

Serving Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach

SOUTH FLORIDA

Parenting

FREE

OCTOBER 2004

No Ordinary Party

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT PLANNING A BAR MITZVAH, QUINCE OR OTHER BIG KIDS' PARTY

ONLINE SCHOOL

Florida's free virtual schools let kids go to school from home computers

HALLOWEEN

Laughs for Parents

ELECTION SEASON

Books and Crafts

Sun-Sentinel



Caught in the Web

**SHOULD YOUR
FAMILY GO**

BY CARA NISSMAN

Jennifer Ryan

liked her son's public school, but when she started receiving teachers' notes about 9-year-old Connor's misbehavior, she knew something had to change — and it wasn't Connor.

"He was always a good student, but when he started third grade, the FCAT hit, and all his class did was work on practice book after practice book," says Ryan of Lake Worth. "They weren't doing recess so they could practice. Connor just stopped doing his work. He asked the teacher, 'Can I take the FCAT now to show you I know all this and can move on?' Of course he couldn't do that, so we had to find something else."

Carol Williams also saw her son floundering. Wade's grades plummeted from As to Ds when he entered middle school. Noting his troubles with focusing and following directions, teachers recommended testing him for attention-deficit disorder. Williams knew that her son merely needed more attention paid to him.

"With 25 or more kids in a classroom, nobody noticed he needed help," says Williams of Davie. "He wasn't retaining everything he needed to learn. He was sick and nervous every night. He said, 'Mommy, I'm one of the dumb ones.'"

Now both mothers believe they've found a

solution by plugging into the latest trend in education — virtual schooling. Connor, now 12 and a grade ahead of others his age, attends Florida Virtual School and Wade, 13, goes to Florida Virtual Academy. The boys have never felt so energized about learning.

Hundreds of South Florida kids like Wade and Connor are clicking with free online public education. Florida Virtual School, which pioneered online education in 1997 as a 100-student pilot program in Orange County, now serves about 7,000 middle and high school students statewide. K12's Florida Virtual Academy and Sylvan's Florida Connections Academy, two for-profit kindergarten-through-eighth-grade virtual schools in their second year as state-funded pilot programs, together serve about 600 students in Florida and may be up for expansion next year if legislators think taxpayers' dollars are being well spent.

Families and educators involved in virtual schooling think so. They shrug off criticisms (familiar to homeschoolers) that virtual learners miss out on social interaction and rob resources and students from traditional public schools, touting the diverse ways in which online classes can help children learn: Some kids take a class they can't fit into their regular schedule or access at their conventional school.

Many homeschoolers take courses online that their parents don't feel comfortable teaching on their own. Others, seeking flexibility, demanding curricula and individual attention, take only virtual school courses. They may be gifted, learning disabled, travel a lot with their parents or devote a great deal of time to athletics or performance activities, making the flexible, online assignment agenda and multimedia lessons ideal (although much work is done offline). Still, even though virtual education is versatile, proponents warn that the learning method is not for everyone and that parents should consider several factors before letting their kids learn online.

"I think the Internet can be a tremendous tool for learning at any age," says

Donna Lenaghan, director of the educational computing and technology program at Barry University in Miami Shores. "But parents need to look at the whole child and consider learning styles to choose the best medium for them to learn."

Not so up close, but personal

When Ryan's son struggled with an algebra problem last year, he didn't raise his hand to get his teacher's help. He sent her an e-mail. She called back within an hour.

"He sat on the phone and said, 'I'm stuck again. I still don't get it,'" says Ryan. "The teacher was great. She said, 'OK, let's bring it up on the computer and work through it.'"

Rather than compete with others for attention or admit their confusion in a crowded classroom, virtual school students can speak one-on-one with their teachers, says Norma Jean Carnicella of Loxahatchee. Carnicella enrolled her son David, 7, in Florida Connections Academy last year for the more complex curric-

ula. Assignments include science experiments, elaborate art projects and in-depth history lessons. "Public school teachers are so overwhelmed by all their demands, he would never get challenged like this in a class with 40 students," she says.

Yet parents also should consider what kids might miss by plugging in. Lenaghan says even though the programs build children's language skills by focusing on phonics and word roots, they lack the personal interaction essential to shaping well-rounded adults attuned to social cues. "Missing from most virtual programs is the role modeling with facial expressions and body language," she says. "The development of how children talk really is through conversing with and hearing many different adults and children. Something is lost when it's just typed out."

