

Broward Virtual School

Preparing Students for Success

Adrienne Fuller

INTRODUCTION

Broward Virtual School (BVS) seeks to prepare students for success in college and careers through the provision of excellence in teaching and advanced technology (Broward Virtual School [BVS], 2017a). Its mission statement states that, "The Broward Virtual School learning experience will provide students with an individualized, rigorous and engaging instructional model through a technology driven, interactive format" (BVS, 2017f, para. 1). BVS is committed to providing the necessary resource and tools to ensure students receive the skills need to be successful. It is a virtual school that strives for excellence while establishing a

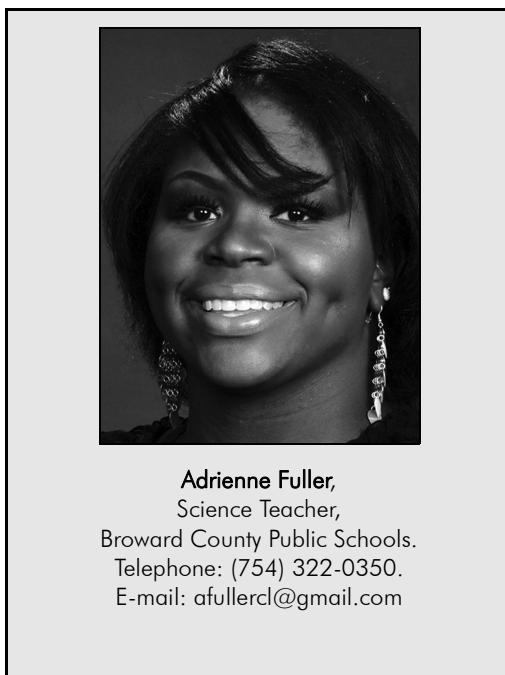
flexible and challenging alternative for students. BVS continues to meet the challenges that virtual schools face and they have reached a level that has made them a viable school of choice for students and parents within the county and beyond.

ABOUT BVS

BVS is a part of the Broward County Public School System (BCPSS) (BVS, 2017a). Students within the county have the ability to take virtual courses through BVS free of charge. BVS was formerly located in Davie, Florida, but has since transitioned to Coconut Creek High School's campus, in Coconut Creek, Florida. BVS partners with Florida Virtual School to offer secondary courses, and K12 Inc. to offer K-5 courses to bring quality distance learning courses to K-12 students throughout the county, state and other areas. In 2016, BVS serviced more than 15,000 students (Royes, 2017a). BVS courses are 100% online with the exception of some exams, labs, and some meetings. Since BVS is a part of BCPS, it is fully accredited through AdvancED (BVS, 2017a). BVS takes pride in helping students prepare for success in colleges and careers.

BVS COURSES

BVS is comparable to traditional schools due to the nature of providing quality educational experiences to students (Lishon-Savarino, 2013). BVS is a flexible alternative for students that is designed with content that is at or above grade level (BVS, 2017c). The courses at BVS are an alternative for students that is not only flexible but challenging as well. The BVS curriculum



encourages problem solving skills and critical thinking skills, as students work on real-life projects. BVS offers opportunities for students to utilize the knowledge and skills they have gained throughout their courses. BVS recommends that students devote approximately one hour or more daily to complete course requirements in order to remain abreast on the content.

Students that take courses through BVS must have access to the appropriate technology to complete the coursework. Lessons through BVS are compiled of learning modules with interactive content (Lishon-Savarino, 2013). Some courses require different equipment depending on the content. Students must possess basic skills in technology and instructors will work with students to develop any other skills needed to complete the coursework. If any additional software is needed for communication purposes, links are provided for students to download the software (Lishon-Savarino, 2013). Although courses at BVS are completely online, students are expected to remain active participants throughout the duration of the course (BVS, 2017c). The administration of state exams to BVS studies requires a secure testing environment, which makes it necessary for students to take the exam face-to-face. Teachers also have the option of employing this option to guarantee credibility for major assignments or exams. If students fail to remain active in courses for a period of a week or more they will be considered truant. Attendance in online courses is just as valuable as attendance in traditional courses to remain on track for success.

“BVS utilizes videoconferencing so students, educators, and administrators can collaborate with one another” (Lishon-Savarino, 2013, p. 21). Schools within the county have partnered with BVS to bring instruction to the various classrooms through videoconferencing (Lishon-Savarino, 2013). This method has been used effectively with multiple schools at the same time. Videoconferencing allows

students to participate in different lessons at one time with students in a different school. The lessons are engaging for students because they get the opportunity to view other students on the screen from different schools and they get to actively participate in the process.

