

Equitable Access to Florida's Online Public Elementary School

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A PROFESSIONAL PROJECT PRESENTED TO THE SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM AND  
MASS COMMUNICATION OF FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY IN PARTIAL  
FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF SCIENCE

FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Spring Semester, 2010

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### Abstract

The goal of this project was to inform and educate local residents about the elementary virtual school, which is a State of Florida public school option. The history and origins of virtual school were examined. Florida policy, which restricts eligibility to current Florida public school student, is discussed. A literature review identified the challenges and benefits of virtual school. Three exploratory focus groups were conducted within the study area to assess potential consumer attitudes and levels of awareness. Finally a public awareness campaign is recommended to educate and ultimately motivate voters to contact their state senators and representatives to lobby for legislative change ensuring for equitable access to Florida's virtual schools by all children in Florida.

*Keywords:* virtual school, public school online, virtual learning, e-learning

### Author's Note

In the interest of full disclosure and transparency, it should be noted the author is a full-time home schooling mother of two boys in primary grades. While neither son is enrolled in a virtual school, the author has a positive disposition to schooling children at home. The elder son was enrolled in Florida Virtual Academy under the state's pilot virtual school program.

In 1983 President Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education published "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform." This publication produced a firestorm of media coverage which repeated the ominous warning found in the opening paragraphs, "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war."

Educators have spent the last two and a half decades debating education and looking for ways to better serve America's children. One approach that has been steadily gaining traction is bringing distance learning through virtual school to the K-12 population. Virtual school is defined as an educational organization that offers course content via the Internet. The method of delivery includes Web-based, technology-based and traditional resources, like textbooks and printed materials (FL House Virtual Instruction Program fact sheet, 2009).

In the research and materials generally available regarding virtual schools, the most noted reason for them is still the need to reform our current educational system. "Innovation" is also a buzzword seen time and time again.

In 2009, there were some 55,083,000 K-12 students in the United States, of which 2,850,000 were home schooled (0.5 percent), 268,000 attended virtual school, and 185,000 attended a cyber charter school (see Appendix 1). Today, about one million, or approximately two percent of all K-12 students are enrolled in online courses (Watson, 2009; Picciano, 2008). The number of students seeking schooling outside the traditional classroom is expected to continue to rise as families explore options. (Adkins, 2009; Watson, 2009; Picciano, 2009).

E-learning, as a component of virtual schooling, has been identified as a disruptive innovator in the educational system. Using theories of innovation, Christiansen, Anthony and

Roth (2004) argue that e-learning has the power to reshape the educational system in ways that can best help future generations of students in relatively inexpensive and convenient ways.

The U.S. Department of Education's National Educational Technology Plan strives to document and explore the ways technology supports learning, assessment, teaching and productivity. Revised every five years, the plan is set to be released in 2010. Ultimately, the plan will provide a clear path to transforming education through technology (Lohr, Sept 2009).

Education for American children is considered a fundamental right and is thus provided by federal law. Florida's students are still in need of change and improvement within the school system. That is reflected in the graduation rates, in which Florida ranks 43, with only 60.8 percent of high school students graduating with a diploma (NEA Ranking of the States, 2008). The state's students also have a low rank in standardized test scores, ranking 48<sup>th</sup> in the nation in average composite ACT scores, a standard college entrance exam (American Legislative Exchange Council, 2008). In addition, Florida ranks 50<sup>th</sup> in per capita spending on education and 42<sup>nd</sup> on education spending as a percentage of total resources, spending only 3.1 percent of its resources on education (Education Week, Quality Counts 2009). In 2007, Florida spent an average of \$8,514 per pupil which earned it a 35<sup>th</sup> place ranking among the 50 states, as reported in 2009 the last year for which census data is available (U.S. Census, 2010).

The purpose of this study is to determine the direction for a public awareness campaign that will inform Floridians about the availability of virtual school to public school students. The research included a review of the literature available in the field of virtual schooling, followed by primary research, which consisted of three focus group sessions. An integrated communications campaign was developed, based on the data collected from the focus groups.

## History and Growth of Virtual Schools

This section will examine the history and growth of virtual schools in the United States. A brief review of the original virtual course in a high school will be reviewed and reasons for growth and impediments to its success will be briefly discussed.

The concept of distance learning has been broadly defined as “education or learning which takes place despite the student and teacher being separated by time and/or space (Cavanaugh, Gillian, Bosnick, Hess, Scott., 2005). The goal of distance learning today is the same as when it was introduced in the United States in the late 1900s with correspondence schools: to increase the access of educational opportunities for more people. As early electronic technology developed, so did distance learning opportunities. The first educational radio license was issued to Salt Lake City, Utah’s Latter Day Saint’s University in 1921, and the first educational television program was launched by Iowa State in 1950 (U.S. Distance Learning Association, 2010).

The usefulness of emerging technology was quickly recognized as a way to educate and train the growing U.S. workforce. Adapting training methods to specific industries and making use of the technology as the vehicle for teaching has spurred a whole industry of what is known today as e-Learning or electronically-based presentation of material.

In the 1970s, public and/or public school attendance was considered the standard path for American children in their schooling years. However, by the 1980s, it had become clear the past educational standards were not working effectively for all American students. Release of the presidential commission report “A Nation at Risk” (1983) is seen as a turning point in how Americans viewed education.

Parents and educators began to search for educational alternatives; some looking for ways to bring innovative change to the public school system, while others were looking to improve their own children's educational experience. Some reasons to seek alternatives to traditional school include homebound, struggling or advanced learners, military families, athletes or other performers, parents seeking the personal safety of their children, families looking for educational opportunities outside public school (like religious focus) or dissatisfaction with their home public school (FLVS.com, 2010; FPEA, 2009 as cited in Balona; USDOE, 2005).

However, there is considerable debate and discussion regarding parental choice. The National Education Association stated in its 2008-2009 resolutions that it feels "that parental choice (like home schooling, vouchers to private schools, etc.), and other public school options compromise the education available to children through public education" (National Education Association, 2009). The association position is that equitable, free and universal education through public education is the only right option.

Today, home schooling is on the rise, as is the creation of and enrollment in magnet schools, charter schools and virtual schools. In a show of support for parental choice in education, home schooling was made legal in all 50 states in 1993 (Basham, Merrifield & Heburn, 2007).

Regardless of one's position regarding parental choice in education, the call for education reform and the natural pace of expanding technology continued to impact schools. In 1995, in Eugene, Oregon, nine teachers experimented with a new educational model and unveiled the CyberSchool Experiment (Clark, 2009; Horney, 1998). Technology teacher Tom Layton, from Eugene School District 4J, spearheaded the project to create a high school class that used the World Wide Web as its educational setting. This use of the Web is one characteristic that



defines a virtual school as unique and different from other forms of distance learning, like correspondence school (Clark, 2001).

Students interested in taking the class e-mailed the instructor a request to join the course accompanied by an explanation of why they were interested. Once accepted, the students received via e-mail the reading list, assignment and the due date for their first task. They were directed to read materials only found on the Web as well as pertinent traditional materials. Once the materials were read, students were registered into an online discussion group.

Course instructors said that the discussions and debates were basically what they would have expected from a traditional face-to-face interaction. The biggest difference with the students in the CyberSchool Experiment was that they were physically located around the world. Since the discussions took place via email, students and instructors interacted at times convenient for each person. The result was that contributions were often carefully considered, well-thought out responses. Each student was eventually assigned a paper to write and those who completed the course received high school credit.

This use of technology in a U.S. high school was cutting edge at the time. Meanwhile virtual schooling was underway in several provinces in Canada, primarily in rural areas (Barbour & Reeves, 2009).

In 1997, a five year federal grant of \$7.4 million funded The Virtual High School (VHS) and the state of Florida allocated a \$200,000 Break the Mold grant for the Florida Virtual School (FLVS) (Friend & Johnston, 2005; Pape, Adams & Ribeiro, 2005).

Soon, virtual high schools were considered alternatives for students who did not fall in the middle of the bell-shaped curve. These students often had issues that prevented them from attending traditional schools, such as pregnancy, incarceration or other health issues. Today, the

vast majority of students choose virtual school for supplemental courses (Project Tomorrow 2009).

Virtual or correspondence schools suffered a few high profile scandals that uncovered diploma mills. In one well-publicized instance in 2005, University High School in Miami was found to be granting grades to student-athletes to help them raise grade point averages so they could receive scholarships or play sports, though the school held no accreditation or classes (Wilson, 2005). Stories like these have undermined the credibility of virtual schools, and credibility continues to be an issue for many people (Ramaswami, 2009; Wilson, 2005).

Early success with VHS and FLVS and virtual classes led to immediate growth in the availability of virtual schools nationwide. In 2009, 45 states offered a state virtual school or an online initiative. Appendix 2 presents a map of all virtual school programs available in the United States.

Increased demand fuels the growth for new opportunities nationwide and in turn, new opportunities fuels growth (Keeping Pace, 2009). This increased demand from students continues to raise the bar of expectations by students of what online courses should offer. It is important to note that in most states, public virtual schools are for middle and high school students. In 2009, only 24 states offered K-8 virtual school to all or most of their students (Watson, Gemin, Ryan & Wicks, 2009).

The rapid growth of demand for virtual learning led to the proliferation of for-profit online schools, or cyber charter schools. Experts and business people recognized the opportunity presented in the convergence of increased home schooling, adoption and creation of charter schools nationwide and the recognition of online learning as a viable alternative to traditional schools (Education Week, Dec. 8, 2004).

Hirsch (2001) cautioned school administrators to carefully consider the following characteristics before committing to a particular vendor: quality and content of online courses; whether a course receives credit toward graduation (alignment to state standards); whether courses are part of a curriculum where the next level follows a natural progression from the first (for example Algebra II follows Algebra I); internet safety issues; overall pricing; and record keeping functions for each student through vendor built-in software.

Today, K-12 students who have grown up through the virtual school system are receiving diplomas and are widely viewed as at least equal to traditional students (FL TaxWatch , 2007). These students outside the traditional classrooms are being welcomed and even courted by universities and colleges (Ramaswami, 2009). College admissions counselors considering a student with a diploma from a virtual school evaluate the same criteria as with any other graduating senior: accreditation of school, courses taken, faculty member credentials and the students' experiences. The process may take longer for the counselors, but some in the education field predict it will pay off, as more students graduate from virtual schools (Jaschik, 2009).

The rise of virtual schools continues to gain momentum, as is evidenced by the rapid growth from the CyberSchool experiment in 1995 to the proliferation of virtual schools for elementary, middle and high school students. This brief introduction to the history and growth of virtual schools give the necessary background and context for the literature review.

## Literature Review

This chapter addresses the published literature and studies concerning high, middle and elementary virtual schools. Particular attention is focused when possible on data concerning elementary virtual school. Challenges and benefits of virtual schools will be discussed as well as the related issue of socialization or social skills of children schooled at home. The future of virtual school in terms of numbers of students and potential market growth will be examined.

In the online learning industry there is a tremendous amount of research but most is centered on higher learning education, specifically university level. A new and growing body of research encompasses middle and high school. Regarding elementary online education there is little published research. The limited research indicates that K-12 virtual school learning appears to have the same positive outcomes as online higher education. This literature review will explore the lack of research-driven data for elementary virtual schools, applicable published studies and models of online learning, the challenges and benefits of virtual school, social skills of children schooled outside the traditional brick and mortar school and the future of virtual school.

### Available Data to Assess Virtual School

Virtual school and cyber charter providers are often private, for profit companies and due to proprietary concerns do not share information with competitors. The result is little published data except information the providers make available to the states in which they operate. This data often cannot be compared because of differing methodologies and assessment tools, and even definitions of completions. Another problem with virtual school research is a lack of

sufficient details regarding attrition rates for virtual school students, which will be discussed in another section of this literature review.

In the lower elementary grades there is a standardized test that every child takes from third grade on, making it easy to chart the progress each child is making and the body of knowledge the child is attaining. This is one of the reasons of why many have not seen a need for in-depth research of online elementary school. Elementary school online learning is parent or guardian-led and the student's consistent progress is predicated by the home-teacher's dedication to motivating the student (Barbara Dreyer, personal communication, 1/4/10).

As in all grades, middle and high school math and reading course effectiveness can be measured through the yearly standardized testing of students. However, there are a great many other courses, like music appreciation, computer animation and honors classes that are not. Therefore, there has been a great deal of research to track achievement and progress of students taking online classes. Middle and high school virtual classes are also considered to be independent, and a high degree of self motivation is needed to complete the courses (Barbara Dreyer, personal communication, 1/4/10).

#### Published Studies Addressing K-12 Virtual School

The International Association for K-12 Online Learning recognized in its Keeping Pace report the lack of a large -scale national study comparing students in online courses with students in a traditional setting. The Summary of Research on the Effectiveness of K-12 Online Learning further codified that the limited available research finds K-12 virtual schooling to be as effective for students as online courses in higher education (Patrick & Powell, 2009).

Another leader in researching the virtual school movement, the Sloan Consortium, noted that while early research of K-12 online schooling is impressive, educators had valid concerns. Quality of online course content, cost of the programs and education policies relating to virtual schools are the overriding concerns and will have to be addressed at every stage of development in the field (Picciano & Seaman, 2009). The Sloan report stated that if K-12 online learning follows the same pattern of online learning for post-secondary learning, then it will become a significant component of K-12 education.

