

TECHNOLOGY COULD VIRTUALLY TRANSFORM FLORIDA EDUCATION

BY PATRICIA LEVESQUE

For more than a decade, Florida has been a leader in utilizing technology to improve the quality of education. A recent study conducted by the Center for Digital Education ranked Florida number one in the country for policies, programs, and strategies implemented to advance online learning.

Florida Virtual School, the nation's first statewide, internet-based public high school, has provided more than half a million courses to students in every county in Florida. Other online schools, like K-12.com and Connections Academy, have also played a role in our number one ranking. Moreover, our array of virtual options has provided more choices to more parents and has contributed to

Florida's rising student achievement.

Despite these advances, today's education system still looks too much like it did in the 1950s. Most students attend brick-and-mortar



schools based on annual seasons marked by changes in weather, just as they did during the heyday of the agricultural era. While more and more textbooks are coming online, they are merely electronic versions of the hardback books, lacking the interactivity that is now possible. Although most schools have

computers and are wired for the Internet, few are using technology as an integrated tool to improve the delivery of knowledge to students.

While there is no question that Florida is ahead of the curve when

it comes to technology, the potential of technology to transform the quality of education remains largely untapped. It's time to take education out of the farms of the 1800s and into the global economy of the 21st Century.

Through technology, students can overcome the biggest obstacle to student achievement—access to quality education. Virtual education provides students with access to courses not offered at traditional schools. After being inspired by the television show *C.S.I.*, a student in a small, rural town could pursue online courses in forensic sciences to further his dream of becoming a crime scene investigator. Students can take classes that wouldn't necessarily be feasible or cost-effective to offer at every school. With the click of a mouse, students could take Chinese at one virtual academy, geometry at another, and 18th Century poetry at another without ever leaving their desks. Elementary school students could take introductory Spanish-language classes at home and on the weekends if we provided the mechanism and the means to allow these courses to be offered within and outside of the traditional public school setting.

Equally as important, technology provides teachers and students with the ability to customize learning to fit the unique needs of each student. This area has been left largely unexplored, and it could have the greatest benefit to the quality of education in Florida.

Today's virtual schools are more

or less online variations of what students get in the classroom. Virtual education ought to be about customization and expediency. Instead of spending their time building one common curriculum, for instance, an online virtual marketplace could allow teachers to individually target students based on their skills and level of competency. As Harvard Professor Clayton Christensen explains in his book *Disrupting Class: How Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns*, as technology is introduced into the classroom “teachers will act more as learning coaches and tutors to help students find the learning approach that that makes the most sense for them.”

This customized approach allows students to learn in their own style and at their own pace, maximizing their learning potential. Instead of measuring achievement by the amount of time spent in a classroom, success could be measured through the mastery of subjects and skills. As Christensen elaborates in *Disrupting Class*, “Every student learns in a different way.... A key way to make schools intrinsically motivating is to customize an education to match the way each child learns best ... schools need to move away from the monolithic instruction of batches of students toward a modular, student-centric approach using software as an important delivery vehicle.”

If more broadly utilized, virtual education could enable educators across the state to more easily create

customized lesson plans for Florida students. Much like iTunes allows customers to buy individual songs, an online marketplace could allow educators to create better, more individualized curriculums. Instead of having to choose among many books, educators could choose the best parts of each textbook in designing lessons. Not only would this help students get the greatest education, but it also helps drive the industry by actively telling the companies what kind of curriculum works best.

For technology to truly take hold in classrooms across Florida, state and local leaders must address issues today that could impede this revolution within our educational system in the future.

First, we must expand access to virtual learning to *all* Florida students. Current requirements that participating students must attend public schools for an entire year before they can participate in certain virtual education programs unfairly bars public school transfer students and private and home-schooled students from accessing quality online content. Additionally, we must embrace the flexibility technology provides and allow students to participate in programs offered by any school district in Florida. Modernizing our funding system will ensure the money follows the child.



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Second, we must eliminate barriers to a more robust virtual education environment. We must level the playing field for providers to foster competition and innovation. We must eliminate the bureaucratic and administration obstacles for out-state virtual providers, including removing the requirement that providers must have an administrative office in Florida. Antiquated rules, such as Florida-specific certification requirements, that effectively bar high-quality teachers from across the country or the world from educating in virtual classrooms must be revised.

Finally, to ensure every single student graduating from a Florida high school is prepared to enter the 21st Century workforce, we should include the completion of at least one online course for high school. A recent study by the Consortium of Institutions and Organizations Committed to Quality Online Education revealed that more than 20 percent of all U.S. higher education students were already taking at least one online course in the fall of 2007, and that figure will only increase with every college semester. In fact, in the span of just one year, between the fall of 2006 and 2007, the number of students enrolled in one or more online courses increased by

To page 33 >

should consider Florida's example. Repealing the federal estate tax will encourage high net-worth citizens to save and invest, leading to job creation and a quicker economic recovery.

On the other hand, keeping the death tax will ensure that wealthy taxpayers continue to spend their income now rather than investing in the future.

At this writing, Connecticut was finally realizing the error of its ways and was considering legislation to lower its death tax. We can hope that in the months ahead, Congress will take similar steps—if not approving a full repeal—of this onerous tax. ❧

Dick Patten is the Executive Director of the American Family Business Institute, an organization representing family businesses across the country.

INDEPENDENCE

(Continued from page 29)

and affordable. Plainer still: We've earned it. Today's retirees have weathered our share of tough times. We've lived through world wars and not-so-great depressions. We've overcome every challenge. Our energy security is one of the most important challenges we face. If our government listens to its people and allows us to embrace new, 21st Century technologies that can produce more American energy safely and use what we have more wisely, we will overcome this challenge, too. ❧

James L. Martin is the president of the 60 Plus Association, a nonpartisan seniors-advocacy group with a free-enterprise, less-government, fewer-taxes approach to seniors issues.

TECHNOLOGY *(Continued from page 26)*

12 percent, bringing the total to nearly 4 million students.

Finally, technology shouldn't be merely a resource used periodically in classrooms, but the primary mechanism of transforming our education system into a 21st Century model of student-centered learning. From access to customization to superior content, technology may be the key to helping us keep the promise of a quality education for every Florida student, but the transformation

must commence now. ❧

Patricia Levesque is the Executive Director of the of the Foundation for Florida's Future and the Foundation for Excellence in Education, a non-profit public policy organizations founded by former Florida Governor Jeb Bush to improve the quality of education in Florida and across the nation. For more information on the Foundation for Florida's Future's efforts to transform Florida classrooms through technology, please visit www.floridapromise.org.