ADMINISTRATION

BVS has managed to remain a school of excellence through the dedicated and innovative leadership of its administration, led by Principal Christopher McGuire. McGuire was a finalist for Broward County Principal of the Year for the 2016–2017 school year (Royes, 2017b). The focal point of his leadership is ensuring that the well-being of students is top priority. Under his leadership BVS continues to promote diversity within their school (BVS, 2017c). This is believed to be one of things that sets this school apart from traditional schools. BVS provides an experience for students that is unique and was created for the purpose of leading students to success.

TEACHERS

BVS desires to remain an elite school that prioritizes the quality of each learning experience (BVS, 2017a). BVS courses are facilitated by teachers who are knowledgeable and highly qualified and certified through the state of Florida (Lishon-Savarino, 2013). Due to the diverse educational experience of BVS teachers, the school is able to offer courses that traditional schools offer. Virtual teachers must be able to manage the traditional roles of a teacher such as presenting content, being a role model or mentor, providing assessments, developing lessons, et cetera. (Teacher Certification, 2017). In addition to managing traditional roles virtual teacher must become acclimated to teaching students at a distance (Royes, 2017a). Students are given the ability to transition from one class to another whenever they desire with their virtual courses. Students have men-

tioned that they have the liberty to communicate more often with their BVS teachers than in a traditional classroom. The relationship that the teachers and students develops is unique. The teacher can provide specialized attention to students based on their individual needs. BVS requires that students actively participate in courses and communicate with their instructor.

STUDENTS

Although BVS partners with other virtual schools, it is a district run virtual school. Virtual schools that are run by school districts typically have a low full-time enrollment (Miron, Gulosino, Shank, & Davidson, 2017). "Approximately 350-400 full-time students elect to pursue a diploma with BVS each year" (BVS, 2017b, p. 1). BVS does have a limited full time enrollment but they have serviced thousands of other students seeking to take virtual courses. Students choose to take courses through BVS for various reasons. One of the reasons students take courses through BVS is for the purpose of recovering required courses (Royes, 2017a). Others attend BVS part-time to take courses that may not be offered at their local schools. Some may take courses through BVS to get ahead for the purpose of graduating early or for the purpose of taking more college preparatory courses (Lishon-Savarino, 2013). Another factor that has led to an increase in the number of students taking courses through BVS is that fact that high school seniors need at least one online course to graduate (BVS, 2017c). As of the 2014-2015 school year, BVS high school seniors still manage to have a high completion rate (U.S. News, 2017). The completion rate for high school seniors has managed to stay over 90% since 2007 (Lishon-Savarino, 2013). "BVS targeted an appropriate learning strategy that enables the majority of students to complete coursework" (Lishon-Savarino, 2013 p. 18). The high senior com-

pletion rates shows that BVS is dedicated to ensuring that students reach success.

PARENTS

BVS serves as a viable school of choice for parents seeking to find a school that offers quality education and flexible options (Royes, 2017a). BVS understands that in order for students to be successful, the parents/guardians must be involved in the educational experience of their children (BVS, 2017g). Parents are kept up-to-date with student progress at all times. Parents are contacted on a regular basis regarding the progress of their child. BVS provides a link for parents that enables them to check on the progress of their child in a BVS course at their leisure. BVS offers many resources for parents like Virtual Counselor, which enables the parent to check things such as student attendance, grades, test scores, et cetera. BVS also provides links for graduation requirements, College Board, and the Florida standards.

ADMISSIONS

FULL-TIME STUDENTS

Students have the ability to enroll in BVS on a full-time or part-time basis. If students choose to enroll full-time they must apply for admittance. In order for students to be admitted full-time they must meet certain criteria (BVS, 2017d):

- Students must show that they have successfully completed courses in the past;
- Students must have scores from state assessments from the previous school term;
- Students must be a resident of Broward or Miami-Dade County; and
- Students with any disability will be admitted upon the review of their Individual Education Plan.