In 2009 the U.S. Department of Education published its “Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: a Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies.” This is viewed within the online learning community as the current, definitive source for U.S. K-12 virtual school programming (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The study’s researchers seemed somewhat surprised, and indeed they called it an unexpected finding, to discover there are few rigorous studies comparing K-12 students in face-to-face and online learning. There were no studies of K-12 online versus face-to-face learning from 1996-2006 that could be included in this meta-analysis. The time frame for inclusion of studies had to be extended to July 2008. Ultimately, the study urges caution in generalizing its findings to K-12 online learning because the most of the results used came from studies conducted in other settings (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

The meta-analysis found that students enrolled in online learning courses, on average, outperformed their peers educated in traditional classroom settings. Their study showed significant differences but noted that the online learning courses were often blended, meaning a mix of face-to-face instruction and online learning. The courses often also included greater learning time and other instructional components or materials. The presence of these added

elements imply that the positive effects are from more than the media by itself (U.S. Department of Education, 2009; Smith, Clark & Blomeyer, 2005). The study also showed that online learning through virtual school fills a great gap in course accessibility for many students. Field research about flexible access usually focuses on either increasing availability, cost effectiveness of disseminating course content or empowering online instructors to effectively teach and guide more students, without sacrificing quality of instruction (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

Finally, the meta-analysis reviewed various models of online learning. Asynchronous communication tools are methods in which the student and teacher do not necessarily have direct or real-time communication with each other. Today, this is usually e-mail, discussion boards, blogs, podcasts or newsgroups and benefits include allowing the user to respond at his or her convenience and consider responses before posting replies.

Synchronous communication allows students to use the ever-emerging technology in ways that approximate face-to-face instruction, like lectures or student group meetings. These methods include, but are not limited to webcasting, chat rooms, desktop audio/video and instant messaging. This instruction time is scheduled, and allows for a high degree of collaboration and communication between teacher, student and classmates (U.S. Department of Education, 2009; Bruce, 1999).

Today more than ever, virtual schools use a combination of these methods. The mixed method might even include a limited number of face-to-face meetings. Web access to lectures, articles and other materials provides some equality in the materials available to each student in the course.

## Challenges of Virtual Schooling

Research on virtual school is almost entirely focused on post-secondary and corporate-training populations. There is very little research on the impact of virtual schooling on the K-12 population, though there is a growing body of research on middle and high school. Challenges have been divided into two separate areas: administrative and student specific. Berge and Clarke (2005) cited administrative challenges that include high virtual school's start-up costs, access issues surrounding the digital divide, and accreditation of virtual schools.

In a statement pointing to the high start-up costs, Ron Packard, founder of virtual school provider K12, Inc. noted that online school is not easy to develop because presenting course content is not just uploading a book. He said that providers need to find engaging and rigorous content, motivate the students, hire good teachers who know how to teach online, which is a still relatively new discipline, integrate students and teachers in the schooling process, and find sites that make the content come alive (Bill Bennett radio interview, 2008).

There is considerable debate about the cost of funding a virtual school course and who should pay for it (Reeves, 2001) because of the great expense of developing materials. Thus many states have chosen to partner with programs that have already made the initial start-up expense of creating online courses (Bennett interview, 2008). Additionally, because there are no federal standards or guidelines for virtual school, content and quality may vary from state to state and indeed between school districts (Russo, 2001).

Internet access is another challenge facing virtual schools. Approximately 99 percent of U.S. public schools offer students Internet access (Kleiner & Lewis, 2003) however, home computer ownership and internet access presents a different picture. In 2003, it was estimated that 70 percent of white and Asian students had home access but only 33 percent of black and



Hispanic students. In homes where parental income was less than \$20,000 only 33 percent had computers (DeBell and Chapman, 2003 as cited in Barbour & Reeves, 2009). This leads many to question the equality of virtual schools. Many school districts have met this challenge by offering “loaner” computers and subsidizing the cost of internet access at home.

Accreditation of virtual schools, whether as a full-time school or supplemental course offering, is particularly important for high school students. The push from college-bound students to assure their credits are recognized by post-secondary institutions has led virtual schools to seek traditional accreditation (Berge & Clark, 2005).

As public schools move toward offering more courses online, public perception becomes instrumental in driving the funding choices made by states and individual school districts (Berge & Clark, 2005). A 2005 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll of the general population asked respondents if they thought public high schools should require at least one online course. The poll was administered in response to a request from the National Center for Educational Statistics that charted the growth of distance and online learning in post-secondary education. Thirty-nine percent of respondents felt high school students should be required to take an online course, while 56% did not feel an online course should be required (Lyons, 2005).

In 2007, the annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup follow up poll measured the opinions of respondents regarding virtual schools, and found that while 41% of respondents approved of high school credits earned online, there was strong opposition to a student earning most of their credits online. This 41% approval rating represents a sharp increase from the 30% positive response observed in the 2001 poll (Rose & Gallup, 2007).

Project Tomorrow (2009) cites teacher preparation as another basic challenge to virtual school. Researchers suggest that this issue will become less important as teachers take more online courses themselves, though a lack of school or district resources will continue to hamper development of courses at the school level.

Most virtual schools (both full-time and supplemental) allow students to enroll in the program for up to as many as four weeks as a trial period, without incurring a penalty. Students who drop out during the trial period are not counted as having registered in the program. This trial period varies among providers, and at least two providers have trial periods of 180 and 181 days (Barbour, personal communication, 1/25/2010). Pennsylvania is currently the only state that does not allow the charter cyber schools a trial period. Consequently, the data available becomes meaningless since it cannot be compared across the nation.

A related challenge is student readiness. Again, researchers have been unable to quantify how student readiness affects virtual school course completion because of attrition rates. In existing studies, virtual school students have a higher assessment completion rate, though this may be attributed to Rosenthal and Rosnow's (1975) finding that volunteers are more likely to participate in studies and complete assessments than other less-motivated participants/peers (as cited in Balbour & Reeves, 2009).

Research of middle and high school virtual students find the students to be more highly-motivated than peers. However, the K-5 virtual school student relies on their learning coach, more often than not the parent or guardian. Balbour (personal communication, 1/25/2010) extends the retention issue to cover retention of the learning coach and ties it specifically to the demands of the particular virtual school. Readiness of the learning coach, or competency in the

course subject, also impacts the students. He suggests that teaching is as much a science as it is an art, but that the more a person knows about or understands a topic, the greater the potential to excel.

### Benefits of Virtual Schooling

There are a number of benefits, for both students and schools, to be gained from virtual schooling. The number one cited benefit in current research literature is increased educational access – both in a physical sense, for students in rural districts and in the sense of offering courses that would otherwise not be available at the student’s school. Kellogg and Politoski (2002) also included individualized instruction which meets specific needs or learning styles, schedule flexibility both in timing and physical presence, opportunities for students who can not physically attend brick-and-mortar schools and “higher levels of motivation.” Four similar benefits identified by Berge and Clark (2005) were “expanding educational access, providing high-quality learning opportunities, improving student outcomes and skills, and allowing for educational choice.”

Educational choice in the Berge and Clark study was meant in terms of choice of parents under the No Child Left Behind legislation. NCLB includes public virtual schools as an option for students whose schools do not meet annual yearly progress. Other researchers, including Baker, Parks-Savage & Rehfuss, (2005), Butz, 2004, Fulton (2002) and Hassell & Terrell (2004) have pointed to educational choice (as cited in Barbour, 2009).

There are also benefits for administrative efficiency in schools. Virtual schools help brick-and-mortar schools address overcrowding, access issues of offering certain courses,

employment of qualified and certified teachers, lowering high drop out rates and increased home schooling or choice of charter schools by potential students (Russo, 2001).

Virtual learning is also relevant for a variety of other reasons. Globalization continues to make the world and marketplace smaller, increasing America's need to understand and communicate with others. American students must be fully prepared to compete in the online marketplace using and creating new technologies (Smith, Clark & Blomeyer, 2005).

Technology, with its ever-changing and increasing potential, is not static and cannot be adequately taught in classrooms with traditional books. Just as computer equipment becomes obsolete as soon as it reaches the store, textbooks become obsolete at their printing. This opens the door to online coursework as a supplement to a class or even as the sole vehicle for teaching material (Bridgwater, 2008).

Technology's potential brings with it great promise for the evolution of education in which each child can meet his or her potential through specialized opportunities that reach them in ways best suited to that individual. Individualization and personalization are but just two characteristics of that great promise (Smith, Clark & Blomeyer, 2005).

"The promise of technology is to take us back to the past, toward one-to-one learning," said Monica Martinez, president of the New Tech Network, a nonprofit group that trains teachers and designs high schools that use computing extensively (Lohr, Sept. 2009).

Proponents of virtual schools suggest that greater access to education through online schools offers educational equality to students in rural areas or areas with limited resources available locally or under-performing schools. "I think that this notion that we all have to be in

the same room together to learn is really a myopic view of what the learning experience can be," says Luis Garcia, VP of Full Sail Online, a provider of virtual education (Jones, Nov 1, 2009).

As technology continues to make personalization of education for every child possible, the discussion naturally moves from thinking of education in terms of where it is taking place (brick and mortar schoolhouse) to how the content is delivered and how to help each child best master skills being taught (Vander Ark, 2009).

### Social Skills

One frequently asked question or concern involves the socialization of children who are not schooled in a conventional classroom setting. Some education experts view the classroom as the primary setting in which children learn to appropriately interact with their peers, through face-to-face interactions. It has been suggested that some children will not learn social skills unless they attend traditional schools. Traditionally, this debate has focused on children who are home schooled, but now this debate has been extended to all children who are schooled via distance learning (be it virtual school, cyber charter schools, etc.)

There are limited studies regarding the socialization of children who are schooled outside the classroom. For that reason, research about the home schooled population is cited as the only information close to virtual school socialization questions. Studies and the research available about socialization have found these fears to be ungrounded (Knowles & Muchmore, 1995; Ray, 2004; Van Pelt, Neven, Allison & Allison, 2009). In some cases, studies have shown that the social skills of home schooled children are superior to traditionally schooled peers (Koehler, Langness, Pietig, Stoffel & Wyttenbach 2002; Shyers, 1992; Smedley, 1992, as cited in Sivin-Kachala, 2009).

Smedley's (1992) master's thesis about home-schooled versus public-schooled students found that there is a fundamental difference in the way these children are socialized. Primarily, public school children are socialized horizontally and are expected to learn conformity behaviors, to be like their peers. Home schooled children are socialized by their parents in the direction of responsibility and adulthood.

In May, 2009, an independent study was completed by Interactive Education Systems Design (IESD), Inc., in collaboration with The Center for Research in Educational Policy (CREP) at the University of Memphis, sponsored by K12, Inc. This study represents the first and only significant research effort on the social skills of students in full-time, online public schools.

After addressing the perceived lack of opportunities for virtual students to develop social skills, the researcher concluded that "there is substantial evidence supporting the conclusion that typical, mainstream students enrolled in full-time, online public schools are at least as well socialized as equivalent students enrolled in traditional public schools" (Sivin-Kachala, 2009).

Other experts see virtual school as one component of socialization and an important one for fostering 21<sup>st</sup> century interactions (Pape in Education Sector transcript, 2007). Rather than dismiss face-to-face social interaction, virtual schooling can supplement socialization by helping students learn to work in groups across distance and communicate with others online.

#### Future of Virtual Schooling

There is no national database for virtual school vendors. While there are many for profit companies, many states have their own virtual schools and school districts might develop schools that are franchised or leased to other districts

Market research firm Ambient Insight LLC released a study in October, 2009 titled “The US Market for Self-paced eLearning Products and Services: 2009-2014 Forecast and Analysis.” This study analyzed the market for self-paced eLearning products and services. The report encompassed eight consumer buying segments including consumer, corporations and business, federal civilian and military government, state and local government, PreK-12 academic, higher education, NGSOs, non-profits, associations, and healthcare.

“The U.S. market for self-paced e-Learning products and services reached \$16.7 billion in 2009. The demand is growing by a five-year compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 7.4% and revenues will reach \$23.8 billion by 2014.” Ambient explains that the PreK-12 and higher education industries represent the second highest rate of growth for e-Learning products, following the healthcare segment. Reasons for the high rate of growth include the move to more online content and “the success and proliferation of for-profit online schools.”

During a webinar in late 2009, Ambient presented data which illustrated the change in the number of PreK-12 students taking all classes in physical classrooms. This segment of students will decline in number from 50,030,000 to 40,490,000 with significant increase in students taking advantage of online supplemented courses of study, virtual schools, home schools and cyber charter schools.

In fact, in 2009 nearly 450,000 K-12 students took all course work online – either through virtual schools or cyber charter schools, while some 1.75 million took some coursework online. Ambient forecasts that in 2010, some 3.78 million PreK-12 students will be fully schooled online, while 6.68 million will take some courses online. More than 10 million U.S. students will take some courses online – be it virtual school, cyber charter, or online supplemented (also known as blended or hybrid courses.)

The future of e-Learning as a science will continue to grow and evolve. The advent of new social media will increase learning opportunities and the technology will change with the times. As one example, in March 2009 Laurel Springs School launched a new online community for its students. The private K-12 online school uses Community Server from Telligent and the site is called MyLaurelSprings.com. The password protected community uses the MySpace technology and allows students to create friend lists, join clubs, create avatars, upload video, participate in discussions and more (Schaffhauser, 2009).

Web-logging (blogging) is also a common tool for keeping families and students connected and updated on current trends and technology. Some online schools feature blogs which are updated several times a week, delivering news, tips and helpful hints to students.

