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NATIONAL NEWS

E-Learning Expands for Special-Needs Students

Education Week

By: Nirvi Shah

August 22, 2011

[HTTP://WWW.EDWEEK.ORG/EW/ARTICLES/2011/08/24/01EDTECH-DISABILITIES.H31.HTML?TKN=RWVFAUP%2F0VQRYHB8WX02GIMV56BBPAOKGNAH&CMP=CLP-EDWEEK](http://WWW.EDWEEK.ORG/EW/ARTICLES/2011/08/24/01EDTECH-DISABILITIES.H31.HTML?TKN=RWVFAUP%2F0VQRYHB8WX02GIMV56BBPAOKGNAH&CMP=CLP-EDWEEK)

When Seph Koutsoukis was in a classroom at an elementary school in Simpsonville, S.C., he floundered.

For Seph, who has autism, on-the-spot questions from teachers were a source of embarrassment. He was easily distracted by the sights and sounds in the colorful, occasionally loud room.

But for two years, 10-year-old Seph has taken online classes through the [South Carolina Connections Academy](#), a charter school based in Columbia, S.C. He watches lessons on his home computer and talks with his teachers by phone and email. His mother, Kelly Koutsoukis, says Seph's self-esteem and demeanor are so improved because of his new school arrangement that people ask if he still has autism. Seph can focus on his schoolwork because he isn't scoping out the rest of his class when he should be concentrating, she says. He isn't anxious about being called on by the teacher and looking dumb in class. Now when he answers a question during a live virtual class, only the teacher sees what he says.

"This was the first time somebody has ever said, 'What can we do for your child?' instead of 'This is what we're going to offer,'" Ms. Koutsoukis said of the accommodations the public online school has made.

Virtual classes have been a blessing for Seph, and students such as Jasmin Floyd. Ms. Floyd, 18, just graduated from Woodstock Academy in Woodstock, Conn., but took several classes through the Maynard, Mass.-based Virtual High School Global Consortium. That allowed her to stay at home without exacerbating her fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva, a painful condition that causes extra bone to form in her muscles and other connective tissues.

Yet not all online classes are welcoming to students with disabilities. The courses may not be accessible to them, or the students may never be offered the courses in the first place.

A [report](#) last year by Project Forum at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education concluded as much. "One of the findings from the group at the Forum was that students with disabilities have been systematically denied admission in places," said Paula Burdette, Project Forum's director, although she doesn't believe that's because of outright ill will. "I don't think it is a conspiracy," she said. "I think people with sometimes the best intentions don't know what to do." However, a 2003 letter from the U.S. Department of Education is explicit on the issue of virtual classes for students with disabilities. Although there isn't any specific federal guidance about online or virtual schools, wrote the then-director of special education programs, there also isn't any need for special rules because online or virtual schools must abide by all the same requirements set for other schools in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Years since that letter, obstacles between students with disabilities and online education persist, enough so that the Education Department has recognized the need for guidance and research about online courses for such students.

The department is in the process of selecting a creator for a Center on Online Learning and Students With Disabilities and is

putting about \$1.5 million behind the center.

"The expanded use of online learning offers potential benefits to children with disabilities but also poses significant challenges," the May 5 *Federal Register* notice about the project reads. The center's goal is to research how students with disabilities participate, or don't, in online courses in kindergarten through 12th grade, what the positive and negative outcomes for online learning are for those students, and effective ways of teaching children with disabilities online.

"Just because it goes into digital format does not make it accessible," said Yvonne Domings, an instructional designer and research associate for the [Center for Applied Special Technology](#), or CAST, in Wakefield, Mass. She worked on a panel that was reviewing standards for online courses.

"Giving somebody access to something does not mean they're going to learn from it," she added.

Indeed, said Patti Ralabate, a universal design for learning fellow at CAST, "too often what's happened is online courses end up just being what used to be in printed text, now hosted in an online format. It isn't any more accessible in that format than it was when it was in a textbook."

While features such as videos and graphics might seem to automatically bridge that gap, those enhancements may be useless to a student who has visual problems or other needs.

"You have to do a lot of proactive thinking," Ms. Ralabate said.

On the flip side, warns one advocate, is the use of online classes as a substitute for teaching students with disabilities in other ways.

"We do not want to see technology used in place of best practice ... or to see technology compensate for shortages or to save on budgets—motivations that are less than addressing the best interests of students," said Kim Hymes, the director of policy and advocacy for the Council for Exceptional Children in Arlington, Va.

Low Participation

Online classes have grown rapidly into an entire industry, with for-profit companies and nonprofits offering courses for entire schools and individual families. In addition, school districts and states have their own virtual schools.

Despite the proliferation, students with disabilities often don't take the courses, because in many cases, the classes themselves or the types of classes offered weren't designed with those students in mind.

For example, in Alabama, which has one of the largest state-run virtual schools in the country, just 217 students with disabilities took at least one online course last school year, although Alabama, through the Montgomery-based, state-run [Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators, & Students Statewide](#), or ACCESS, delivered 34,000 online courses to students. The school was created to offer foreign language and Advanced Placement courses to students in rural parts of the state.

If little or no access is a problem in some places, too much access, with little teaching, is a problem elsewhere, said Marcie Lipsitt, a parent advocate in Michigan for the National Center for Learning Disabilities, which is based in New York City.

"While I absolutely believe that high-quality and rigorous online learning can offer children new opportunities, I have pretty serious concerns about online education being used to supplant direct teacher instruction," she said, especially in self-contained classrooms for some children with disabilities.

"If done right, online learning can afford students with learning disabilities new opportunities," Ms. Lipsitt continued. "But with all things in education and children who have learning disabilities and [individualized education programs], there are schools that will look to shortchange students with disabilities."

Getting a solid grasp of how many students take online courses is its own challenge. While Alabama tracks how many students with disabilities take online courses, some states and virtual schools don't, even though the programs are years old. When Project Forum asked states how many students with disabilities enrolled in online courses two years ago, one state chose not to respond because the topic was "too controversial."

And in Kentucky, the [state-run virtual school](#) that opened in 2000 will, for the first time, collect information about a child's disability status starting with the 2011-12 school year.

Other schools gather data on students with disabilities but know it is incomplete. Florida's state-run online school, the largest state-sponsored virtual school in the country, collects information about whether students have disabilities—but only if the students volunteer it.