PART-TIME STUDENTS

Part-time students for BVS live in Broward County and are enrolled in private or public schools within the county and home-schooled students (BVS, 2017h). These students must also have access to computer that will enable them to take online courses. Through BVS, students are given the opportunity to take courses part-time not only through the school year but through the summer as well. Students can enroll in courses based on availability. When BVS courses reach capacity, students are able to still take courses through Florida Virtual. Due to the partnership the schools have, the courses are replicas of each other. Home-schooled students do have the ability to take courses part-time but they cannot be promoted through BVS, they cannot receive their diploma through BVS, and they are not mandated to take any state tests. Parents must still follow the home school reporting guidelines to enable student promotion.

SCHOOL CHOICE

Virtual schools are experiencing growth nationwide due to the expansion of the school choice initiative and provided rewards for companies that are seeking to enter the virtual school market (Molnar, 2017). "Broward County Public Schools (BCPS) is proud to offer high-quality educational programs at each of our schools. Our District is a national leader in providing innovative learning opportunities to help students reach their highest potential" (BCPS, 2017b, para. 1). BVS is one several choice options that is provided for parents/guardians to explore. School choice in BCPS allows students to attend schools that are not their boundary school (BCPS, 2017b). BVS must continue to offer quality courses and other resources to appeal to parents and students and remain a viable school choice option (Royes, 2017a). BVS does not desire to compete with traditional public schools, but instead provide a qual-

ity alternative for students. Many assumed that providing the option of virtual courses would impact student enrollment in traditional schools. After a few years, this belief diminished and BVS began to be known for offering courses that were not being offered at local schools.

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR SUCCESS

BVS makes every attempt to ensure student success by providing a wealth of support for students (BVS, 2017c). The teacher for each course is the first option students can use for assistance. Students can reach teachers in a multitude of ways to receive support. Guidance counselors are also readily available for students. BVS promotes the development of skills, approaches, and discipline (BVS, 2017a). Students may desire to know whether or not online learning is right for them (BVS, 2017c). Students at BVS are held accountable for their learning. It is imperative that students preparing to take courses at BVS be motivated and have the ability to independently begin coursework. Students must be dedicated to accomplishing the tasks necessary to complete each learning goal. Managing extracurricular activities in addition to coursework can be tedious but BVS offers flexible courses that students can take on their journey to success. BVS is not designed to serve as a school for students on the verge of dropping out; there are other less strenuous options available for students to explore.

BVS seeks to engage students through the provision of face-to-face activities (BVS, 2017a). "To enhance the virtual school experience for students, BVS offers extracurricular activities to provide students with opportunities to collaborate with their teachers and classmates" (BVS, 2017a, para. 3). BVS offers many face-to-face social and academic activities for full time students to remain active (BVS, 2017a). Some of the social activities that are offered are junior and senior prom and

meet-and-greets where students can meet other BVS students. Academic activities such as field trips, academic competitions, National Junion Honor Society/National Honor Society, college planning sessions, and various clubs are available for eligible students. "These events allow students to collectively work with one another, engage in constructive programs, raise awareness for good causes, enrich their personal learning experience, and actively participate in community services activities" (Lishon-Savarino, 2013, p. 19-20).

BVS provides students with the necessary resources to be successful. BVS offers the same resources for students and parents that are offered for BCPS students (BVS, 2017e): resources such as Virtual Counselor, which helps students and parents monitor things such as grades and graduation requirements, BEEP, which is a portal with resources for students and parents, and Navience which is a program that helps students prepare for colleges and careers. BVS also provides links for instructional tutorial sites such as Khan Academy and Lit2Go audiobooks (BVS, 2017e; Lishon-Savarino, 2013). Khan Academy is a free resource that provides math tutorials, practice tests, practice questions, and so much more (Khan Academy, 2017). Khan Academy also provides some of those same features for other subject areas such as science and humanities. Lit2Go is a site that provides audio and pdf copies of a range of books and poetry (Lit2Go, 2017). The site is organized and user-friendly, which makes it simple for students to access the material that they desire to read.

SCHOOL OF EXCELLENCE

BVS has also maintained their school grade of an A since 2012 (BCPS, 2017a). Student performance on state assessments has led to the proficiency level of BVS students in reading and math being above the district average (U.S. News, 2017). BVS earned a silver medal for 2015 and 2016 from the

U.S. News national high school ranking, which is based on student performance on state assessments and the level at which students are prepped for college. Back in 2010, BVS received the Outstanding Learning Practice award from the International Association for Online Learning (Lishon-Savarion, 2013). BVS continues to provide quality courses surpassing the common standards for virtual schools to ensure that are learning and preparing for success.