The mechanics of virtual school will continue to change and evolve as technology evolves. Based on the limited studies, virtual school for elementary students is following trends of post-secondary schooling's positive outcomes. The challenges and benefits discussed in this chapter will also continue to change with future studies addressing new aspects as needed.



## Virtual Schooling in the State of Florida

This chapter will examine the various public school options currently available in Florida and focus on the Virtual Instruction Program. Next, a look at the elementary virtual school program and its funding and success measures will provide detail regarding the program requirements and restrictions. Finally this chapter will address current 2010 Florida legislation affecting K-12 virtual school.

Florida lawmakers have recognized that parents must play an active role in their children's education and has given a great freedom to parents making choices about each individual child. Many Floridians feel that by offering options, schools are being held accountable – whether the school is public or private. Not every family has the luxury of taking advantage of the traditional school choice – private school - and the result is that the state of Florida has opened its definition of school choice to include many options.

In 2007-2008, there were 2,652,684 K-12 students in Florida. That same year, 24 percent (or 645,184 students) were educated someplace other than the school assigned by their local school district. This includes 39,000 families that home schooled nearly 60,000 students. Approximately 335,000 students, or 11 percent of Florida's children, were educated in private schools 2007-08 (Florida Department of Education, 2009b).

Florida school choice also includes the following options:

- Magnet schools – institutions where a particular academic subject is emphasized. In 2007-08 more than 345,000 students attended magnet schools.
- Controlled open enrollment – parents may choose from existing public schools rather than being assigned to a school based on geographic region. This open

enrollment option gives preferential treatment to parents residing within a school zone, but based on enrollment numbers other children may attend any school.

Some 323,000 students exercised their option to choose their public school.

- Charter schools – public-private partnerships wherein a public school is independently operated. During the 2007-08, 389 charter schools served 117,602 Florida students.
- No Child Left Behind, 2001, provided federal resources to states to ensure that students in Title 1 schools would be given opportunities to attend schools with higher academic ratings. In 2007-08, there were 1,365 Title 1 schools in Florida and 990 did not make the APY and were required to offer transportation to students wishing to attend schools outside their nearest geographic school. Approximately 70,000 children took advantage of these Supplemental Educational Services.
- The John M. McKay Scholarships for students with disabilities program offers students with an individual education plan the opportunity to choose a private or public school that is right for the child. It is student-directed funding based on parent-directed choices.
- High school students have a variety of other options including dual enrollment, career and professional academies, advanced international certificate of education program, advanced placement program, and the international baccalaureate diploma program. There were 19,842 McKay Scholarships given in 2007-08.
- Corporate tax credit scholarship program provides scholarships for students with limited financial resources to attend private schools. Corporations are offered

dollar-for-dollar deduction in their tax liability (up to 75%) by donating the tax funds to this program. Corporations lower their tax liability, and lower-income students receive scholarships to private schools in Florida. 19,416 students accepted scholarships from this program in 2007-08.

- Charter technical and career center – schools use a school-to-work, tech-prep, magnet, academy model to prepare students for the workforce. Three schools educated 8,970 students in 2007-08.
- Opportunity Scholarships can be granted to students to attend higher performing public school if their school has received “F” grades two years during a consecutive four year period. In 2007-08, 1,205 students received these scholarships.

#### Florida’s Virtual Instruction Program

Florida tested the virtual instruction waters in 1996 when it began the very first semester of virtual school in two Florida counties. The original goals of the school were to help relieve school overcrowding, make advanced courses available to students in Florida’s rural districts and create opportunities for high-demand courses. In 1997 the Break the Mold grant allocation had risen to \$1.3 million to continue developing the program. In 1998 the program went state-wide, with an allocation of \$4.36 million and created Florida Virtual School (FLVS). FLVS’ motto regarding education is “anytime, any place, any path, any pace.” Today, FLVS seeks to help students master course material and flexibility for students (U.S. Department of Education, 2010)

Now, more than a decade later, Florida has the largest virtual instruction program in the United States with more than 154,000 course enrollments and more than 124,000 unique students in 2008-09 (Watson, et al., 2009). FLVS is now available throughout the state’s 67 school

districts. FLVS students took an average number of two course credits. A FLVS student survey measuring reasons to enroll in FLVS courses revealed that the top three reasons included taking a course to graduate on time (26%), grade forgiveness or the need to raise a grade (16%) and desire to graduate early (13%). The remaining reasons ranged from home school or homebound students, taking courses their school didn't offer or the need for schedule flexibility. See table in Appendix 3.

Today, FLVS is seen as a rousing success in Florida. In 2007, Florida TaxWatch Center for Educational Performance and Accountability published its "Final Report: A Comprehensive Assessment of Florida Virtual School." The report sought to quantify how FLVS students compared to those in traditional brick-and-mortar schools and find out if virtual school is cost effective for Florida's taxpayers.

FLVS students fall proportionally into every range in terms of cumulative grade point average: approximately 25% particularly high; 25% particularly low with the remaining 50 percent in the middle. However, on both the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test and national Advanced Placement tests, FLVS students performed better than their peers (FL TaxWatch, 2007).

Based on the combination of higher test scores and per credit cost, FLVS weighted FTE per student is \$1,048, less than public school students. The state of Florida also nets more value per course credit because it has no transportation or school building maintenance or repair when students choose FLVS courses (FL TaxWatch, 2007).

Following the early success of FLVS, the state of Florida piloted the K-8 Virtual School Program in 2003 with no more than 1,000 students. The pilot schools were funded with a total of

\$4,800,000 through the appropriations bill. Enrollment was limited to students who were Florida public school students the previous year, and Florida's kindergartners and first grade students.

The aim was to incorporate strong parental involvement and public education. Through a request for proposal process, K12, Inc. and Connections Academy were selected to run the two schools provided for by the Florida legislature. The schools provided complete curriculum, learning materials such as manipulatives, computers, software, printers and subsidized internet access for each of its students.

At the end of the first year, all students in the pilot program took the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). The results were mixed: the students tested well at reading but poorly at math and below state average for writing. Parents, however, expressed high satisfaction. Since the beginning of the pilot program, the K-8 virtual school ratings have continued to show improvement as shown. See Table 1 in the appendix for FCAT results for the Florida virtual schools.

The second year, the legislature funded the program at \$4,800 per student, but dropped the overall attendance to a maximum of 800 students (\$3,840,000). Enrollment in the program was further limited to returning students of the pilot program and their siblings. During the 2006-2007 school year, enrollment was opened to include any kindergartner or first grade student in Florida. The program subsequently moved out of pilot status and became a regularly funded part of Florida's education system. Florida's funding of these programs are shown on the following table from the Florida House of Representatives Education Council Fact Sheet (2009).

Table 1. K-8 Virtual School Program Funding 2003-2008

| <i>Year</i> | <i>Total Funding Amount</i> | <i>Per Student Amount</i> | <i>Student Capacity</i> |
|-------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| 03-04       | \$4,800,000                 | \$4,800                   | 1,000                   |
| 04-05       | \$3,840,000                 | \$4,800                   | 800                     |
| 05-06       | \$4,800,000                 | \$4,800                   | 1,000                   |
| 06-07       | \$7,200,000                 | \$5,200                   | 1,384                   |
| 07-08       | \$9,500,000                 | \$4,848                   | 1,881                   |

State law provides for full-time virtual school for students grades K-12 and part-time school (or supplemental classes) for grade 9-12 students enrolled in drop-out prevention, academic intervention or Department of Juvenile Justice programs. All Florida Virtual School options are shown on Table 2 in the appendix.

The full-time virtual school is now offered by each school district. FLVS continues to operate as a supplemental course program to middle and high school students. FLVS, as a supplemental course provider is not a diploma-granting school, though it can enter into a franchise agreement with school districts to offer a full-time virtual instruction with diploma-granting abilities.

The 2009-10 academic year was the first year every school district was mandated to offer virtual school. There were seven state-approved virtual instruction providers for the 2009-10 school year: Florida Virtual School (includes FLVSCA), Florida Connections Academy, LLC, K12 Florida, LLC, Advanced Academics, CompuHigh, Educational Options, Inc., and Kaplan.

The program requirements remain the same for each vendor:

- Align virtual course curriculum and course content to the Sunshine State Standards under s. 1003.41.
- Offer instruction that is designed to enable a student to gain proficiency in each virtually delivered course of study.
- Provide each student enrolled in the program with all the necessary instructional materials.
- Provide, when appropriate, each full-time student enrolled in the program
- All equipment necessary for participants in the school district virtual instruction program, including, but not limited to, a computer, computer monitor, and printer; and
- Access to or reimbursement for all Internet services necessary for online delivery of instruction.
- Not require tuition or student registration fees.

Payment to the vendors by each school district is based on per student successful completion. K-5 students must promote to the next grade level, and grades 6-12 students must complete course credits. The school district will not pay vendors for credits that do not get completed by the students. For instance, if a student moves out of state 3 /4 of the way through the school year, the vendor does not get compensated for the time or materials the vendor has invested in that student.

The per student funding is based on the current unweighted full-time equivalent through the Florida Education Finance Program. The current average total funds available unweighted per student is \$6,873.07. For every school district with a child enrolled as a full-time virtual instruction student, the district receives the \$6,873.03, said Tina White, deputy council director

for the Florida House of Representatives Education Policy Council. Each district negotiates its own contract with specific Florida-approved vendors, and she notes that the average per student cost (though it varies by district) is about \$4,200. Any surplus discrepancy between the vendors' negotiated rate and the UFTE is kept by the district and used as general funds for other schools (White, personal communication, 2010).

Florida Virtual School funding is \$464 per semester course, though funding was cut by approximately 10% for 2009-2010 school year. If a public school student does not complete a FLVS course, the school is entitled to receive an 11.4 percent add-on to the full-time equivalent funding. FLVS receives no funding for non-public school students who do not finish courses (Watson, et al., 2009).

If a virtual instruction program receives a grade of 'D' or 'F' or the school rating declines for any two years during a four year period, the district must terminate its contract with the provider. The school grade/rating is determined by the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test taken by each public school child each year beginning in the third grade. Virtual school vendors receive their school rating based on the statewide aggregated assessment scores for their students, regardless of student's individual district (Watson, et al., 2009).

The section 1002.45(5) of Florida Statutes limits student eligibility for the district virtual instruction program to students residing within the district who meet at least one of the following conditions:

(a) The student has spent the prior school year in attendance at a public school in this state and was enrolled and reported by a public school district for funding during the preceding October and February, for purposes of the Florida Education Funding Program surveys.



(b) The student is a dependent child of a member of the United States Armed Forces who was transferred within the last 12 months to this state from another state or from a foreign country pursuant to the parent's permanent change of station orders.

(c) The student was enrolled during the prior school year in a school district offering virtual instruction program

The current state of Florida's virtual schools is by no means the last chapter in the quest by Florida lawmakers and educators to provide a quality education to children in Florida. Indeed Senate bill 2262 and House of Representative bill 1173 continues to make its way through the bill process in the 2010 legislative session toward becoming a law. Both the House and Senate bills provide for charter virtual schools and funding for such, and would open the doors of virtual school to Florida's students. It does not negate the restrictions on the district virtual programs.

This chapter discussed K-12 virtual schools in Florida. It examined the history of the programs in the state and its current status. Pending legislation is a step toward creating equitable access to the elementary virtual school, but does not open access to all. The next chapter will address a Strengths-Weakness-Opportunities-Threats Analysis (or S.W.O.T. Analysis) and methodology for a local study of the parental attitudes toward elementary virtual school.

S.W.O.T. Analysis

| Strengths   | Weakness   |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Virtual School works – FCAT results prove students perform academically as well as or better than their peers</li> <li>• Well suited educational solution for families concerned about the quality of academics or harmful environmental factors, like drugs, at public school</li> <li>• Well suited for families with issue about their particular child like health issues, bullying and other behavioral issues</li> <li>• Self-paced schooling addresses different needs of individual children</li> <li>• Encourages increased parental involvement in child’s schooling</li> <li>• All approved Florida virtual school vendors are accredited</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concerns over authorship of assignments and level of parental input</li> <li>• Perception that children schooled at home lack socialization opportunities, fail to learn peer interaction or submission to external authority figures</li> <li>• Concerns about quality of online content vs. content found in textbooks</li> <li>• Concerns about accreditation of virtual school (keep language consistent)</li> <li>• Financial consideration – one parent must stay home with child</li> <li>• Concerns that parents do the work and students do not learn the curriculum</li> </ul>  |
| Opportunities   | Threats  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policies are in place to ensure students are not denied this opportunity because of economic situation (digital divide)</li> <li>• There is no current vocal opposition to expansion of eligibility to virtual school among legislators</li> <li>• Tax-payer funded public virtual school makes it universally affordable</li> <li>• As more teachers are being trained through online courses, more courses being developed to teach this in style.</li> <li>• Sunshine standards assure level of competency of students</li> <li>• Eligibility of millions of Florida students</li> <li>• Research about elementary virtual school points to positive outcomes and trends toward successes achieved in post-secondary virtual education</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concerns over funding; misunderstanding virtual schools are the equivalent of public school at home</li> <li>• Access is restricted to public school students who attended a Florida public school the previous year</li> <li>• Little existing documentation about elementary virtual schools</li> <li>• Concerns over impact of the digital divide in reducing access to broadband Internet, hardware, and software in the home</li> <li>• Little existing documentation about attrition rates at elementary virtual schools</li> <li>• Few instructors trained to teach online</li> <li>• State education policies may be interpreted differently between districts</li> </ul> |

## Methods

This chapter will address the methodology used to conduct primary research regarding parental attitudes toward elementary virtual school. A discussion of the sample size, sampling method and overview of the primary research will provide context for the results. The demographic questionnaire and informed consent presented to each respondent will be discussed. The focus group questions will be examined along with the specific concepts from the literature review necessitating the questions.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Florida International University was gained to conduct the focus group sessions on March 18, 2010. A copy of the approval letter can be seen in Appendix 5.