Kiala Boykin, a Florida Virtual School teacher, says she makes up for the distance by

sending students e-mail announcements with peppy voice-overs. "I always put things in like, 'This weekend I went with my nephew to the beach,' to connect with the kids," says the seventh-grade language arts teacher. "A lot of them are so used to going to chat rooms without face-to-face interaction, anyway."

To ensure their kids don't turn into screen drones, parents considering virtual schooling should chat with their children about extracurricular activities they might enjoy, says Mary Stacell, a Florida Connections Academy teacher. Otherwise, kids, especially only children, are liable to feel a bit isolated.

Parents go back to school

Virtual schooling has taken over Sheila Wallace's life.

"My life now does not belong to me," says Wallace of Lauderhill, whose 9- and 7-year-old daughters take Florida Virtual Academy courses. "During the hours I would usually clean and do the shopping, I am now 'Teacher.'"

Although there are certified teachers on the other end of the network, parents are the ones on the front lines of virtual lessons, supervising their kids' studies and,

Florida Virtual School has helped Connor Ryan, 12, get the attention he needs and feel energized about schooling.

PHOTO BY CARA NISSMAN



More Information

FLORIDA VIRTUAL SCHOOL

www.flvs.net

Florida Virtual School began as a pilot program serving 100 students in the Orlando area in 1997. It has now expanded to serve more than 7,000 students. Florida Virtual School provides free online classes and instruction to public, private and homeschool students in Florida with 75 courses at middle school and high school levels. Outside of Florida, classes are available on a license or tuition basis.

FLORIDA CONNECTIONS ACADEMY

www.connectionsacademy.com/state/home.asp?sid=fl

Operated by Sylvan Learning Centers, Florida Connections Academy is funded as a pilot program only by the state of Florida and offers free online classes to students. For the 2004-2005 school year, the state has authorized Florida Connections to serve existing students and their siblings. New students are not being accepted at this time.

FLORIDA VIRTUAL ACADEMY

www.flva.org

904-721-0035

A larger pilot program also funded by the state, Florida Virtual Academy provides instruction for kindergarten through 12th grade. Applications received now will be placed on a waiting list. If accepted, students are provided with a computer, printer and reimbursement of Internet connection on loan while they are enrolled.

for young children, printing out and dictating the lessons provided in online agendas. Sometimes parents are as intimidated by the lessons as their children, even though the programs provide scripts for parents to follow.

"When I look at lessons the night before, a lot of times my stomach gets in knots," says Carnicella. "I think, 'How am I going to teach that tomorrow?' But the next night I say, 'Whoa, I taught him that!' It's very difficult, critical thinking, but it's very rewarding."

When she needs motivation, Jupiter resident Katie Choy, whose three children Armand, 8, Stefan, 7, and Francesca, 5, attend Florida Virtual Academy, remembers she's a role model. "If I said, 'Forget it, I'm not teaching today,' what message would that send to them?" she says. "You have to do it no matter what mood you're in."

Sometimes Choy fights the urge to do

Rather than compete with others for attention or admit their confusion in a crowded classroom, virtual school students can speak one-on-one with their teachers.

her children's work to move lessons along. "You have to have the self-control not to say 'Are you sure you want to choose that answer?'" she says, laughing. "It's hard because you want your children to do well. But you have to make sure your kids are learning or you're cheating them."

Lenaghan says it's best to consider the commitment involved before getting caught in the Web, especially if parents have multiple children with divergent learning styles. But the results of these efforts, parents say, outweigh the challenges.

"It's a lot of work, but it's worth it," says Wallace. "Their public school had budget cuts and they lost their science teacher. Now they're learning art, history,

CREATING A SPECIAL CONNECTING BETWEEN PARENT & CHILD!

Work With Your Children One On One & Build Their Academic Skills To Mastery With Packages Starting At The Minimal Cost Of \$15.00.



- **Learning More Package:**
Learning Activities Video/DVD
- **Getting Started Package:**
Learning More Package Plus Workbook
Parent Manual & Quick Start Resource Manual
- **Mastery Package:**
Getting Started Package Plus Flash Cards,
Dominos, Puzzle, HiQ Game, Word Box & Folder



For More Information
About the Product & Packages,
Call Toll Free:

1-866-KIDS-4-AHT

www.athometutor.net

Reading, Listening and Attention Problems?