Because it is a school of choice, students decide whether to disclose their disabilities, and last year, 17 percent of the [Florida Virtual School's](#) more than 90,000 students did so, said Jeffrey Jacobson, who oversees special education for the school.

"We have a pretty good inkling that that number is more around 40 percent. That's what we're getting from kids that identify themselves later and [from] talks with teachers," he said.

What the numbers do tell the Orlando-based Florida Virtual School is that students with disabilities are struggling with their online classes. Of those students, only 30 percent successfully completed their courses, Mr. Jacobson said.

This fall, the school will launch a pilot program in which six teachers certified in special education will work more closely with students who have identified themselves as having disabilities. Their teaching loads will be smaller than for other Florida Virtual School teachers, Mr. Jacobson said, to foster stronger relationships between the teachers and their students.

"They can now spend the time to do direct instruction. Let's say [the students] need help every day. If you have 120 students you can't do that," he said, adding that the total for those teachers will probably be about 75 students.

"If the student's not calling you," he said, "you can call the student every week."

Blended Approaches Grow

In other states, the era of virtual learning has spawned distinctive courses and teaching methods for students with disabilities. During the 2010-11 school year, North Carolina launched a new method of teaching life-skills courses for students with significant cognitive disabilities. The classes combine in-person teaching and online instruction.

- 17%

Conservatively, the proportion of Florida Virtual School students with disabilities

- 3,363
Students with disabilities in Pennsylvania cyber charter schools (13.7 percent of total enrollment)
- 2,400
Students with intellectual disabilities who took new blended courses last year at the North Carolina Virtual Public School (9.6 percent of total enrollment)
- ZERO
Known students with disabilities to have taken online classes with the Kentucky Virtual School
Sources: Florida Virtual School; Pennsylvania Department of Education; North Carolina Virtual Public School; Kentucky Department of Education

For more than 2,000 students statewide, their special education teachers were paired with teachers from the 25,000-student [North Carolina Virtual Public School](#), based in Raleigh. The virtual school teachers delivered much of the core content of a subject—this past year, it was Algebra 1, biology, and English—and classroom teachers helped ensure the lessons were as accessible as possible for the students, said Michelle Lourcey, the curriculum and instruction division director for the school. The course content and design were a big shift away from the traditional lessons in those classes, she said. While students still learned how to count money, which chemicals may be poisonous, and how to grocery shop, they also did science experiments and studied “Romeo and Juliet” via online lessons created with the principles of universal design for learning, or UDL. Those principles call for developing curriculum in a way that gives all students an equal opportunity to learn.

If there was a chunk of text for students to read, they could click on it and it would be read to them, for example, said Freda Lee, a state consultant for students with intellectual disabilities.

Although recorded or live lessons from the NCVPS teachers were delivered online, there were many days students weren’t sitting at computers, said Casey Peeler, who taught some blended courses at Shelby High School, about 40 miles west of Charlotte. Lessons might have been delivered on smartboards, for example.

When the class was studying osmosis, they soaked gummy bears in salt water and tap water, remembered Jamar Petty, 18, one of Ms. Peeler’s students.

“We were trying to see what was going to happen and what was the effect,” said Mr. Petty, who has learning disabilities. “One of them got bigger than the other.” He said he had never done experiments like that before.

The [Pennsylvania Virtual Charter School](#), based in Norristown, Pa., has developed its own method for teaching life skills virtually, special education teacher Stacy McGowan said. Overall, about 15 percent of the students at the 3,500-student school have disabilities.

For several hours a day, Ms. McGowan teaches her students live from her home. They have webcams to see her, and she can see them—and everything they’re doing.

“When we’re working on counting money, I like them to use real money. Their mom or dad, or whomever, moves the webcam so I can see the money,” said Ms. McGowan, whose classes are typically no larger than 15 students. “One time we were working on tying shoes. We put our foot in front of the webcam.”

The idea to teach classes this way was Ms. McGowan’s, said the virtual school’s chief executive officer, Joanne Jones Barnett. “She developed that model by asking the question, ‘How do I do life skills in a virtual environment?’ ” Ms. Jones Barnett said.

Meeting Special Needs

While online classes could be larger, even when they are for students with disabilities, Ms. Jones Barnett said that isn’t her school’s approach.

Because virtual schools are still in their relative infancy, she said, the teaching requires innovation, “and not being afraid to meet the needs of your students.”

The Pennsylvania Virtual Charter School seems ideal for Tessa Falcetta, 13, whose disabilities are very different from those of the students Ms. McGowan teaches.

Tessa has a limited short-term memory, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and [dysgraphia](#), which affects her ability to write, form letters, and spell, said her mother, Esther Falcetta.

In rural Grove City, Pa., Ms. Falcetta said, traditional brick-and-mortar schools haven’t been able to address all of Tessa’s needs. After two years of that situation, Tessa, for 8th grade, will go back to online schooling, which she did as an elementary school student.

While Tessa has the option of attending live classes, that can be a challenge because it’s often difficult for her to stay on task, Ms. Falcetta said.

With the virtual school, which helped accommodate Tessa’s difficulty with writing, “she’ll read her book, and do her work,” her mother said, “and if she has a question, she’ll call the teacher.”

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Collier, Lee school districts prepare to test teacher merit pay plans

Naples Daily News

By: Heather Carney

August 19, 2011

<http://www.naplesnews.com/news/2011/aug/19/performance-pay-plan-teachers-collier-lee-schools/>

NAPLES —Forget rewards in the form of shiny red apples.

Starting this year, teachers will strive for two words only: highly effective.

Highly effective is the best rating a teacher can receive under the new teacher evaluation systems in Collier and Lee school districts this year as part of the Florida “Student Success Act.” Both districts will develop and test the new systems this year before they’re linked to performance-based pay in 2014.

“We’re stressing that this is a real pilot year, a test run. We want to make sure the system is working well before linking money

to it," said Gregory Adkins, chief human resources officer with Lee County schools.

The "Student Success Act," part of Senate Bill 736, was approved by the Florida Legislature earlier this year to improve student performance by rewarding the most effective teachers.

Teachers will be evaluated throughout the year and will receive a final performance rating of highly effective, effective, needs improvement or unsatisfactory. Teachers won't receive bonuses or performance pay this year, but their final performance rating could affect their eligibility to move up the pay scale. The state requires that the district link the final evaluation to performance pay by 2014.

Collier schools administrators also emphasized that this first year is a trial run, calling it the "hold harmless period." From August to December, the classroom observations will not count toward a teacher's final evaluation. But from January to March 2012, the observations will count.