The method selected for this exploratory study consisted of focus groups. Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2003) noted that the use of focus groups in educational research is growing, particularly when used in conjunction with data questionnaires. Focus groups allow the researcher to explore specific consumer attitudes. One limitation is that results are not necessarily representative of the entire population and cannot be generalized. Still, this method is considered appropriate for research such as this study (Barnett, 2002).

## Sample

Two of the focus groups consisted of eight respondents, one consisted of seven respondents. Three focus groups were conducted in the North Brevard / Titusville area; one each in the south, central and the northern area. This is the metropolitan area in central Florida where the initial public awareness campaign is scheduled to take place. As such, all research was

conducted there. According to the 2000 census, and as illustrated in Appendix 4, the study area is relatively racially and linguistically homogeneous with 83.8% of the population white and 93.4% speaking English as their primary language at home. As the study area is a relatively homogeneous community, it was decided that focus groups with parents of school-aged children would provide the most valuable information with minimal expenditures. No additional effort was made to address the racial make-up of the focus groups.

### Sampling Method

A snowball sampling was undertaken in an effort to find appropriate respondents for the study that were not known to the researcher and would represent various segments of parents of school-aged children. Lindlof (1995 as cited in Barnett, 2002) noted that snowball sampling meets these recruitment requirements for focus groups. Snowball sampling is a research tool used to recruit small groups of individuals who share specific characteristics of interest to the researcher (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2003).

Three snowball referral chains were started by the researcher contacting a parent with a child in each of these three segments: public school, private school and home school. Each parent was told that the researcher was completing a project for graduate school and was conducting a series of three focus groups about Florida's educational system. These three parents were then asked to provide the researcher with contact information for three parents of elementary-age children they thought might be interested in helping by attending the focus groups. They were given the option of providing the names and phone numbers directly to the researcher or contacting their associates and then providing the information to the researcher. No other guidelines were provided to the parents, minimizing bias to the sample.

The researcher then contacted the referrals and each subsequent parent was asked to provide the same information for three other parents, etc. With each new contact, the researcher asked only if the parent would be willing to participate in a focus group; asked the grade level for each of their children and whether they attended public, private or home school; and whether a Tuesday evening, Thursday evening or Saturday afternoon focus group would be most convenient.

A pool of 71 possible respondents was created. The list was then filtered to generate a list of only parents with children currently in third grade or younger. This resulted in a potential respondent population of 41. The third grade cut off was applied because the marketing campaign is an effort to affect legislation which will apply to elementary grades kindergarten through fifth grade. This allows the campaign to specifically target parents who have children that could be affected by the elementary virtual school option in the upcoming next two school years.

The researcher attempted to create three balanced focus groups. For the purposes of this study balanced means including both men and women, parents representing public, private and home schooled children. Focus groups were conducted in three distinct locations. Meeting space in two public libraries and one private corporation were used. Intentionally no religious or politically-associated facilities were used in an effort to make participants as comfortable as possible in the surroundings without presenting additional bias. Focus group sessions were held on three different days of the week; two on weekday evenings and one on a Saturday morning. The focus groups were deliberately held during the same week to minimize impact of potential news or tainting of future focus groups by way of discussions among possible respondents. In an effort to reach parents throughout the study area, the three focus group locations were

intentionally located in the north, south and middle of the study area. Focus groups were planned for times as least obtrusive to parents of school-age children as possible. The Tuesday and Thursday focus groups were conducted from 6:30 – 8 p.m. and the Saturday focus group ran from 1:30 – 3 p.m.

Despite concerted efforts to assemble balanced focus groups, there was great difficulty in getting commitments from fathers. Anticipating low participation levels of participation by fathers, two more snowball samplings were started with fathers being asked to provide contact information of other fathers. All other guidelines were consistent with the original snowball samplings. The researcher invited a total 40 people from the pool to attend any one of the focus group with the expectation of participation level of between 24-30 respondents total.

#### Focus Group Implementation:

In each location, a private room was used. Respondents were greeted by the researcher as they entered and were asked to choose any seat in the room. Respondents were encouraged to introduce themselves to each other informally while waiting for all respondents to arrive. After all respondents had entered, the research team was introduced. Respondents were then formally introduced to the principal researcher as a master's student who was conducting the focus group as part of a final project.

The group was informed there was also a volunteer observer who would not be participating in the discussions but was present only to assist in documenting the discussion to follow. Then, two copies of the informed consent waiver were distributed to the respondents; they were asked to sign one and keep the other for reference. A copy of the informed consent

waiver can be seen in Appendix 6. Each focus group respondent was also asked to fill out a short questionnaire about demographic information (see Appendix 7.)

Prior to the start of each focus group, the facilitator read aloud a definition of virtual school. The definition states that, “Virtual school is a school in which students and teachers are separated by time and/or space. The State of Florida offers virtual school to elementary students through their local school district and provides students with all materials needed including: books, workbooks, manipulatives, loaner computers and printers, and web-based or computer programs. This is public school at home and is not home school.”

### The Questionnaire

All questions used in the focus groups were derived from the literature review. Table 3 lists concepts extrapolated from the literature deemed important for further research, appropriate contextual definitions and the operational definition or questions that were asked at the focus groups. Actual focus group questions and prompts are listed in Appendix 8.

The first concept to be explored in the focus group was level of awareness of the existing virtual school program by potential customers in the target area (focus group questions 1, 2, and 3 in Table 3.) Because K-12 virtual school is relatively new, existing in Florida only since 1997, the first research questions aim to measure general awareness levels. Asking the focus group respondents to first name any and all options available to public school students allow respondents to work together to answer the first question and open the door to virtual schools.

Respondents were next asked to share what they knew specifically about virtual school, and then more specifically what they new about the elementary virtual school. Bearing in mind that the elementary virtual school has existed in Florida (in pilot program status) since 2003, the researcher needed to establish knowledge levels for the elementary school in particular.

The next set of concepts to be examined centered on student eligibility and the cost of virtual school (questions 4, 5 and follow-up prompt 1.) Florida's school system is generally recognized to be overburdened with overcrowding and a shrinking budget. Research shows that the costs of developing a virtual school may be prohibitive to already overtaxed school systems. The cost unweighted per student for a virtual school student is significantly less than the cost of a student attending a brick and mortar school. The question posed to the focus group respondents, "Who should be eligible to attend virtual school?" aimed to establish eligibility parameters for a public school. The following question was "How do you feel about your tax dollars paying for students to learn the public school curriculum at home?"

The literature review noted that there are certain barriers as relates to technical issues and the access divide. Lower income families may not have the equipment and resources for broadband services and would thus make them ineligible for the program. Florida makes "loaner" equipment available and in some cases subsidizes the cost of Internet services. In order to assess the focus group's attitudes to these challenges, the following prompt was developed, "Who do you think should pay for this program, the materials and resources?"

Virtual schooling is a new educational approach to elementary school, and there have been abuses of high school level virtual schooling in the past. This public school option is not right for every child or every family, but in an effort to find out who this appeals to, the focus



group respondents were asked in question 6, “Would you consider virtual school for your child? Why or Why not?”

Another challenge addressed in the research was socialization of children and was addressed in follow-up prompt 2. Some opponents of children schooled at home believe that these children lack interaction and opportunities to socialize with their peers and learn important interpersonal communication skills. In the event socialization was not discussed in the focus group, the following question was developed: “Would you have any concerns or doubts about the effectiveness of this approach to childhood education?”

The final follow-up prompt developed for the focus groups was based on the notion of academic achievement for virtual school students. Florida’s elementary virtual school students are subject to the same standards as traditional public school students. The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test will measure achievement levels of virtual students which can then be compared and contrasted with other public schools. Focus group respondents will be asked, “What are your thoughts about this approach to childhood education?” if additional prompting is needed.

## Results

This chapter will examine the breakdown of the focus groups by demographic data and characteristics. As shown in Table 4, the 23 respondents were women whose ages ranged from 21-49 years of age. Nineteen (83%) of the respondents identified themselves as white; three (9%) self-identified as some other race or more than one race; one (4%) self-identified as Black or African American; and one (4%) self-identified as Hispanic or of Latino origin. All respondents spoke English at home as their primary language.

The focus group respondents had a combined total of 54 school age children, with five (21.7%) having one child, eleven (47.8%) having two children; four (17.3%) having three children; two (8.6%) having four children; and one (4.3%) having six children. All respondents (100%) have at least one child in elementary school; ten (43%) have at least one other child in middle school and ten (43%) have at least one other child in high school. Of the focus group respondents, eight (34.7%) had children in a home school; seven (30.4%) respondents had children in private school; and ten (43.4%) of these respondents had children in public school. Two (8.6%) respondents across the focus groups had children attending both a home school and public school.

Nineteen (82.6%) of the respondents indicated the Internet was their primary news source. Seventeen (73.9%) indicated they get their news from other people; nine (39.1%) get news from television; nine (39.1%) get their news from newspapers and four (17.3%) get their news from the radio.

The first focus group was held on Tuesday evening from 6:30 – 8 pm and was attended by eight respondents, or 35% of the total sample. All the women in this focus group ranged in

age between 31- 49. The second focus group was held on Thursday evening, also from 6:30-8 p.m. with seven respondents (30% of the total sample). All women in this focus group ranged in age between 22- 42. The third focus group was held on Saturday afternoon from 1:30 – 3 pm and was attended by eight respondents (35% of the total sample). All in this group ranged in age between 21- 46. All respondents in all focus groups spoke English as their primary language at home.

This chapter examined the breakdown of the focus groups. The focus groups were relatively homogenous, which correlates to the most current U.S. Census data. The following chapter will encompass a discussion of comments and reactions to the focus group questions.

## Discussion

This chapter will examine a variety of attitudes and perceptions which will be used to formulate a marketing campaign to inform consumers and ultimately provide equitable access to Florida's online elementary school. Parental awareness of the virtual school program, perception about eligibility and attitudes to virtual schooling their own children will be discussed as relates to the focus group respondents. Insight gained from these discussions will be applied to the marketing tactics and strategies recommended.

### Parental Awareness of Virtual Schools

In regards to the level of awareness of public school options, respondents were asked to name any and all public school options of which they were aware. In all three focus groups respondents were able to successfully name public school, magnet school, virtual school, charter school and home school. Yet, when asked about virtual school, focus group respondents were most often unaware of the option or knew very little about it. In each focus group, respondents were able to identify certain characteristics of virtual school including that it is home-based, self-paced, and flexible for the student; that the virtual school year follows the August – June public academic calendar and is not open-ended; and that there are deadline for students to meet which creates accountability between the student and teacher.

In each focus group, one or two persons had the vast majority of knowledge about virtual school and those individuals generally led the group discussion. Thirteen (62.5%) of the focus group respondents knew something about virtual school, while ten (37.5%) knew little or nothing about virtual school. Regarding individual awareness of elementary virtual school in particular,

no further details were uncovered. Respondents who knew anything about virtual school assumed their knowledge was relevant for elementary, middle and high school.

### Parental Perception about Eligibility

The second concept discussed was who should be eligible for virtual school. Respondents universally stated that any child in the State of Florida should be able to attend virtual school and further anyone who pays taxes. In one focus group there was consternation over the fact that dependents of the US military also have some restrictions on their eligibility.

When asked specifically, “How do you feel about your tax dollars paying for student to learn the public school curriculum at home?” respondents showed little reaction. The general sentiment was that if eligibility was open to every child, than this is just one more program available. Without exception at least one respondent in each focus group said that since their tax dollars already go to the public school system and they don’t specifically know how every dollar is used, they have no issue with virtual school being paid by their tax dollars.

The follow-up prompt to this question, “Who do you think should pay for this program and the materials and resources?” was not needed. It was clear respondents believed that if this program was offered as a public school option, it should be paid for by the public school system. Substantial discussion was generated by the initial question.

### Parental Attitude Towards Virtual Schooling for their Children

In order to measure the perception of virtual school within the focus groups, the facilitator asked respondents, “Would you consider virtual school for your child? Why or why not?” Across the three focus groups, half of the respondents said they would consider virtual

school for their child. While the answers varied greatly among those who said they would consider virtual school, at least one respondent in each of the three groups mentioned: the value to children with special health issues; the opportunity it would afford parents to spend more time with their child; the value in virtual school for avoidance of negative peer situations in traditional school situations; the ability to accelerate or slow the pace in subjects as appropriate for each child to ensure mastery. Also noted was the flexibility of when to do actual school work depending on child and the decision which is ultimately to do what is best for that unique child.

Avoidance of negative environmental factors at school was summed up by one respondent who stated, “[Virtual school] would be great to help kids avoid bullies and even drugs. Plus we could help preserve our children’s innocence longer.”