CHALLENGES IN VIRTUAL SCHOOL

The popularity of virtual schools has increased due to the nature of providing an alternative to education that promotes a different teaching style other than the traditional teaching style (Royes, 2017a). According to the Miron et al. (2017), "school performance measures for both virtual and blended schools indicate that they are not as successful as traditional public schools" (p. 6). These measures are evidenced by input and output differences amongst students in traditional and virtual schools. The differences are based on the analysis of policies in comparison with the instructional/organizational models of virtual schools within different states. Virtual schools still are faced with challenges that are related to funding, accountability, quality of instruction, and staffing shortages. "Accountability challenges linked to virtual schools include designing and implementing governance structures capable of accounting for expenditures and practices that directly benefit students" (Miron et al., 2017, para 6). BVS sets high expectations for their students to ensure learning success, these expectations have led to standards that lie above the average standards for virtual schools (Royes, 2017a). The guidelines that BVS have in place that are related to the increase in teacher/student face-to-face communication and decreases the chances of students falsifying their assignments.

CONCLUSION

“Virtual learning provides flexibility of time and location, and promotes development of the skills, attitudes, and self-discipline necessary to achieve success in the 21st century” (BVS, 2017a, para. 1). BVS has become a viable school of choice preparing students for success whether the student is completing their entire high school program, doing course recovery, meeting high school graduation requirements or simply taking a course to get ahead. BVS strives to provide quality educational experiences for students. Although BVS faces the same challenges many virtual schools face across the nation, they are continuing to set high expectations for students to maintain the integrity of the school. Moving into the future BVS plans to remain a school of choice for students within the county and beyond and continue provide the tools and resources that are needed to help the 21st century learner succeed.

REFERENCES

- Broward County Public Schools. (2017a). School grades—high. Retrieved from <http://browardschools.com/School-Info/High-Schools/School-Grades>
- Broward County Public Schools. (2017b). School Choice. Retrieved from <http://browardschools.com/schoolchoice>
- Broward Virtual School. (2017a). About our school. Retrieved from http://www.bved.net/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=311574&type=d
- Broward Virtual School (2017b). Academic Profile. Retrieved from http://www.bved.net/ourpages/auto/2016/8/1/52970600/BVS%20ACADEMIC%20PROFILE_2017.pdf
- Broward Virtual School. (2017c). FAQs. Retrieved from http://www.bved.net/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=311576&type=d
- Broward Virtual School. (2017d). Full-time enrollment. Retrieved from http://www.bved.net/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=312309&type=d&termREC_ID=&pREC_ID=623110
- Broward Virtual School. (2017e). Learning resources. Retrieved from http://www.bved.net/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=312200&type=d
- Broward Virtual School. (2017f). Mission Statement. Retrieved from http://www.bved.net/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=312211&type=d
- Broward Virtual School. (2017g). Parent information. Retrieved from http://www.bved.net/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=312198&type=d
- Broward Virtual School. (2017h). Part-time enrollment. Retrieved from http://www.bved.net/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=312309&type=d&termREC_ID=&pREC_ID=579886
- Khan Academy. (2017). Khan Academy. Retrieved from <https://www.khanacademy.org/#/humanities>
- Lishon-Savarino, N. (2013). Broward Virtual School. *Distance Learning*, 10(1), 17–23.
- Lit2Go. (2017). Lit2Go. Retrieved from <http://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/>
- Miron, G., Gulosino, C., Shank, C., & Davidson, C. (2017). Full-time virtual and blended schools: Enrollment, student characteristics, and performance. Retrieved <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/virtual-schools-annual-2017>
- Molnar, A. (2017). Virtual schools in the U.S. 2017. Retrieved from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/virtual-schools-annual-2017>
- Royes, K.-A. (2017a). Choice goes virtual and may never go back. Retrieved from <http://facesofeducation.org/choice-goes-virtual-may-never-go-back/>
- Royes, Kerry-Ann. (2017b). The virtual leadership of Christopher McGuire is changing school choice. Retrieved from <http://facesofeducation.org/virtual-leadership-christopher-mcguire-changing-school-choice/>
- Teacher Certification. (2017). The many roles of a teacher. Retrieved from <http://www.Teachercertification.org/a/the-many-roles-of-the-teacher.html>
- U.S. News. (2017). BVS franchise. Retrieved from <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/florida/districts/broward-county-public-schools/broward-virtual-franchise-4768>