Debbie Terry, executive director of human resources for Collier schools, said this gives the evaluators time to coordinate with each other on the rating system, so that all observe and evaluate the teachers equally and objectively.

"We should all be on the same page — it will give administrators time to look at the same things and compare notes," she said. Teachers in both counties are apprehensive about the new system but recognize the need for a more fair and consistent evaluation system. Adkins said he knows the system will have problems at first and that teachers shouldn't be adversely affected by that.

"You have a bad student growth score this year — it doesn't mean you're automatically going to suffer consequences because of that," he said.

Under both systems, those teachers receiving a needs improvement or unsatisfactory rating won't be eligible for a pay increase. Those teachers receiving an effective or highly effective rating will be eligible for a pay increase. But those increases have yet to be determined.

Collier schools based their system on Robert Marzano's methods, one of two state-approved evaluation systems. The Marzano system uses the electronic iObservation tool that provides short videos on elements of the teaching model, snapshots of professional development needs and provides immediate data and feedback for teachers, principals and administrators. Data can be divided into demographic categories such as grade level, subject matter, districtwide school comparisons and more.

"It's a very powerful tool," Terry said.

Thomas Satre, who teaches eighth grade American History at Immokalee Middle School, is one of a few teachers already introduced to the system. Satre said he's confident he will be viewed as a highly effective teacher. But with the new system, he will place more emphasis on understanding the statistical background on each student -- such as socioeconomic status and previous FCAT scores.

"You can't be an artist in that room anymore. You have to be a statistical master," he said.

Satre thinks many teachers will be nervous and overwhelmed by the system at first.

"This isn't the way to get rid of teachers, but to use the data to empower me and others to be better teachers," he said.

According to Michele LaBute, chief operational officer with Collier County Public Schools, the purchase price for the iObservation contract was about \$445,000, including \$144,650 for the software license and about \$300,000 for professional development. Of that amount, \$100,000 was paid through the district's general fund and the remaining \$345,000 was paid by the district through the Race to the Top grant.

The Lee school district developed its system using the Danielson Framework for Teaching. However, instead of purchasing an already state-approved system, the Lee school system is developing its own evaluation tool based on the Danielson system.

Shellie Halstead, with the Lee schools human resources department, said the district budgeted \$1.4 million in Race to the Top funds to develop and implement the program over the next four years. Part of this money also is being used to pay for two computer programmers.

Adkins said it is difficult to quantify the entire cost of the system because of work by in-house staff.

"The vast majority of this effort is being funded with existing resources and the work is being performed by existing staff," Adkins said.

Lee County's system also breaks down the evaluation further, rating teachers as exemplary, accomplished, developing or requires action.

In Collier County, the system also becomes more complicated when rating teachers new to the district or those in their first year of teaching.

Those teachers with less than four years of teaching experience total or less than four years of teaching experience in the district will be rated highly effective, effective, developing or unsatisfactory. The developing rating replaces the needs improvement rating.

A teacher who falls into the developing rating still could be eligible to move up an increment in the salary schedule. However, a teacher with more than three years of experience who receives a needs improvement rating will not be eligible to move up the salary schedule. The final increments in the salary schedule are all dependent on the teacher contract negotiations to be completed by Sept. 30.

"If they're brand new out of college or new to the district, this gives them time to learn the district, learn the evaluation system," Terry said. "It's a learning time for them."

In prior years in both districts, teachers were eligible for a 5 percent bonus of their annual salary. Both districts are working with the teachers unions to come up with possible bonuses and acceptable compensation under the new system.

Adkins said the new state evaluation and performance pay requirement makes the traditional salary schedule obsolete.

"It makes it extremely difficult to provide steps like teachers got in the past. We can't do steps anymore because it requires that we give more money to performance raises rather than steps ... rather than experience," he said.

Current teachers will have the option to stay on the step/incremental salary schedule rather than move to the performance schedule if they choose to.

Adkins said teachers will receive a bigger raise if they move to the performance pay schedule but that some teachers may choose to stay on the step schedule if they are further into their career.

"If you're already at the top of the salary schedule, it probably isn't much of an incentive to move to the performance schedule. But if you're a young teacher with 10 to 15 more years to go, you would rather move to performance," Adkins said. Fifty percent of the evaluations will be based on student growth determined by FCAT and state assessment results and a state developed value-added model. The model is a measure developed by the state that determines the predicted annual growth for a class in a year and compares that to the actual improvement.

Evaluations also will be determined by formal, informal and walk-through observations conducted by principals, assistant principals, deans or select district administrators. A teacher will be observed at least five to 10 times a year depending on his or her teaching experience in the district.

Adkins and Terry said one of the primary challenges with the new system is the time-line. The data for the value-added model must be determined before Sept. 30 for the districts to qualify for Race to the Top grant money.

This means that the teachers union and district must also agree on the changes to the contract before Sept. 30.

"Everyone agrees that it's crazy," said Gary Brown a veteran educator and administrator with the district who formerly served as interim superintendent.

A further complication with the system is evaluating teachers in elective classes. Adkins said it is difficult to come up with student growth measurements that aren't exactly linked to the FCAT or other assessments.

"If I'm a band teacher or an art teacher – how do you measure the student growth in an objective fashion?" he asked.

Both districts hope the new evaluation system will motivate teachers to improve and that ultimately will improve student performance.

Regardless, Adkins said it will improve the overall evaluation system and teacher performance.

"Now if teachers have great growth, great evaluations, a really top-exemplary teacher can share their skills with others and be compensated at a higher level," he said.

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FLORIDA NEWS

Growing charter schools in Volusia, Flagler earn praise, raise concerns

Daytona Beach News-Journal

By: Annie Martin

August 21, 2011

<http://www.news-journalonline.com/news/local/flagler/2011/08/21/growing-charter-schools-in-volusia-flagler-earn-praise-raise-concerns.html>

PALM COAST -- When Teresa Cestare first heard about Imagine School at Town Center, the fledgling charter school's 226 students attended classes in a local church.

The school's more permanent facility in Palm Coast wasn't finished until a few weeks after classes started.

Three years later, Cestare's three children will return to Imagine on Monday with more than 800 classmates. "It's just been the talk of the town since it first started," Cestare said of the school.