A few respondents said they might consider the virtual school option, but their hesitation seemed more about their capacity to do a good job as the teacher than whether the child would flourish in a virtual school. “I like the idea of [virtual school] but I’m not sure I could do a good job of motivating my child to work all the time,” said one respondent. “Besides,” added another respondent, “I have a low tolerance for his [her child’s] antics and I’m not a teacher.”

One out of every three respondents said they would not consider virtual school for their child. The common themes which emerged from all focus groups centered on families with two working parents and / or other financial considerations. “I’m a full-time working parent, as is my husband,” stated one respondent. “There are financial reasons I couldn’t do it, too,” added another.

Several felt that virtual school would result in children spending too much time on the computer. Others believe that children need the social interaction that can be obtained in a

traditional school setting. “Kids can thrive in the healthy competition that can be found in a classroom,” said another respondent.

One parent said that she was very happy with the public school her child currently attends. “We, my husband and I, are accountable for our daughter’s education,” said another respondent. “My husband and I both work, but if we were not happy with her schooling we would make changes.”

There were several misconceptions that were uncovered resulting from this question in the focus groups. These misconceptions included: the belief that all schooling happened online; that student’s wouldn’t be learning math through drill or practice handwriting on lined sheets of paper; that it was difficult to reach teachers.

The discussion about whether a respondent would or would not consider virtual school naturally led into a discussion about socialization. Respondents across the three focus groups noted that children need to learn to interact with their peers and learn to sit and follow directions, which they felt was an important lesson learned in traditional school. Healthy competition develops naturally amongst a group of children, which again, they felt was a benefit to attending traditional school. These comments led other respondents to wonder how the public school system would truly know if a child was doing the work or if a parent, instead, was logging in and doing the work.

The final focus group prompt, “What are your thoughts about this approach to childhood education” did not elicit any answers common across all focus groups. Not one respondent felt that virtual school was inherently bad or substandard, though there were questions regarding the availability of evidence-based research that it was an effective tool for teaching children.

Another comment illustrating this concern was, “the challenge is to hold a young child’s attention and provide meaningful instruction, considering the distance between the child and teacher.” Several comments indicated that virtual school provides an ideal approach to meet children academically where they are, in each particular subject.

### Summary of Focus Group Respondent Insight

Several important findings emerged from the focus group questions. It has become apparent that while the State of Florida offers virtual school as a public school option, the department of education has done little to publicize the benefits and features of the program. Overwhelmingly the respondents showed they had little knowledge but were interested in hearing about the program.

With regards to questions of eligibility, respondents felt that if a program is touted as a public school option, it should be available to every child in the state. The current restrictions elicited questions as to why there were restrictions and anger over them.

Focus group respondents had a variety of reasons why virtual schooling may or may not be the right choice for their child(ren). Answers were incredibly personal and were individualized for each parent.

This chapter examined parental awareness of the virtual school program, perception about eligibility and attitudes to virtual schooling. A summary of the focus group respondents point to various problems that should be addressed in the marketing campaign which is presented in the following chapter.



### The campaign: “What’s good for kids?”

The marketing campaign outlined in this chapter is the result of the literature review and insight gained from primary research in the study area. Objectives, target audience, strategies and tactics will be recommended.

#### Objectives:

- Increase awareness of the public virtual school option.  
(Measured by general awareness levels as speakers’ bureau addresses community meetings.)
- Motivate voters to contact local representatives and senators to lobby for great and equitable access of this program for all of Florida’s children.  
(Measured by number of co-sponsors attached to current bill.)
- Ultimately increase the number of children enrolled in virtual school.  
(Measured by number of students enrolled in August 2011 as compared to August 2010.)

#### Target audience

The researcher identified several potential target audiences for the “What’s good for kids?” campaign. Based on market research and budget constraints the campaign will target mothers. Fathers and children are mentioned as future potential target audiences.

**Mothers:** As evidenced by the focus groups, mothers take the most visible and public role in determining their children’s schooling. Clearly this is not a one-woman show, but often a partnership with the mother taking the lead in researching options.

The most efficient use of media money is to directly target mothers of elementary age children who do not work outside the home, as the final decision makers. This segment is a huge population and the recommendation is to direct all resources toward influencing them. This population is reachable through a relatively simple campaign, but they hold great decision making ability. The target audience includes mothers in the suburban study area.

Fathers of elementary school children: Many wives receive their news from their husbands and it is important that the husbands be informed. While fathers were not interested in taking an active role in the focus groups and there was very little mention by the mothers attending the focus groups, familiarity of the program by fathers may lend legitimacy and pave the way for future conversations.

If targeting this segment, advertise in sports-talk radio and other shows with a high male demographic as well as in the local and sport sections in the daily newspaper. A campaign to this segment would emphasize the gadgetry and technical aspect of virtual school. The mechanics of school online would create the wow factor for this demographic. Monday ad placement in the sports section of the newspaper would be preferred placement, as weekday rates are lower than weekend rates, but male readership high.

Children: This segment of the population is very vocal when it comes to talking to parents about what they see on television. While they are highly influenced, they may not get the subtle distinction of public school online. However, this market is likely to help drive traffic to the website, particularly when seen on a television show he or she might be watching with a parent.

## Budget

The “What’s good for kids?” campaign is ideal for the virtual school vendor in the study area as a way to increase interest in the program and gross revenues by enrolling students. The initial budget for this campaign is \$90,000; derived from a ratio of 10% of the gross revenue of students enrolled in the study area’s district program. The districts expects approximately 200 students to be enrolled in the 2010-2011 school year, at an estimated \$4,500 per student. Based on research of other private education industry professionals, the advertising budget is typically five percent of student gross revenue (Ross Hancock, personal communication, 2/25/10; Mark Ravelli, personal communication, 3/11/10). This campaign recommends an additional five percent to fund the introduction of this program in the study area. See budget in Table 5.

## The Creative: “What’s good for kids?”

The concept is simple: choosing what is good for a kid is the most important way each parent can help their child find his or her potential. By pairing specific attributes of children with visual shots of children schooling and growing, the campaign addresses socialization, computer time questions and schooling at home questions. The socialization shots chosen illustrate that socialization occurs in a multitude of situations like in groups with other children on teams (soccer, baseball) or individually (hanging with a best friend), and laughing with grandparents. Computer time questions are addressed by showing learning opportunities in conjunction with and independent of the computer, like nice shots of a child looking on the globe while doing something on the computer and doing science lessons and reading with a parent. Schooling at home questions are addressed through the positive interactions of the family inherent in all the shots. This campaign works as a :30-second television commercial as well as

in print media. All creative drives the target audience to the website for further information. See storyboard in Appendix 8.

Voiceover:

What are kids good for?

Asking questions.

Dreaming.

Making up stories.

Showing off.

And growing up too darn fast.

What are kids good for? Better to ask, "What's good for kids?"...

[www.publicschoolonline.org](http://www.publicschoolonline.org)

That's what's good for kids. And it's free.

#### Print media

A series of print ads will continue the theme. The top of the ad asks, “What are kids good for?” and shows one attribute (asking questions, dreaming, making up stories, or showing off) with 2 pictures – a split shot of a fun kid socialization activity and a child engaged in serious but creative schooling. This cinematic affect will draw the mind to consider that children need to be engaged in different ways. The bottom of the ad continues, “Better to ask, “What’s good for kids?”” [www.publicschoolonline.org](http://www.publicschoolonline.org). See sample ad in Appendix 9.

This campaign is designed to run an initial period of nine months. Enrolling a child in a program of this kind is a serious, potentially life-altering decision for a family and not usually a spur of the moment decision. A parent may decide to school at home a child who has gone to a

brick and mortar for years; this option is one in which a parent would need to investigate and take time to consider. This initial campaign timeframe allows families who are or become dissatisfied with the current schooling a reasonable period of time to explore this option and make appropriate choices.

Florida's virtual instruction program in the study area closes late enrollment July 30 for the first semester public school August 9 start date. Enrollment for the second semester, which begins January 4 closes Nov. 20.

There are certain times of the year when media buying is increased and decreased. Best use of advertising dollars suggest that advertising is significantly increased during the months of June, July, early August, October, November, January and February.

Slightly increased advertising will occur during the months of January and February, as inquiries to private school admissions officers peak approximately 6-8 weeks after the start of the semester, when parents and children may become dissatisfied with the teachers or schools (Mark Ravelli, personal communication, 3/11/10; Thema Wassman, personal communication, 3/20/10). This suggests that the ad campaign be more visible during these months, offering information about the option.

Advertising spending should be decreased during the period between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Parents are not actively considering making major schooling changes during these months.

The following publications are recommended for print advertising:

The Star Advocate – weekly published through daily The Florida Today – circulation: 51,900. Circulation area: Mims, Titusville, PSJ, Cocoa, Rockledge, Cocoa Village, Merritt Island, Cape Canaveral, Cocoa Beach; zip codes: 32754, 32775, 32780, 32796, 32927, 32926, 23922, 32955 (Rockledge), 32952, 32953, 32920, 32931. With a weekly circulation of 51,00 in the target area as well as surrounding zip codes, the campaign will run a mix of preprinted inserts and 27 ads.

Brevard County Moms – color tabloid-size monthly magazine distributed throughout Brevard County with circulation of 28,850. These magazines can be found in 400 rack locations and has some home delivery. This free publication caters to moms of elementary school children and particularly stay-at-home mothers.

#### Broadcast Media

Bright House Media is the cable system that serves the study area. Less than 40% of the focus group respondents said they received news from television. Based on that, the campaign recommends advertising not on news shows, but on shows that cater to women. Research shows that the target audience can be effectively targeted based on cable offerings. Nationally syndicated shows are prohibitively expensive and tend to hit a broader population. By advertising with :30-second spots during the following shows, the goal of driving traffic to the website will be accomplished: ABC Family, CF13 (local news, all the time channel); Cartoon Network, Family Channel, Fox, Hallmark, Lifetime, Lifetime Movie Network, Oxygen, Noggin, Nickelodeon, USA Network, We TV.

Web: [publicschoolonline.org](http://publicschoolonline.org)

The url [www.publicschoolonline.org](http://www.publicschoolonline.org) was available for \$14.99 per year at godaddy.com. In anticipation of approval of this campaign this domain name has been acquired. The cost of creating a website, webhosting, maintenance and updating is an additional \$1,500 for the campaign period. The home page will have the same theme as the print and broadcast media, and a sample can be seen in Appendix 11. Links from the home page will allow prospective students and their families to see what public school at home might look like. (This would be shots of a child and parent using the curriculum for the Brevard county school district vendor, K12, Inc.)

At right a fill-in space allows a parent to type in his or her zip code to find the vendor for his or her district. Once this navigates to the specific vendor, the parent can then click on the vendor to be re-directed to the vendor's website. In the case of Brevard County, the interested party would be directed to [www.K12.com](http://www.K12.com). A separate link from [publicschoolonline.org](http://publicschoolonline.org) would be established directly to K12.com's Myths About Online Learning page.

Another fill-in space allows Web page visitors to advocate for making public virtual school available to all of Florida's children. By typing in the visitor's Florida zip code, the visitor is directed to a page that lists his or her Florida representatives and senators. They are then given phone number and address information for each legislator as well as the opportunity to send a form-generated email in which they simply fill in their voter name and address. When the web site initially goes live, this political advocacy link will work for any zip code in the state of Florida. The goal is to affect state legislation, so support and advocacy from all over the state is needed to make legislative change.

Web as an advertising tool: directing customers to [publicschoolonline.org](http://publicschoolonline.org)

Research suggests that a strong web presence is crucial for educating and informing the target audience. The Web is also useful tool for attracting and driving traffic to the website. Using Google AdWords potential virtual school families will see ads for the free virtual school above or alongside Google searches. The pay per click system allows people to see the ads when searching for the following keywords” virtual school, Brevard public school, Brevard schools, Titusville schools, Brevard virtual school, Brevard Virtual Instruction Program, Titusville virtual school, Brevard County schools, public school online and Florida Virtual School. Using or searching Google networks, like gmail, You Tube, and other content rich sites will result in the [publicschoolonline.org](http://publicschoolonline.org) ads to be shown to the users.

This campaign will allocate \$150.00 per month to initiate the program and will monitor the number of clicks. The amount of money allocated can be adjusted if the number of clicks to the [publicschoolonline.org](http://publicschoolonline.org) exceeds initial estimates.

#### Public Relations

Press releases will play an important role in this public awareness campaign. Not only with the releases strengthen the core message of “What’s good for kids” but will allow extra opportunities for political advocacy. Many mothers of young children gather their news from other people; thus consistent presence in print media, non-advertising, is desired and will be cultivated through media relationships. Press releases with accompanying photos will be sent to local media monthly. Press releases will be sent to Florida Today, the local daily, as well as weeklies: The Star Advocate and the Hometown News; and monthly Brevard Mom magazine.



The Florida Today newspaper has a daily circulation of 204,000 in the affected county with 52% of readers being women. The Star Advocate has a weekly distribution of 51,900 homes in study and surrounding areas; and the Hometown News distributes weekly to 21,000 homes. The Star Advocate and the Hometown News are free weeklies and cater to families, publishing weekly baseball and soccer league scores as well as weekly school news and features on kids and “hometown heroes.” Many families with children potentially affected by the accessibility of virtual school follow these papers for news and events that specifically affect children. The following releases will roll out in specific months; other months’ releases will be in relation to current events.