They may be the symptoms of an underlying **Auditory Processing Disorder (APD)**.

Children with APD struggle to follow directions, hear in noisy places and remember what they have heard. To solve these problems, hearing pathways in the brain must be "rewired" to make listening easier.

For more information regarding APD and the most advanced treatment programs, please contact our office at **(954) 450-4226**.

Children's Hearing Associates
Leah K. Light, M.S., CCC-A
11011 Sheridan St.
Suite 303
Cooper City, FL 33026
childrenshearing@aol.com
www.childrenshearing.com



science and music along with reading and math. Virtual school is a blessing."

On the Move

Choy's children enjoy weighing multicolored gram cubes on their scale and locating distant lands on their globe, but any time they get restless, she lets them expend some energy so they won't wriggle impatiently in their seats, as they might do in a traditional classroom.

"I keep jump ropes in a drawer and whenever they get sleepy, I have them jump to get their blood pumping again," says Choy. "Sometimes I just say, 'Take 10 minutes and run around outside.'"

Practicing violin, swimming and diving

more. With more time and less pressure, Williams' son jumped from the 40th to the 77th percentile on the FCAT reading ranking this year.

"In a traditional class, you take a math test, get a 60 percent and that's it, you move on to the next chapter, whether you've mastered the information or not," says Gila Tuchman, a Florida Virtual Academy teacher. "In this program, if a child doesn't understand something, he can stay with the subject and his parents and teacher can use different techniques to help him understand."

The portability of virtual schooling also appeals to some families. Using a laptop, Yvonne Steingold of Miami gave her chil-



most days, Choy's children are busy. It is because she could plan her children's lessons around their extracurricular pursuits while maintaining a reasonable amount of down time that Choy chose to enroll her kids in virtual school.

"The kids used to never see their dad because he's a physician and he works late and they had to get up early for school," she says. "We have a lot more quality family time now."

Besides planning coursework around activities, families can start later for children who are more productive in the afternoon. Parents also can organize their children's days according to their best and worst subjects, pairing harder lessons with lighter subjects, or teaching just one subject some days if they can't absorb

dren Florida Connections Academy tests on a recent Disney cruise. One of Boykin's 14-year-old students completed lessons while accompanying his father on a Peace Corps trip to Puerto Rico.

Still, just because virtual school caters to their schedules doesn't mean all online material is appropriate or credible for teaching children. "Anyone can put anything on the Internet, so parents need to make sure kids learn to check the citation of sources," Lenaghan says. Parents also should consider their children's level of

Virtual schooling allows Francesca Choy, 5, and her siblings to have lessons planned around extracurricular pursuits while maintaining a reasonable amount of downtime.

PHOTO BY CARA NISSMAN

brain development when choosing a virtual school. Young children should spend less time learning online than preteens. "Most children's level of development from kindergarten through sixth grade is pretty linear and they're not ready for abstract concepts until high school," she says. "The Internet is a pretty abstract medium, so young children will be lost as to how the information builds on itself. The goal is to help them master the basic information and a fearlessness of learning more as they grow."

A love of learning

Above all, Lenaghan says, parents should choose a virtual school that instills in their children a love of learning.

"We want children to be curious, to explore for more information and to apply that information," she says. "We want them to enjoy the path."

The Ryans of Lake Worth are happy with their choice. Reading intently off his computer screen, Connor shows off his favorite world geography project. Last year the seventh-grader created a theme park for cultural understanding, assembling images of all the trappings of a theme park while doing extensive research to educate about a chosen region of the world. As vibrant photographs of Latin American landmarks, musicians and animals flash across the screen during his Power Point presentation, he describes why working on a dynamic project, incorporating music and animation, rather than a regular book report, appealed to him.

"I didn't just look at maps and read dates. I got to learn about the people and how they react to the places they live in," he says. "It makes it fun, you know? I actually remember the stuff." The Ryans reinforced what Connor learned by taking a cruise to Belize and Mexico. "We got to see the Mayan ruins — it was really cool," he says. "I kept saying, 'Wow look at how big this is! I studied this!' It was so awesome."

Cara Nissman is a freelance youth and family reporter. She lives in West Palm Beach.