Enrollment at Imagine and other charter schools in Volusia and Flagler counties has surged in recent years as an increasing number of parents seek alternatives to traditional public schools for a variety of reasons, from smaller class sizes to different teaching strategies. Many parents say they like being able to choose schools for their children without paying private school tuition.

But some charter schools haven't performed well on state-mandated tests. "I wouldn't say they're on equal footing with public schools nationwide," said Bette Heins, an education professor at Stetson University. "They have not performed as well."

Nonetheless, the popularity of charter schools seems to be growing. Supporters include Gov. Rick Scott, who recently signed several laws favorable to charter schools, including shifting millions in capital funds from traditional schools to charter facilities. Charter schools have been an option in Florida since 1996. Two years later, Reading Edge Academy opened as the area's first charter school. Three new Volusia County charter schools, opening this week, bring the total to 12 in Volusia and Flagler counties. More are planned for 2012.

Locally, charter schools are as diverse as the students they serve. A few cater to those with specific needs. Chiles Academy in Daytona Beach serves pregnant and parenting teenagers and young children. Richard Milburn Academy's two campuses, one in Daytona Beach and the other in DeLand, are a last resort for struggling students.

Other charter schools target students with specific interests. Ivy Hawn Charter School of the Arts in Lake Helen will incorporate dance, visual arts, music and drama into its curriculum.

Still others offer students in geographically isolated areas the chance to attend a neighborhood school. After the Volusia County School Board voted to close Burns-Oak Hill Elementary School in 2009 to cut expenses, parents vowed to open a charter school in its place. When the Burns Science and Technology Charter School opens this week, it will be the only public school in tiny Oak Hill.

GROWTH CURVE AHEAD

While charters are gaining steam, they still represent a small fraction of the student population. There were about 74,500 public school students in Volusia and Flagler counties last year but only 2,082, or 2.6 percent, attended charter schools. Statewide, more than 137,000 students, or about 5 percent of the total enrollment, attended charter schools.

Gov. Scott recently signed a law that will allow high-performing charters to serve additional grades or open another branch in the same district. And state lawmakers eliminated \$121 million in funding for maintenance, repair, renovation and remodeling projects in traditional public schools in this year's budget while retaining \$55 million for similar projects in charter schools.

"My understanding is the Legislature believed traditional public schools didn't need renovations and repairs while charter schools

did," said Ruth Melton, director of legislative relations for the Florida School Boards Association. "The Legislature is of the opinion, and has repeated it often, that capital funding for charter schools is scarce and difficult to obtain."

Also, school boards are allowed to levy a property tax of \$1.50 per \$1,000 of taxable value to support their construction, maintenance and renovation programs, while charter schools don't have that authority. Melton said some school districts share that tax revenue with their charter schools, others don't.

Supporters say charter schools compete with public schools, forcing them to get better. When students attend charter schools, the state's money follows them. But local school administrators say they don't view charters as competitors.

"We really view them as a partner," said Alicia Parker, program accountability and evaluation coordinator and the charter school liaison for Volusia County. "Volusia County students, regardless of what school they go to, are Volusia County students."

MORE FREEDOM?

Though they are supported by tax dollars, charter schools straddle the line between public and private schools.

"A lot of surveys kind of show that the public really doesn't understand the distinction between charter schools and private schools," said Jim Hull, senior policy analyst for the National School Boards Association's Center for Public Education. "Many times, they think they can charge admission or teach religion and select their students, when that is not what a charter school can do."

Though Florida charter school students take the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test and must meet state graduation requirements, charter school administrators are free to design their own curriculums and instructional strategies.

That arrangement hasn't always worked the way it was intended, Hull said.

"One of the original reasons for charter schools was they're supposed to be the incubators of education and then share their best practices with neighboring schools," he said. "Unfortunately, we don't see that happening."

Many local charter schools include elements that are common in private schools, such as uniforms, smaller classes and mandatory parent volunteer time.

Cestare pulled her oldest son, Justin, from a traditional Flagler County school almost three years ago after classmates bullied him. Cestare said she appreciates Imagine's focus on character development.

"Kids are kids, but that kind of thing is not allowed to continue there," Cestare said. "That kind of stuff is nipped in the bud right away."

Justin, now 11, will be in fifth grade and twins Logan and Ansley will be in third grade at Imagine.

To encourage their students to become good citizens, teachers integrate lessons about positive character traits into their plans, said Lisa O'Grady, Imagine's principal. Teachers can occasionally abandon their regular curriculum for the day and devote that time to listening to guest speakers, writing essays and reading stories that promote those qualities, she said. Students also volunteer for outside organizations like an assisted-living facility or the humane society.

That program "is so woven into who we are," O'Grady said.

A very different charter, Chiles Academy in Daytona Beach, helps pregnant and parenting teens earn standard diplomas and provides care and preschool programs for children. That school also has expanded over the last three years, growing from about 50 children ages 4 and younger to about 180. It's a "conversion" charter -- it started as a district program but became a charter school in 2002.

MIXED RESULTS

Some charter schools haven't performed as well as public schools on standardized tests and some educators think it's important to hold them accountable.

"I look at it from a taxpayer's standpoint," Heins of Stetson said. "I don't want my money taken out of public schools to fund something that's substandard."

If a school violates its charter, district officials can revoke it. But getting rid of substandard schools, or preventing them from opening, can be difficult. For example, the Volusia School Board rejected applications from administrators for Boston Avenue Charter School four times before the organizers appealed in 2005 -- and won state and court approval to open.

Last month, School Board member Judy Conte made a motion to close the 3-year-old school that died for lack of a second. The superintendent and staff attorney said the "D" state grade that the school received earlier in the month probably wouldn't be considered legal grounds to close the school because it had improved from an "F" the previous year.

But some parents of charter school students often say their schools' low grades and test scores don't bother them.

Kim White, chair of the Boston Avenue Charter School board, said her son Noah took the FCAT for the first time last year and received all 4s and 5s, the highest scores. It's unfair to compare Boston Avenue's test scores to the other public schools because many of the students struggled at other schools before coming there, she said.

Some charter schools do serve students who haven't done well in other schools, Heins said.

"To be fair to charters, many of the charters take very difficult populations," she said. "You have the schools that take your talented kids but you also have your charters that take troubled children."

Cestare said she's aware that some of Imagine's FCAT results haven't been up to par with the local traditional schools. But her kids are doing well, making the honor roll every term.

"I don't put a lot of my trust or my interest in the state scores or the grading," she said. "What concerns me the most is what's going on in my child's classroom."

