & Staker, 2011).

The third model is the Flex Model. With the flex model students are able to get the majority of their curriculum using a web-based system. However, there are teachers in the lab to provide the students with assistance if needed. AdvancePath Academics in Williamsburg, Virginia has a very impressive flex model. They facilitate their dropout prevention programs through the flex model. Students are in the computer lab working on a course; however certified teachers are available to provide one on one or small group assistance if necessary (Horn & Staker, 2011).

The fourth model is the Online Lab model. With this model students are in a traditional school computer lab yet the curriculum is provided using a web-based platform. The teachers are all web-based; however, noncertified individuals monitor the students. Students who participate in this model usually also have traditional courses. Miami-Dade County (Florida) Public Schools has widely implemented this model as a result of their lower number of teachers. They developed Virtual Learning Labs (VLL), which are facilitated by FLVS. With the VLL's the students' courses are completed online through FLVS. Although the students are supervised by an adult, no traditional instruction is provided (Horn & Staker, 2011).

The fifth model is the Self-Blend Model. The self-blend model involves students taking web-based courses in addition to their traditional school day. This is similar to the online lab model; however, with this model students are not completing their

assignments in a school computer lab during the school day. These students are completing their assignments at a separate location after the school day has ended. Many students take online courses after school. Many online schools such as FLVS and Michigan Virtual School offer students single online courses (Horn & Staker, 2011).

The sixth and final model is the Online Driver. With this model students take courses completely online. The teacher communicates with the students via the web. These programs may require a face-to-face experience at some point however; this may not be needed. Often these programs offer activities and some other traditional components. Albuquerque (New Mexico) Public Schools' eCADEMY uses this blended learning model. These students initially meet with a teacher in a traditional environment. However, they transition to an online environment. Although students who are able to sustain at least a C average can continue to work online independently, some students choose to use the technology labs at the traditional school site (Horn & Staker, 2011). FLVS primarily uses the online lab model, the self-blend model, and the online driver.

How FLVS Conducts Blended Learning

The Online Lab model is noted as the FLVS version of the blended learning model with its Virtual Learning Labs. FLVS partners with many school districts on an individual basis. However, FLVS references Miami Dade County in relation to defining its program. FLVS reveals that in Miami-Dade County the courses are taken in a completely online format in a computer lab within the school building. The individuals monitoring the labs are referred to as Lab Facilitators (FLVS, 2013a).

Florida Virtual School Virtual Learning Lab Pilot

Florida Virtual School piloted its Virtual Learning Lab in Miami Dade County during the 2010–2011 school year. The pilot consisted of a total of 56 middle and senior high schools in the area. SRI International conducted a study in November 2011 evaluating the success of this program. However, the study focused on 38 high schools. In order to gain information for the study seven high schools were visited. Students, facilitators, administrators, and FLVS personnel were interviewed. Enrollment and demographic information was also used in the study. The study found that in order for a Virtual Learning Lab to be successful there needs to be strong leadership, consistent communication, and parents need to be informed. The study also revealed the many benefits of the Virtual Learning Lab for students. These benefits include but are not limited to greater access to courses, flexible scheduling, pace control, independent learning, and an excellent method for students to gain their online graduation requirement (SRI International, 2011)

The study also identified the skills students should have to prosper in an online lab environment. These skills include: reading skills, time management, self-direction, self-motivation, learner independence, oral and written communication skills, sound academics, and comfort with technology. There is no lab without a facilitator; the study also pointed out the top skills that would be needed to become a successful facilitator. These include, being a student motivator, communication with the web-based teacher and knowledge of best practices. In addition, facilitators should communicate with parents and staff. Being knowledgeable about the course was not ranked at the highest level for making a successful facilitator. Student support is also need in terms of monitoring student progress, working with the guidance counselors, and giving content support if necessary (SRI International, 2011).

VLL Versus Blended Learning Community

A VLL and a blended learning community (BLC) are very similar yet different. Both offer online courses in a lab setting. However, VLLs offer instructional support, meaning that an online teacher physically visits the class. With blended learning, students receive instruction in a completely online model in VLLs, while students are able to have face-to-face contact with the instructor visits for BLCs. For BLCs and VLLs, FLVS gives the instructional materials online, and qualified teachers as well as training for the facilitators. The facilitators do not need to be certified. Labs need computers, telephone, and a listing of the course offerings FLVS (FLVS, 2014b)

The Future

After the pilot, one Miami-Dade administrator said that they would like to enhance the curriculum with FLVS courses in the future. Another future concern is funding for facilitator positions. Before her retirement, Julie Young described the future of online blended learning for FLVS and discussed how she would improve course offerings. She mentioned the implementation of gaming such as the Sims and Minecraft. In addition, Florida Virtual School has added a social media course. FLVS currently partners with most districts for blended learning. Furthermore, FLVS has implemented BLCs in all of the high schools in Miami-Dade County (Riedel, 2014).

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