Table 2: Calendar of Suggested Press Releases

|           |  |
|-----------|--|
| June      | Announce K12 as 2010/11 virtual school vendor for Brevard County |
| July      | Sign-up now for virtual school for the fall                      |
| August    | Virtual School is in session                                     |
| September | Enrollment will close soon                                       |
| December  | Virtual School enrollment opens for second semester              |
| January   | Virtual School success stories                                   |

Press Kits will be created which can be delivered to media during events. Letterhead will be developed using the logos of the study area’s district virtual school program and the approved virtual school vendor. Each kit will contain, at minimum and on letterhead:

- Main news release during which this is to be handed out
- Fact sheet explaining Florida’s virtual school program and history
- Backgrounder on K12, Inc.
- One page “Myths About Online Learning”

- One page listing of all Brevard County public schools, including virtual, and FCAT results for 5 years
- Copy of House and Senate bills for proposed legislative changes

#### Strategic Partnerships

The premier event for women in the study area is the annual Spirit of Women Day of Dance presented by Parrish Medical Center at Sandpoint Park. The fourth annual Spirit of Women Day of Dance is billed as a celebration of fitness and heart health. The purpose of the event is to celebrate and inspire a healthy lifestyle for women and their families. With an annual attendance of 5,000, the event affords an excellent opportunity for personal contact with the target audience.

Florida Parent Educator Association is a statewide organization that acts as a clearinghouse of information and support network for home school families. Five almanacs are published each year between September and March and mailed to approximately 10,000 families plus 525 libraries. The FPEA Guide to Homeschooling, with a print run of 12,000 is mailed throughout the year on request. A full page ad in each Almanac as well as the convention program is \$3,800. Unfortunately presence through a booth at their annual May convention with an attendance of more than 15,000 is not possible because all spots are closed. Applications for the May 2011 convention will be available on the FPEA website in August 2010.

#### Outreach

An important component of this campaign is outreach to the community. The misconceptions many focus group participants had about virtual school points to a great need to inform with facts. Also many in the community may be confused with the middle and high school Florida Virtual School. The focus group research pointed to the fact that families do not choose to access the virtual school option based on one specific or overriding reason, but because

of varied and highly individualized reasons. Outreach is extremely important because it allows the personal contact that allows individuals to ask the questions that are pertinent to their specific situation.

A list of recommended speakers and experts will be compiled and the speakers trained to advocate for the elementary virtual school at clubs, churches, parents at preschools. Speakers and experts include local parents and teachers of virtual schooled children as well as others with an interest in public school options. Speakers would be provided with a simple audio-visional presentation and handouts – all of which drive traffic to [www.publicschoolonline.org](http://www.publicschoolonline.org). The handouts would vary from letter-size handouts to post-card-size handouts based on the event and group being addressed. Pencils stating: What's good for kids? [www.publicschoolonline.org](http://www.publicschoolonline.org) will be distributed freely at all opportunities.

Clubs are important to raise the profile of virtual school within the groups of decision-makers for the community. While Rotarians, Kiwanians, Chamber of Commerce members and the like are not necessarily candidates to do public school at home with their children, certainly they have reach within the community. By explaining virtual school and showing it as a positive and healthy school option, these influencers spread the message through the community.

In the North Brevard / Titusville area, several home school networks are associated with local churches. Churches also offer opportunities to inform large groups of the community at one time in one-on-one contact. Again, the point is to offer a personal contact where questions can be asked and answered in an old-fashioned personal way.

The home school networks are important to tap into, because while some families may choose the virtual school option, many more families are referred to these existing networks for

information. Arming these groups of parents with knowledge allows them to share the option with parents who have even a passing interest in pulling their child out of a school. These home school networks also become a support network for virtual school families as they search for field trips, socialization opportunities during the day, possible inclusion in co-op and parental support.

A partnership with the Coalition for Virtual School Families is also an opportunity to help spread the message at no additional charge. The coalition is part of a national organization and has a web and FaceBook presence. They can help drive interested traffic to [publicschoolonline.org](http://publicschoolonline.org).

## Evaluation

This marketing plan has been created recognizing that periodic evaluation is needed in order to assess its effectiveness. Tactics recommended will be tracked by medium. Newspaper and television advertisement will all drive traffic to the website, but with a different url attachment specifying publication (i.e.: [www.publicschoolonline.org/brighthouse](http://www.publicschoolonline.org/brighthouse)). By tracking through the web portal, media resulting in potential customer clicks on the website can be increased.

Number of clicks generating form letters to local legislators will be a clear indicator of whether the outreach and speaking program is working.

As students/families request information and enroll in the virtual school, data will be collected to identify how they learned of the program.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study, Equitable Access to Florida's Online Elementary School, is to create a campaign which ultimately achieves this goal. Current regulations to Florida's district virtual instruction program restrict eligibility to prior Florida public school students. The focus group sessions yielded data regarding the general lack of awareness of the public school options and virtual school, in particular. Based on data pointing to the education decision makers, attitudes regarding the cost of education choices, socialization and schooling at home, a marketing campaign is proposed which addresses these issues. The stated marketing campaign aims to inform Florida residents about the elementary virtual school and motivates these individuals to contact their state representatives or senators calling for change. The bedrock of the campaign is to drive traffic to the website [publicschoolonline.org](http://publicschoolonline.org) where greater information can be obtained, and assistance is given to the site visitors making contacting local senators and representatives easy and efficient. The marketing campaign will be deemed successful with a significant increase in enrollment in the study area's district virtual instruction program (virtual school) and with the passage of legislation allowing equitable access to the state's virtual school program by all students. The cost to run this campaign is \$90,000 over nine months beginning in July 2010.

## Appendix

Appendix 1: *2009-2014 Growth Rate of Online Pre-K-12 Students*

Appendix 2: *States with a state virtual school or online initiative, full-time online schools or both*

Appendix 3: *Student Reasons to take online class*

Appendix 4: *2000 Census Data for Titusville, Florida, Population 40,670*

Appendix 5: *Institutional Review Board Approval Letter*

Appendix 6: *Informed Consent Form Used for Focus Groups*

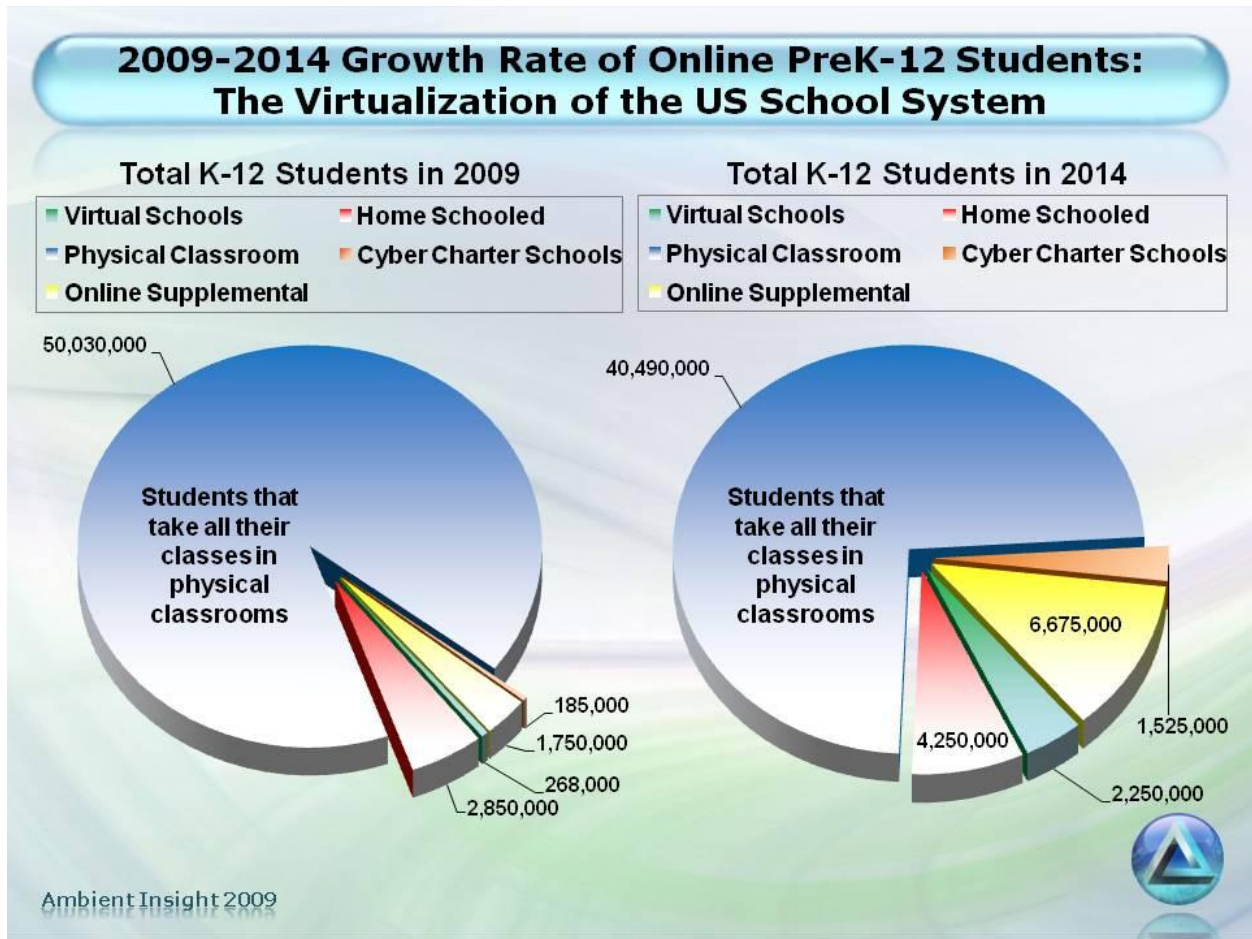
Appendix 7: *General Questionnaire for Focus Group Participants*

Appendix 8: *Focus Group Research Questions*

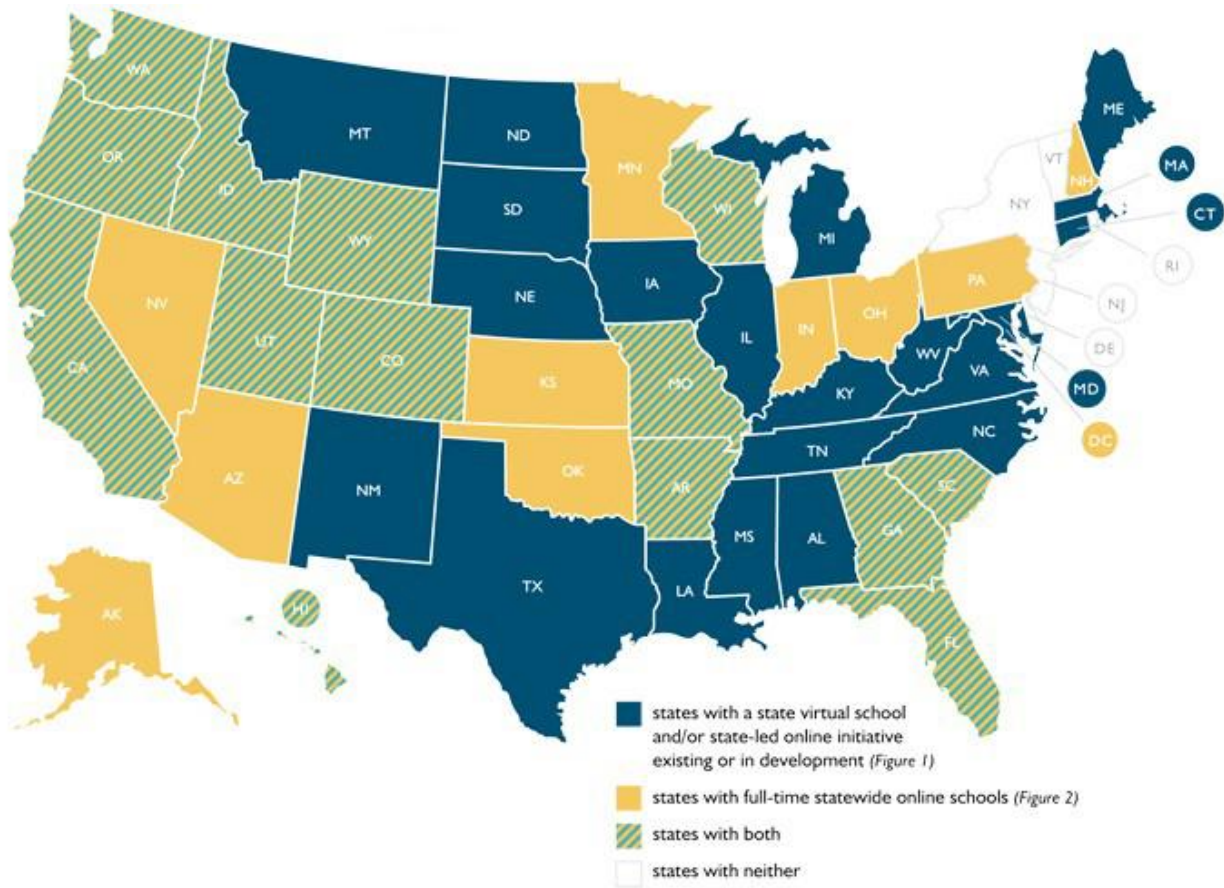
Appendix 9: *“Good For Kids” :30-second Storyboard*