MORE CHARTERS COMING

More charter schools are on the way. Volusia and Flagler received applications from three schools to open for the 2012-2013 school year.

Officials with Richard Milburn Academy and Florida Virtual Academy, an online school, applied to open new schools in Volusia. Meanwhile, a group of Flagler parents is seeking to open Global Outreach Charter Academy of Palm Coast, a K-8 school that will specialize in Russian language instruction.

And, some of the existing schools have more applicants than they have space for on their campuses. Ivy Hawn, one of Volusia's new charter schools, received 565 applications for 300 spots.

That's a sign that some charter schools are offering niche programs that parents desire, Heins said. Many public school districts

are cutting arts and other extracurricular programs and charters are ready to fill that niche. She predicts district officials may even turn some of their own schools into charters.

Hull said she thinks charter schools will likely continue to serve less than 10 percent of public school kids.

"The vast majority of people are very satisfied with their local traditional public schools," he said.

Public school teachers are helping students deal with a lot of difficult issues, including the breakdown of families and community support, Heins said. Overall, the traditional schools are doing a pretty good job, she said.

The same may be true for some charter schools. But unlike public schools, charter schools don't have long track records, and some close up soon after they open.

Heins said she doesn't like to see charter schools investing public money to build or renovate school buildings while local district officials are closing traditional schools.

"We've built this beautiful campus and we have outfitted it and landscaped it," Heins said. "How do we know that in three to five years that it's going to still be here?"

-- *Education Writer Linda Trimble contributed to this report.*

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New school year to see more virtual classes

Miami Herald

By: Laura Isensee

August 20, 2011

<http://www.miamiherald.com/2011/08/20/2368338/new-school-year-to-see-more-virtual.html>

Starting with this year's crop of ninth graders, every high schooler in the state must take an online class to graduate.

Not can take an online class. Must — whether they have a computer at home or not.

This is the brave new (cyber) world of public education. School begins Monday.

In this world, kids as young as kindergarten can enroll in virtual school. And physical education is an online offering.

Not everyone thinks the mandate is such a great idea, but the Legislature did.

It passed the requirement, figuring that kids are already tech savvy and that digital skills are key to success in college and in the workforce.

Plus the state saves money on online education. Florida spends 23 percent less on a student in virtual school than in a traditional one.

"Depending on your level of optimism or cynicism, you would look at Florida as either way ahead of others and trying to improve, or say there's something underhanded and trying to undermine public schools," said Michael Simonson, a professor of instructional technology and distance education at Nova Southeastern University.

He sees virtual education as a natural evolution that merges modern technology with learning — like when calculators came into classrooms in the '60s and '70s.

Among the benefits: Students access teachers and subjects not available at their brick-and-mortar school. They learn at their own pace. And they log on when and where they want.

Critics say the move drains money from school districts, limits the social experience of education and affords few benefits for students who are not highly motivated.

"I cannot think of any reason to mandate it for high school students other than saving money and/or making money for their friends' companies that are running the systems," said Jennifer Smith, who teaches French at Hialeah High and is active with United Teachers of Dade.

The mandate comes more than a decade into Florida's experiment with online education. In 1997, the state created Florida Virtual School as an Internet-based public high school. Now it is a state-wide school district, offers K-12 classes and expects some 150,000 students this year.

In 2007, the group Florida TaxWatch called Florida Virtual a bargain. The school does not have to pay for physical buildings, meaning no custodians, cafeteria workers or buses. And, if a student fails an online course, the state does not pay.

"We are performance-based," said Pam Birtolo, Florida Virtual's chief learning officer. "I think it ensures that students are learning."

Birtolo said they do not scrimp on instruction and they guard against cheating, with phone calls, random exams and other programs. To provide social experience, the school offers online clubs.

AN EARLY START

Cristian Hernandez starts ninth grade Monday at Dr. Michael M. Krop High. Yet he got a jump-start over the summer and is about to ace his freshman geometry class. He did online lessons and talked with his teacher on the phone or on email.

Cristian liked his class, but the 14-year-old wouldn't recommend online class for everyone.

"Just because I find it easy doesn't mean every other kid will. Some kids need the attention of teachers," he said.

One virtual teacher, April Greeson, said she knows her fourth- and third-graders much better online than when she taught in a physical classroom. A few years ago, she left Broward County Public Schools to join Florida Virtual School to be on the "cutting edge of education." On Monday, Greeson will start making welcome calls to about 50 students. Once a month, she will talk on the phone with the student and whoever is their "learning coach" at home, often a parent or grandparent. Their role with younger students is key, Greeson said.

"It's the three of us working together," she said.

Miami-Dade Schools Superintendent Alberto Carvalho said there is a risk in imposing virtual education "simply on the basis of saving money, perhaps."

"The digital divide is going to be critical in this conversation," Carvalho said.

Thousands of families in Miami-Dade and Broward do not have home access to a computer or the Internet. An aggressive push to virtual education could leave behind the "digital have-nots," he said. Families whose child qualifies for a free lunch can access cheap Internet and a voucher toward a discount computer, through a recent national initiative by cable and Internet-provider

Comcast.

The Miami-Dade and Broward districts are marching forward with plans to help students meet the new requirement and bridge that digital gap. This year, there will be more than 27,000 ninth-graders in Dade, another 20,000 in Broward.

"To tackle something as large as every ninth-grader graduating with having an online course, we're going to have to dig deep," said Christopher McGuire, principal at the Broward Virtual School, an A-rated local franchise of the statewide program.

To meet the requirement, Miami-Dade and Broward students can take a class directly from Florida Virtual School or from their local district franchises. About 30 schools in Miami-Dade and about 10 in Broward will house virtual learning labs.

Last year, Miami-Dade used that model of virtual learning labs to meet class-size requirements. This year, that model will likely be replicated in other districts across the state.

In the labs, students log onto a computer, work on their classes and talk with their Florida Virtual teacher by the phone or email. A facilitator is on hand to manage the lab and help with any technical trouble.

"We are still teaching," said Gia Braynon, a counselor at C.O.P.E. Center North, a program for pregnant teens. She recently joined a training session for lab facilitators. "It's 25 kids in a room. They still have that one-on-one attention on the subject they're doing on the computer."

SOME SKEPTICISM

At Hialeah Gardens High, a third of the freshman class will take virtual world history from the lab. Others will take P.E., even Latin. Principal Louis Algaze said last year online classes were an "ingenious" way to meet class size. But he's skeptical about a mandate.

"I'd hate to put a student in a situation where they're not going to be successful," Algaze said.

Last year, the online reading was too difficult for some Hialeah Gardens students who were still learning English. They returned to regular class.

Brick-and-mortar schools likely won't disappear. But expect more virtual education.

Some predict that half of high school classes by 2019 will be online. Others, like McGuire with Broward, envision a quarter of high school classes going virtual.

Carvalho and others envision a third option: blending online class with more traditional teaching. That's the version the Miami-Dade district launched last year at its iPrep downtown and is expanding this year to three other schools.

"A blended environment, I think is going to be the wave of the future," he said.

Already, the profile of online students has changed.

Before, mostly high-achieving students — eager to boost their GPA or earn college credit — took an extra class online. The credit counts the same as in a physical school.

Now more students who struggled in traditional class go online to catch up.

In Miami Lakes, 17-year-old Steve Morales takes all of his classes online through Florida Virtual School. At Hialeah-Miami Lakes Senior High, he was late a lot and got Cs and Bs.

"Electronics I get into," he said, checking out his assignments on his laptop

"I can do it at other people's houses. I can do it at my house. On my kitchen table, on my couch, on my bed, anywhere."

Steve's mom, Laura Morales, appreciates all the emails and phone updates from teachers. She can monitor his daily progress from work or after dinner. And his grades have improved to As and Bs.

"He's walking away with information," she said. And eventually, she hopes, a high school diploma.

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This 'regular' school is extraordinary

Florida Times-Union

By: Editorial Board

August 21, 2011

<http://jacksonville.com/opinion/editorials/2011-08-21/story/regular-school-extraordinary>

This 'regular' school is extraordinary

There is a one-word description for the impressive achievements at Rutledge Pearson Elementary School: "Wow."

That is what Superintendent Ed Pratt-Dannals said recently before a library full of Pearson staff members.

He also used these adjectives: Stupendous, miraculous and amazing.

"I am so proud of you and what you have done," Pratt-Dannals said.

What's so impressive? This school is in a high-poverty area in Jacksonville's Northwest section, yet it has earned three straight A grades from the state.

This is not a magnet school. It's not a charter. It isn't private. It's not an "academy." It's a neighborhood public school.

Most importantly, it has all the standard difficulties of core city schools: High poverty, lots of single-parent families, few businesses in the area.

It's a fairly standard public elementary school that has achieved at the highest level possible.

Even more impressive, the school has maintained its excellence over three years. That's where it really is set apart from other similar inner city schools.

The school literally has come from worst to first. It used to be one of the worst schools in the state, said Principal Debbie Crotty. From 1999 to 2007, it usually scored a D from the state, but the F grade in 2007 was a low point.

Under Crotty's leadership, the school's grade jumped to a B in 2008 and then began its three-year run of A grades.

That is the positive effect of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. The tests are consistent across the state.

What's so special?

Pearson has the feel of other successful schools: A dynamic leader as a principal, an energized staff and support from parents.

At the meeting with Pratt-Dannals, the esprit de corps was obvious. You couldn't tell the difference between the janitor and the office secretary and the lead teachers. Everyone is part of a team.

The school has a few advantages. There are fewer than 300 students. Its small size allows for the development of a real family atmosphere. The teachers mentioned that closeness.

Of the roughly 35 staff members, about 14 have been there with Crotty the entire time. That consistency makes a difference.

Also, unlike many inner city schools, most of the students stay in the neighborhood. Even a great school can't have much impact if its students keep leaving in a year or two.

Pratt-Dannals looks at schools like Pearson and sees the big picture. He sees families that are broken, churches that don't have the same influence they once did.

Public schools like Pearson must fill the roles of the rest of society. It's a heavy burden. Can any one institution handle it alone?

The Pearson staff seems to have figured it out. Thus, Pratt-Dannals promises to bring visitors to the school.

"You are going to be the model," the superintendent said.

Crotty says the work is very hard, but this success can be sustained.

Don't mess with success. Give the school support.

STATE NEWS

Idaho's online ed course mandate stirs concerns at Nampa hearing

By: Kristine Rodine

Idaho Statesman

August 19, 2011

<http://www.idahostatesman.com/2011/08/19/1765098/online-course-mandate-stirs-concerns.html>

State Board staffers hear worries about reduced teacher contact and student success due to the new graduation requirement.

At a lightly attended public hearing in Nampa Thursday, the most popular answer to the question of how to mandate online courses was simply not to do it.

But "zero's not an option," State Board of Education spokesman Mark Browning noted. "This isn't to debate whether the thing should have passed. That's a moot point."

State Board staff have been holding public hearings across the state — Thursday's was the sixth of seven — to gather public opinion on a new graduation requirement for Idaho students that would start with the class of 2016. That rule was mandated by the Idaho Legislature earlier this year as part of state schools Superintendent Tom Luna's Students Come First education reform package.

Luna had initially suggested requiring eight online credits of future Idaho graduates, but that number gradually shrank. The State Board now is considering a two-course requirement.

Teachers and others who testified said they are relieved the proposal now calls for just two classes, but they have grave concerns about how the requirements would be implemented.

Several, including Idaho Education Association President Penni Cyr, said they didn't want the proposal to require one of the online courses to be "asynchronous," which means the teacher would not be in the classroom with the student, although a proctor or other employee without a teaching certificate might be.

"What is the plan for assuring that students who need additional help have timely access to a certified teacher with content expertise?" Cyr asked.

"Students need to use technology, but they don't need to lose a teacher," said Sue Darden, who teaches math and history at Meridian's Galileo magnet school.

Former Idaho Democratic Rep. Branden Durst of Boise, who teaches online and other courses at the College of Western Idaho, suggested that the state require "an online preparedness or technology expertise course" to give students the tools they need to thrive in higher education and business environments that require online skills.

Tracie Bent, the State Board's point person for the rules-making process, said the subcommittee studying the online requirements discussed requiring that type of course but said the concern with that is that "it's another class that students have

to take and school districts have to provide."

Instead, the proposed rule would allow districts to offer any class online. Some small districts will require students to take a particular subject or subjects online because they don't have a teacher available for that, Bent said.

Durst said some students do better in online classes than in traditional classrooms, but the opposite is true for many others. In his experience as a teacher, he said, the national average 58 percent pass rate for online classes is about right.