Appendix 10: *“Good For Kids” Sample Ad*

Appendix 1: 2009-2014 Growth Rate of Online Pre-K-12 Students

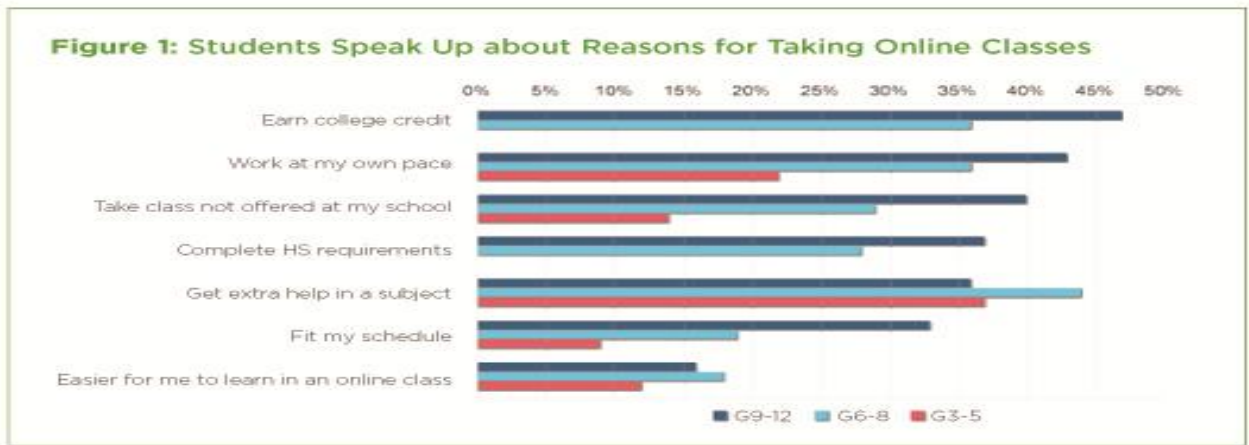


Appendix 2: *States with a state virtual school or online initiative, full-time online schools or both*

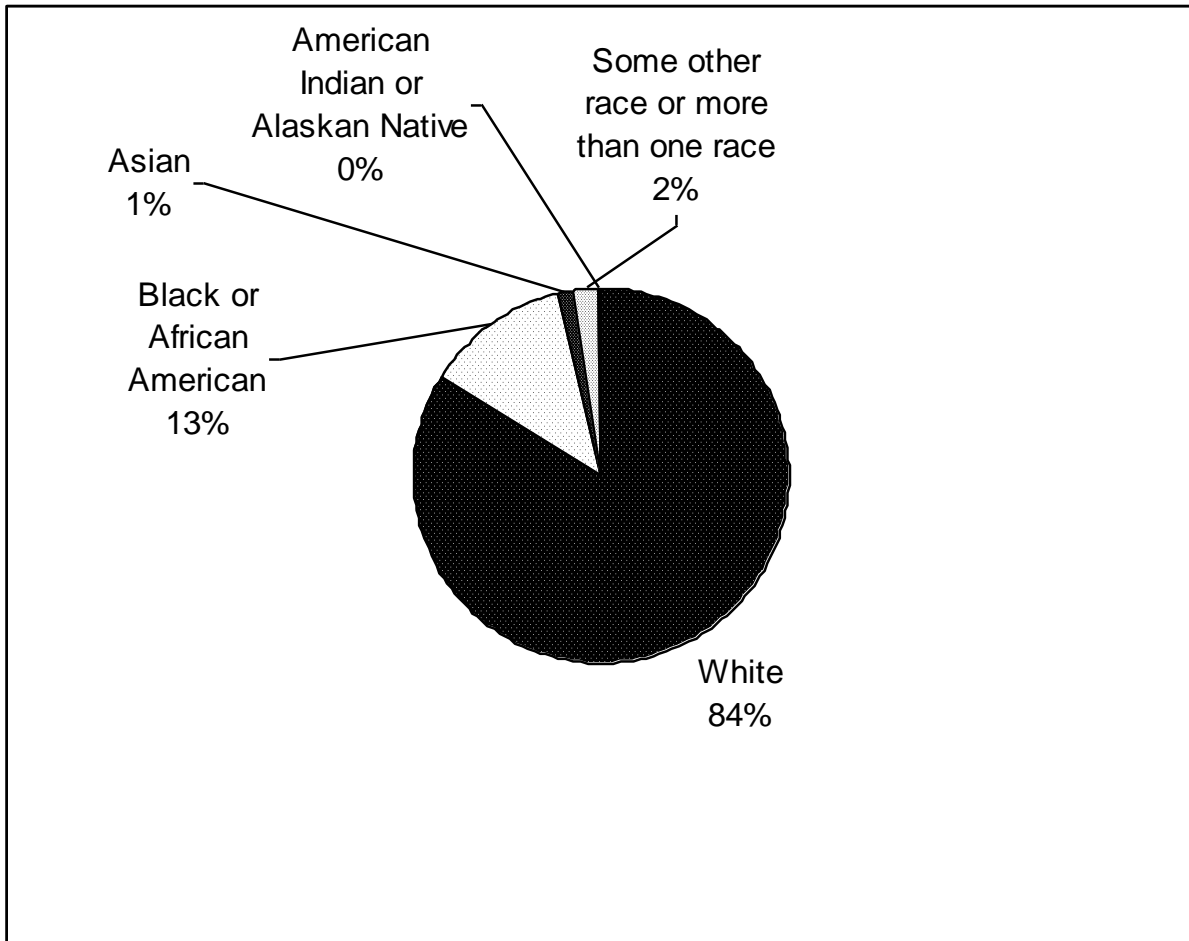




Appendix 3: *Student Reasons to take online class*



*Appendix 4: 2000 Census Data for Titusville, Florida, Population 40,670*



Appendix 5: Institutional Review Board Approval Letter



FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

FIU IRB Approved  
Date: 3/18/10  
No: 030410-02

Office of Research Integrity  
Research Compliance, MARC 430

MEMORANDUM

**To:** Margaret Reynolds

**CC:** Dr. Paola Prado  
File

**From:** Chris Grayson, CIM, Associate Director of Research Compliance *CG*

**Date:** 3/18/10

**Proposal Title:** "Equitable Access to Florida's Online Public Elementary School"

**Approval #** 030410-02

The Institutional Review Board of Florida International University has approved your study for the use of human subjects. Your IRB approval date is **March 4, 2010** and this approval will expire on **March 4, 2011**. As a requirement of IRB approval you are required to:

- 1) Provide immediate written notification to the IRB of:
  - Any additions to, or changes in the procedures involving human subjects,
  - Every serious or unusual or unanticipated adverse event as well as problems with the rights or welfare of the human subjects. Confirmation of receipt of serious AE reports must be made with the IRB office.
- 2) Utilize copies of the date stamped consent document(s) for the recruitment of subjects and receive annual renewal of consent documents.
- 3) **Receive annual review and re-approval prior to your expiration date.**

**Special Conditions:** N/A

Please note your approval number is indicated above. For further information, you may visit the ORI – Human Subjects website at <http://ori.fiu.edu/IRB.html>.

Appendix 6: *Informed Consent Form Used for Focus Groups***INFORMED CONSENT**

Title of Research: Equitable Access to Florida's Online Public Elementary School

Principal Investigator: Margaret Reynolds, Global Strategic Communications Major

Before agreeing to participate in this research study, it is important that you read the following explanation of this study. This statement describes the purpose, procedures, benefits, risks, discomforts, and precautions of the program. Also described are the alternative procedures available to you, as well as your right to withdraw from the study at any time. No guarantees or assurances can be made as to the results of the study.

You are being asked to participate in the research project to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of adults toward public school options available in the State of Florida.

The research method will consist of a focus group lasting no more than 1 ½ hours, where participants are asked questions about public elementary education in Florida. It is unlikely that you will be subjected to physical or psychological risk or discomfort during the focus group.

Withdrawal Without Prejudice

Participation in this study is voluntary; refusal to participate will involve no penalty. Each participant is free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in this project at any time without prejudice from this institution.

Confidentiality

All information gathered from the study will remain confidential. Your identity as a participant will not be disclosed; only the researcher will have access to the research materials, which will be kept in a locked file. Any references to your identity that would compromise your anonymity will be removed prior to the preparation of the research reports and publications. Voice recordings will be destroyed or erased once the study is completed. Your last name will not be used in the transcripts of the recording.

This research is expected to yield knowledge about public school education in Florida. Its results may be used to develop advertising strategies and/or materials for a public awareness campaign about education. There are no direct benefits in participating in this focus group. There are also no costs to participating in the research. Participants will not be remunerated for their participation.

There is no foreseeable risk of injury involved in this study and the researcher has made no provision for monetary compensation in the event of injury resulting from the research. In the event of such injury, the researcher will provide assistance in locating and accessing appropriate health care services. The cost of health care services is the responsibility of the participant.

Should you have any questions concerning this study, you may contact Dr. Paola Prado (principal investigator and faculty advisor) at 305-919-4428 or write her at pprado@fiu.edu. Should you feel that you were mistreated or would like to talk with someone about your rights as a volunteer in this research study, please contact Dr. Patricia Price, Institutional Review Board Chair, at 305-348-2618 or 305-348-2494.

Agreement

This agreement states that you have received a copy of this form and you agree to participate in this study.

---

 Signature of Subject

Date

Subject name (printed)

---

 Signature of Researcher    Date

*Appendix 7: General Questionnaire for Focus Group Participants*

Gender

- Male
- Female

What is your race?

- White
- Black or African American
- Asian
- American Indian or Alaskan native
- Or some other race or more than one race

Are you of Hispanic or Latino Origin?

- Yes
- No

Primary language spoken at home:

- English
- Language other than English

How many school age children are in your home? \_\_\_\_\_

Check off which of the following grade levels for which there are children in your home:

- Elementary school
- Middle school
- High school

Check off which of the options the children in your home use:

- Home school
- Private school
- Public school

Where do you get your news?

\_\_\_\_\_

Your age? \_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix 8: *Focus Group Research Questions*

For the purposes of this focus group discussion we are going to focus on virtual school.

Definition: Virtual school is a school in which students and teachers are separated by time and/or space. The State of Florida offers virtual school to elementary students through their local school district and provides students with all materials needed including books, workbooks, loaner computers and printers, manipulatives and web-based or computer programs. This is public school at home and is not home school.

1. Please name any and all education options that you are aware are available to public school students.
2. What do you know about virtual school?
3. What do you know about elementary virtual school?
4. In your opinion, who should be eligible to attend virtual school?
5. How do you feel about your tax dollars paying for students to learn the public school curriculum at home?

Follow-up prompt: Who do you think should pay for this program and the materials and resources?

6. Would you consider virtual school for your child? Why or why not?

Prompt: What are your thoughts about this approach to childhood education?

Prompt: Would you have any concerns or doubts about the effectiveness of this approach to childhood education?

Appendix 8: “Good For Kids” :30 Storyboard

“What are kids good for?”

Voiceover: What are kids good for?



Asking Questions

Voiceover: Asking questions



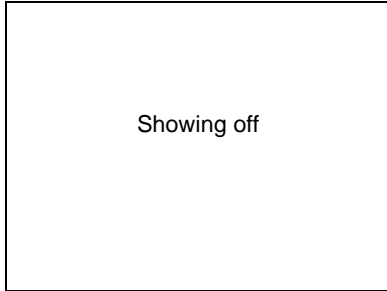
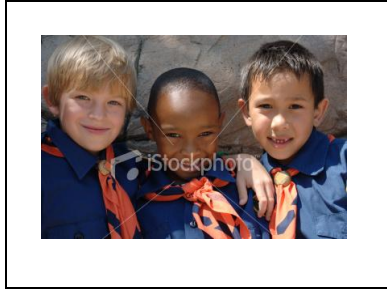
Dreaming

Voiceover: Dreaming





Voiceover: Making up stories



Voiceover: Showing off



Voiceover: And growing up too darn fast.



Voiceover: What are kids good for?  
Better to ask, "What's good for kids?" ...



Voiceover: publicschoolonline.org.  
That's what's good for kids. And it's free.



Appendix 10: "Good For Kids" Sample Ad

# What are kids good for?

Dreaming. Asking questions. Showing off.



Better to ask, "What's good for kids?"

[www.publicschoolonline.org](http://www.publicschoolonline.org)

That's what's good for kids.

And it's free.

Appendix 11: Sample Homepage for [www.publicschoolonline.org](http://www.publicschoolonline.org)

The screenshot shows the homepage of PublicSchoolOnline.org. The browser window title is "Mozilla Firefox Start Page" and the address bar shows "http://www.publicschoolonline.org". The main content area features a large image of a family (father, mother, and two children) looking at a laptop. The text "PublicSchoolOnline.org" is displayed in a stylized font, with the tagline "IT'S WHAT'S GOOD FOR KIDS" underneath. Below the image, the text reads "What are kids good for?" followed by "Asking Questions • Dreaming • Making Up Stories • Showing Off". To the right, there are two promotional images: one titled "10 MYTHS ABOUT ONLINE SCHOOLING" showing children in a field, and another titled "A day in the life of an online student" showing a child with a globe. Below these is a form to "Find your free online school:" with an input field for "ENTER ZIP CODE". Further down is a call to action: "Tell your government to make online public school free to all of Florida's children!" with a "SEND A MESSAGE NOW" button. At the bottom, a dark blue navigation bar contains the links: NEWS, LINKS, FAQ'S, DISCUSSION FORUM, and ABOUT US.