Requiring online classes piles on extra stress for students who already have a lot of pressure in their lives, he said.

"To put something that has such a high fail rate in their path is really quite foolish," he said.

Caldwell veterinarian Victoria Young said she opposes the planned requirement in part because of her own experience taking online courses: "How much I got out of it vs. live in class with a person, there was no comparison."

During the course of Thursday's four-hour hearing, about 25 people turned out and about 10 testified.

At least two complained that none of the board's hearings on the topic were held in Ada County, home to the state's two largest districts. Cyr said an Ada County hearing would likely have drawn students and parents opposed to "being forced to choose an online course if it will mean missing a class taught by an award-winning teacher."

Browning said no snub was intended. He selected the College of Western Idaho at Nampa's eastern edge because it is centrally located among the area's five large districts — Nampa, Caldwell, Vallivue, Boise and Meridian.

And, he said, the State Board was not given funding to hold the meetings, so he chose the most affordable options. By contrast, he said, the state task force to study the new school technology requirements received funding for its public meetings.

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Ohio Grad rates may tumble under new formula

Columbus Dispatch

By: [Jennifer Smith Richards](#)

August 21, 2011

Schools must track ex-students to see if they finish on time

<http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2011/08/21/grads.html>

Sometimes, students say they're switching schools or moving away but drop out instead. Their old schools never know where they ended up.

But a new graduation-rate calculation holds school districts responsible for tracking students, making it tougher for them to undercount dropouts.

Most experts, including those at the Ohio Department of Education, expect that graduation rates will decline — sharply, in some places.

The new rates will appear for the first time on this year's school report cards, which the state will officially unveil on Wednesday. But they won't count as part of the overall rating for a district or school until the 2012 report cards.

The rates show whether a student who enters ninth grade earns a diploma four years later. The current measure counts students as graduates in the year in which they earn a diploma, whether or not that is on time.

"The degree to which there would be a decline could be a function of how accurately you were tracking your students," said Jeanine Molock, director of accountability at the Education Department. "In districts where they don't have a whole lot of mobility, they might know (a student) moved out of state. In a district where 500 students leave in a month, it's harder to say."</p>

Central Ohio school districts worry about the expected declines in their graduation rates. It could be difficult for some to tell whether they're still moving forward, said Bart Anderson, superintendent of the Educational Service Center of Central Ohio.

"It's going to be difficult to really determine, 'Did we truly grow or truly drop from last year?' even if it looks like a drop. It may well have been an improvement in an apples-to-apples comparison," he said.

Larger districts also are concerned that tracking individual students could be burdensome. The onus is on them to find students and verify their whereabouts once they've left.

At the state level, Ohio has an 84.7 percent graduation rate. Molock said the drop under the new calculation should be slight — the new rate won't drop to 70 percent, for example. Some other states predict a drop of as much as 20 percentage points in their rates.

The U.S. Department of Education has required a uniform rate nationally. Different methods are currently used throughout the country, making it difficult to compare how well states are doing at graduating students on time.

Simply changing the calculation will not change how many students have actually completed high school on time. But the new method is expected to give a truer picture of how schools are faring.

"Data is such an essential tool in solving the dropout crisis. For many, it's the 'canary in the coal mine,'" Colleen Wilber, spokeswoman for America's Promise Alliance, wrote in an email. "When it's most accurate, we know what students are at risk and what they are struggling with, which means we can more effectively target how we help them."

The national group, founded by retired Gen. Colin Powell to advocate for at-risk children, has taken Columbus and other districts to task for under-counting dropouts. For example, Columbus City Schools report graduation rates that are nearly 20 percentage points higher than some student-achievement advocacy groups have calculated. America's Promise Alliance hasn't made the comparison in the past few years.

The Columbus district's rate for 2010 rose to 77.6 percent from 72.7 percent the year before. The state standard is 90 percent.

Molock said that, in districts where students move a lot, it would be more difficult to accurately track them.

"I try not to speculate that people were intentionally misreporting. It is a way to have a more-precise estimate of students as they progress through our system," Molock said.

The new rate features these changes: I Students will be tracked using a unique identification number assigned to them when they enroll in an Ohio school. I Students who are reported as transferring to another school but don't enroll there will count as "nongraduates." I Students who take longer than four years to finish high school are considered "nongraduates." I The performance of individual racial and ethnic, gender, and special-needs groups will be published.

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Los Angeles Unified bests reform groups in most cases, data show

Los Angeles Times

By: Howard Blume and Sandra Poindexter

August 18, 2011

<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-laasd-20110818,0,6007412.full.story>

Struggling schools under district control see test scores rise more than most operated by the mayor, a charter organization and others, a Times analysis finds.

In a surprising challenge to four school reform efforts run by outside organizations, the Los Angeles school district has not only held its own in improving math and English test scores, but in most cases outpaced the others, according to a Times analysis of the city's lowest-performing schools.

The district's showing was even more surprising given that its schools didn't benefit from outside funding and other extra resources brought in by reform groups for their schools.

"The results are eye-opening, that conventional schools display stronger results," said Bruce Fuller, a UC Berkeley education professor.

One of the most striking comparisons was with a group of schools under the control of Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa. The mayor's schools — elementary, middle and high schools — all improved less than the district's by some key measures.

The mayor had repeatedly derided the L.A. Unified School District as ineffectual when he unsuccessfully tried to take over the whole system nearly six years ago.

New test scores released Monday showed that the percentage of students in low-performing district-run high schools working at a "proficient" level in math increased 116% since 2008. That compared with a rise of 57% at two high schools under Villaraigosa's purview. The figures were more nuanced in other categories.

Villaraigosa expressed surprise at the results but also complimented the district's success. While his schools "are improving as well, I want them to be improving at a more accelerated rate," he said. "We're committed to the long haul."

He added: "We've decided to go to some of these similar [district] schools that are outpacing some of our schools and look at what they're doing."

The Times analysis looked at district schools whose test scores ranked in the bottom 20% of the state in 2008. Those schools are, in many ways, the ultimate litmus test for local school improvement. They enroll neighborhood students whose families haven't left to take advantage of a growing number of alternatives, including independently operated charter schools and the district's own popular magnet program.

The district scores were then compared with those of schools that have been part of four highly touted reform efforts aimed at boosting achievement at the lowest-performing schools.

All of these groups had the goal of breaking the long-standing pattern of academic failure by bringing in outside expertise, new resources and new leadership to end what critics view as the stultifying grip of district bureaucrats and entrenched faculties.

Three years later, the scores at many of these schools remain poor — often extremely so.

Because so many students started out at such a low level, many schools in the analysis showed large improvements in proficiency rates, despite overall low scores, most notably Locke High School. There, the percentage of students with proficient math scores more than tripled, even as enrollment grew.

But another illuminating statistic is the change in percentage points, which more closely reflects how many more students rated proficient in math and English.

In percentage point gains, the district outpaced all the outside organizations. Test scores in reading at the district high schools rose 7.8 points; math scores climbed 6.3 points.

Among the outside efforts, Crenshaw High School, which is being overseen by the Los Angeles Urban League, the Bradley Foundation and USC, fared the worst under the analysis. Reading scores at Crenshaw were down 2 percentage points over three years, while math scores nudged upward 0.3 point.

Crenshaw has seen the most grass-roots effort and enjoyed the most consistent support from the teachers union. The school's governing board includes teachers and parents.

Despite criticism that responsibility for the school is too diffuse, Urban League President Blair Taylor listed elements of progress: fewer suspensions, more graduates, more counseling and safer routes for students walking to and from school.

"We really want this model to be community-based engagement," Taylor said. "It's a harder exercise, but I do believe and hope and feel that, in the long run, it's more sustainable because it has buy-in."

Watts' Locke High School, run by Green Dot Public Schools, showed a 5.1 percentage point increase in English scores, and a 5.7 point increase in math.

Locke is probably the best-funded effort and the only one run by an independent charter organization, which is not bound by L.A. Unified's labor agreements. Green Dot could choose which staff members to keep; it retained fewer than a third of the teachers.

"The edge that charter schools have is more flexibility in their hiring of personnel," said Eric Hanushek, a senior fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution.

Green Dot board Chairman Shane Martin said the goal is to create a new campus culture, with everyone committed to the same vision. "It's about limiting the distractions and focusing on what's truly important," said Martin, adding that the Green Dot approach could be a model for improving the lowest-achieving district schools.

At South L.A.'s Manual Arts High School, which is run by L.A.'s Promise, a locally based nonprofit, reading scores rose 4.6 points and math scores 3.4 points.

Promise also points to rising high school exit exam results and higher college acceptance rates, among other milestones.

The approach at Promise and the mayor's schools is thematically similar: Bombard schools with high-quality teacher training, support and high expectations, while hiring strong administrators to pore over achievement data and insist on results.

From the start, the mayor's organization — Partnership for L.A. Schools — has been made up of elementary, middle and high schools, which has enabled it to reach some struggling students earlier.

The mayor's high schools showed a 5.7 percentage point increase in English and a 1.5 point increase in math, a smaller rise than the district's.

The head of the mayor's education team, Marshall Tuck, said the proficiency gains did not take into account other evidence of improvement, including the "large number" of students who made progress but still weren't proficient. He also said the mayor deserved credit for initiatives that benefited all district students. Those included identifying more gifted minority students and leading a successful bid to prevent disproportionate layoffs at any school because of budget cuts.

Villaraigosa also quietly endorsed the management shake-up that brought his top education advisor at the time, Ramon C. Cortines, to L.A. Unified in April 2008. Cortines directly supervised the work of improving the low-achieving schools that remained under district control, first as deputy superintendent, then as superintendent. The veteran educator critiqued school-improvement plans and personally removed some principals, while authorizing various approaches — some with broad support, some controversial.

New Supt. John Deasy, who took over in April from Cortines, said that the district and the reform groups could learn from each other and that L.A. Unified was ultimately responsible for students at every school.

"We have lots of room to grow, but the growth over time is important," he said. "These types of schools have been the most difficult to improve across the nation.... We're making progress in that area in L.A."

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Iowa students suggest education changes

Des Moines Register

By: Sheena Dooley

August 8, 2011

<HTTP://WWW.DESMOINESREGISTER.COM/ARTICLE/20110820/NEWS02/108200317/1004/STUDENTS-SUGGEST-EDUCATION-CHANGES>

Schools need to set high expectations for all students, integrate technology into the classroom and provide teachers who diversify their instruction to help all students learn, six high school students at a round-table talk told Gov. Terry Branstad on Friday.

They said students should also have more hands-on learning opportunities, such as internships, and be able to provide feedback to school leaders about their teachers' performance in the classroom. In addition, they weren't opposed to requiring that all students to take the ACT college exam, complete more science and math courses, and pass an exit exam to graduate, but they voiced some concerns about the ideas.

"I'm not for it or against it," said Danielle Hubbard, a 12th-grader at Van Meter High School. "But what are you going to do if they don't pass the test? Students who aren't the best students might think, 'I don't want to take this test. I will just drop out.' "

The round-table discussion gave students the opportunity to provide input on changes Iowa needs to adopt in order to restore the state's status as a worldwide leader in education. Branstad will use their input and that gained in previous round-tables with teachers, business leaders and administrators in crafting his blueprint for overhauling Iowa's education system, which will be released by Oct. 1.

The round-table included six 12th-grade students from across the state, including Hubbard; Derick Perkins, from Starmont High School near Arlington; Juana Hollingsworth, from Waterloo East High School; Katherine Kustra, from Carroll's Kuemper Catholic High School; Victor Gomez, from Des Moines North High School; and Vivian Wu of Johnston High School.

Students said technology use in their schools is sporadic, although two attend schools that assign laptops to every student. They said that some teachers have yet to embrace technology and that schools need to step up their efforts to integrate its use. Doing so will better prepare students for a work force where those skills are a must, they said.

"There is so much more you can do with that laptop than you can do just in the classroom," said Gomez, whose school will provide all students with a laptop this school year.

The best teachers in their schools are open to using new technology, they said. They also know how to change their instruction to meet the various learning needs of students and provide them with project-based learning opportunities. Most often, it's those teachers that set the highest expectations for all students, they said.

"The students' voices need to go more to the school," Hollingsworth said. "Right now, it's just the teachers' voices. If the teaching isn't right the one year we are there, then it's not going to be corrected the next year and the next."

Some students see their 12th-grade year as an easy year, where they take less rigorous courses, they said. So increasing graduation requirements in core classes could address that issue, but it also would hamper their ability to take classes that interest them, the students said.

"At my school there is the mentality that you take a breath of air and relax after junior year, which I think is the toughest year in high school," Wu said. "Everyone is focusing on maintaining their grade and not challenging themselves."

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