## Tables

Table 1: *Florida School Grades: FCAT Results for Pilot Virtual Schools*

Table 2: *Florida's Public Virtual Education Options, 2009-2010*

Table 3: *Concepts, the Research and Resulting Focus Group Questions*

Table 4: *Demographic Data for Focus Group Respondents*

Table 5: *Budget for "Good for Kids" Campaign*

Table 1: Florida School Grades: FCAT Results for Pilot Virtual Schools

# FLORIDA SCHOOL GRADES

School Accountability Report  
[www.schoolgrades.fdoe.org](http://www.schoolgrades.fdoe.org)

**You selected:**

**District:** FLORIDA VIRTUAL ACADEMY, FLORIDA CONNECTIONS ACADEMY  
**Years:** 2008-2009, 2007-2008, 2006-2007, 2005-2006, 2004-2005, 2003-2004, 2002-2003, 2001-2002, 2000-2001, 1999-2000, 1998-1999  
**School Grades:**

**Report Type:** School Grades

**Level:** Combination for Florida Connections Academy; Combination for Florida Virtual Academy

| School Accountability Report       |             |  |                                     |                                  |                                     |                                     |                                    |                                 |  |   |  |   |                |                        |               |
|------------------------------------|-------------|--|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|---|--|---|----------------|------------------------|---------------|
| School Number                      | School Year | Grade<br><br>(Includes Learning Gains) | % Meeting High Standards in Reading | % Meeting High Standards in Math | % Meeting High Standards in Writing | % Meeting High Standards in Science | % Making Learning Gains in Reading | % Making Learning Gains in Math | % of Lowest 25% Making Learning Gains in Reading | % of Lowest 25% Making Learning Gains in Math | Bonus points for 11th-12th grade Retakes | Points Earned (Sum of Previous 9 Columns) | Percent Tested | Free and Reduced Lunch | Minority Rate |
| <b>Florida Connections Academy</b> |             |  |                                     |                                  |                                     |                                     |                                    |                                 |  |   |  |   |                |                        |               |
| 0700                               | 2008-09     | A                                      | 84                                  | 71                               | 73                                  | 61                                  | 72                                 | 71                              | 69   | 68  | NA                                       | 569                                       | 99             | 46                     | 33            |
| 0700                               | 2007-08     | A                                      | 85                                  | 77                               | 74                                  | 63                                  | 69                                 | 70                              | 67   | 63  | NA                                       | 568                                       | 97             | 45                     | 33            |
| 0700                               | 2006-07     | A                                      | 76                                  | 67                               | 60                                  | 52                                  | 61                                 | 74                              | 70   | 68  | NA                                       | 528                                       | 95             | 50                     | 34            |
| 0700                               | 2005-06     | B                                      | 75                                  | 55                               | 65                                  |                                     | 64                                 | 53                              | 74   |   |  | 386                                       | 98             | 34                     | 29            |
| 0700                               | 2004-05     | B                                      | 80                                  | 56                               | 56                                  |                                     | 69                                 | 67                              | 67   |   |  | 395                                       | 94             | 19                     | 18            |
| <b>Florida Virtual Academy</b>     |             |  |                                     |                                  |                                     |                                     |                                    |                                 |  |   |  |   |                |                        |               |
| 0801                               | 2008-09     | A                                      | 89                                  | 78                               | 71                                  | 64                                  | 72                                 | 72                              | 76   | 69  | NA                                       | 591                                       | 99             | 30                     | 24            |
| 0801                               | 2007-08     | A                                      | 84                                  | 76                               | 65                                  | 67                                  | 72                                 | 66                              | 72   | 62  | NA                                       | 564                                       | 98             | 31                     | 25            |
| 0801                               | 2006-07     | A                                      | 89                                  | 75                               | 64                                  | 64                                  | 76                                 | 59                              | 73   | 57  | NA                                       | 557                                       | 98             | 29                     | 20            |
| 0801                               | 2005-06     | B                                      | 81                                  | 76                               | 73                                  |                                     | 63                                 | 68                              | 48   |   |  | 409                                       | 98             | 35                     | 24            |
| 0801                               | 2004-05     | B                                      | 80                                  | 71                               | 56                                  |                                     | 60                                 | 76                              | 57   |   |  | 400                                       | 91             | 40                     | 27            |

Table 2: Florida’s Public Virtual Education Options, 2009-2010

| Florida’s Public K-12 Virtual Education Options, 2009-10 |  |   |  |   |   |
|--|--|---|--|---|---|
|  | Florida Virtual School (FLVS)*   | District Franchise of FLVS  | District Virtual Instruction Program (VIP)   | Other District Programs                                     | State-level K-8 Virtual School Programs (FCA and FLVA) Transitioning Out  |
| Statutory Authority                                      | 1002.37  | 1002.37   | 1002.45  | 1002.45(9)  | 1002.415  |
| Type of Program  | Primarily Supplemental   | Part-time/Full-time   | Primarily Full-time Part-time or Full-time for DOP, AI, or DJJ in 9-12   | Supplemental in district schools                            | Full-time   |
| Grade Levels   | Grades 6-12  | Grades 6-12   | Grades K-12  | Varies  | Grades K-8  |
| Student Eligibility                                      | Public, private, and home education students   | Public, private, and home education students  | Public school students and military dependents   | These are public school students in district public schools | Public school students (grades 2-8), K-1, and siblings  |
| Funding  | FEFP based on successful completions (courses passed or credits earned)  | FEFP based on successful completions (courses passed or credits earned) Limited to 1.0 FTE  | FEFP based on successful completions (promotion for K-5, courses passed (6-8), credits earned (9-12) Limited to 1.0 FTE  | FEFP  | Previously by Line Item 2009-10-FEFP Based on seat-time (enrollment and attendance) Limited to 1.0 FTE                            |
| Accountability   | Performance Funding Not in state or federal accountability because program is supplemental Accountability goes to school of record in district | Performance funding if full-time, same accountability as other public schools in district if part-time, accountability goes to school of record | Performance Funding District-operated: virtual program in accountability Provider-operated: provider receives statewide grade Grade D or F for one year—submit SIP to DOE Grade D or F for 2 of 4 years—contract or program terminated | Part of school’s accountability                             | In state and federal accountability Grade D or F for one year—submit SIP to DOE Grade D or F for 2 of 4 years—Contract terminated |

\* If FLVS contracts to operate District VIP program, they must meet requirements of section 1002.45, F.S. <http://fldoe.org/schools/virtual-schools/pdf/veof.pdf>

Table 3: *Concepts, the Research and Resulting Focus Group Questions*

| Concept   | Conceptual Definition  | Operational Definition<br>Focus Group Questions  |
|---|--|--|
| Level of awareness of Florida public school options | <p>Because virtual schooling is a relatively new public school option (in Florida since 1997) many people do not even know it exists. Further, in Florida, the change of status for the elementary program, from pilot program to district initiative has confused many, as well as added confusion with the very popular and well-attended supplemental virtual school, FLVS.</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Please name any and all options available to public school students.</li> <li>2. What do you know about virtual school?</li> <li>3. What do you know about elementary virtual school?</li> </ol>   |
| Cost of virtual school                              | <p>What entity bears the burden of paying for school options? The cost of developing virtual school is expensive. The public school system is already overburdened with shrinking budgets, more students and increased costs, across the board. Also, how much does virtual school cost compared to public school?</p>   | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. In your opinion, who should be eligible to attend virtual school?</li> <li>5. How do you feel about your tax dollars paying for students to learn the public school curriculum at home?</li> </ol> |
| Barriers to success - Access divide/ Tech issues    | <p>A fear of lack of access for minorities and lower income students and lack of technical savvy can be a hot button issue. However, the State of Florida has worked around this problem by making "loaner" equipment available and subsidizing internet access in some programs.</p>  | <p>Follow-up prompt 1: Who do you think should pay for this program and the materials and resources?</p>   |

|   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| <p>Public perception of virtual school</p>            | <p>Virtual school has a checkered history in terms of public perception. It has sometimes been synonymous with diploma mills and opportunities for athletes to boost grade point average for college play and scholarship.</p>   | <p>6. Would you consider virtual school for your child? Why or why not?</p>   |
| <p>Socialization</p>                                  | <p>Sivin-Kachala, 2009 addressed the perceived lack of socialization opportunities for children schooled at home. His research noted this to be a major objection for many, though research does not bear this out as a valid concern to not school a child at home.</p> | <p>Follow-up Prompt 2: Would you have any concerns or doubts about the effectiveness of this approach to childhood education?</p> |
| <p>Academic achievement of virtual school student</p> | <p>Virtual school students do as well as and better than their counterparts in public school. In Florida this is borne out by Florida Comprehensive Achievement Tests and results on the national ACT college tests.</p>   | <p>Follow-up Prompt 3: What are your thoughts about this approach to childhood education?</p>                                     |

Table 4: Demographic Data for Focus Group Respondents

| Respondent | Sex  |        | Age | Race  |       |                   | Primary Language Spoken at Home | # of school-aged children in the home | Children's Grade levels |            |        | Schools attended |             |                | News Source   |          |              |           |
|------------|------|--------|-----|-------|-------|-------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|------------|--------|------------------|-------------|----------------|---------------|----------|--------------|-----------|
|            | Male | Female |     | White | Black | Other/<br>>than 1 |                                 |                                       | Hispanic/Latino         | Elementary | Middle | High             | Home School | Private School | Public School | Internet | Other People | Newspaper |
| 1          | X    |        | 31  |       |       | X                 |                                 | 1                                     | X                       |            |        | X                |             |                | X             |          |              |           |
| 2          | X    |        | 26  | X     |       |                   |                                 | 2                                     | X                       | X          |        | X                |             |                |               |          |              |           |
| 3          | X    |        | 49  | X     |       |                   |                                 | 1                                     | X                       |            |        | X                |             |                |               | X        |              |           |
| 4          | X    |        | 30  | X     |       |                   |                                 | 1                                     | X                       |            |        | X                |             |                | X             |          |              |           |
| 5          | X    |        | 37  | X     |       |                   |                                 | 2                                     | X                       | X          |        | X                |             |                | X             |          |              |           |
| 6          | X    |        | 36  | X     |       |                   |                                 | 2                                     | X                       |            |        | X                |             |                | X             |          |              |           |
| 7          | X    |        | 24  | X     |       |                   |                                 | 1                                     | X                       |            |        | X                |             |                | X             |          |              |           |
| 8          | X    |        | 42  | X     |       |                   |                                 | 4                                     | X                       | X          |        | X                |             |                | X             |          |              | X         |
| 9          | X    |        | 27  | X     |       |                   |                                 | 2                                     | X                       | X          |        | X                |             |                | X             |          |              |           |
| 10         | X    |        | 46  | X     |       |                   |                                 | 4                                     | X                       | X          |        | X                |             |                | X             |          |              |           |
| 11         | X    |        | 21  | X     |       |                   |                                 | 2                                     | X                       |            |        | X                |             |                | X             |          |              |           |
| 12         | X    |        | 39  | X     |       |                   |                                 | 2                                     | X                       |            |        | X                |             |                | X             |          |              | X         |
| 13         | X    |        | 33  | X     |       |                   |                                 | 3                                     | X                       |            |        | X                |             |                | X             |          |              |           |
| 14         | X    |        | 29  | X     |       |                   |                                 | 3                                     | X                       | X          |        | X                |             |                | X             |          |              |           |
| 15         | X    |        | 41  | X     |       |                   |                                 | 2                                     | X                       | X          |        | X                |             |                | X             |          |              |           |
| 16         | X    |        | 46  | X     |       |                   |                                 | 2                                     | X                       | X          |        | X                |             |                | X             |          |              |           |
| 17         | X    |        | 33  | X     |       |                   |                                 | 2                                     | X                       | X          |        | X                |             |                | X             |          |              |           |
| 18         | X    |        | 26  | X     |       |                   |                                 | 2                                     | X                       |            |        | X                |             |                | X             |          |              |           |
| 19         | X    |        | 42  | X     |       |                   |                                 | 2                                     | X                       |            |        | X                |             |                | X             |          |              |           |
| 20         | X    |        | 21  | X     |       |                   |                                 | 2                                     | X                       |            |        | X                |             |                | X             |          |              | X         |
| 21         | X    |        | 29  | X     |       |                   |                                 | 3                                     | X                       | X          |        | X                |             |                | X             |          |              |           |
| 22         | X    |        | 35  | X     |       |                   |                                 | 4                                     | X                       | X          |        | X                |             |                | X             |          |              | X         |
| 23         | X    |        | 45  | X     |       |                   |                                 | 1                                     | X                       |            |        | X                |             |                | X             |          |              | X         |



Table 5: *Budget for “Good for Kids” Campaign*

| Advertising Budget<br>July 2010 - February 2011       |          |
|---|----------|
| Outreach  | \$900    |
| Postcards, handouts, display, giveaway pencils, pens  |          |
| Partnerships  |          |
| Florida Parent Educator Association                   | \$3,800  |
| Florida Chapter, Coalition of Virtual School Families | \$2,000  |
| Titusville Spirit of Women Day of Dance               | \$750    |
| Print Media   |          |
| Brevard Moms  | \$8,214  |
| Star Advocate weekly                                  | \$3,500  |
| Web Activities  |          |
| Webpage creation, hosting, maintenance, upkeep        | \$1,500  |
| Google AdWords  | \$4,200  |
| BrevardMomsLikeMe.com                                 | \$1,200  |
| Broadcast Media                                       |          |
| Local cable through Brighthouse                       | \$63,500 |
| Total Budget  | \$90,000 |

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