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Program Review

Florida On-Line High School Should Improve Its Accountability and Access Processes

at a glance

The Florida On-Line High School, though relatively new and a national leader in distance learning for high school students over the Internet, needs a strategic vision of what it is, what it wants to accomplish, and how it might achieve these goals.

Once the school establishes strategic goals, it should develop an accountability system to hold itself responsible for achieving school goals as well as student performance goals.

School administrators also should consider access issues, including student enrollment among districts, improved access for some students lacking home computers, and setting fees for out-of-state students.

Purpose

This review is part of our program evaluation and justification review of K-12 public education in Florida as required by s. 11.513, *F.S.*

The Department of Education encouraged Orange and Alachua counties, which had similar on-line educational initiatives, to establish a partnership and develop a statewide on-line school. Created in 1997, the Florida On-Line High School provides distance learning delivered over the Internet.

Background

What is distance learning?

Students who enroll in the Florida On-Line High School take classes for graduation credit over the Internet. The school operates as a "virtual high school," as students do not physically meet as a group but access coursework over the Internet and use e-mail, fax machines, and telephones to communicate with teachers and other students.

While students gain high school credits by taking its courses, the On-Line High School does not currently offer a complete high school curriculum. [1] Students therefore cannot graduate from the On-Line High School with a diploma.

On-line courses can be accessed 24 hours a day and are project-based and organized by modules, which allows students to learn at their own pace. Staff within the student's home district proctor any exams. The courses generally do not require textbooks, but the on-line school provides any textbooks or other materials that are needed. Access to computers and the Internet is a requirement for participation.

Students gain access to their on-line classes in several ways. As shown in Exhibit 1, most students access courses at home and take on-line
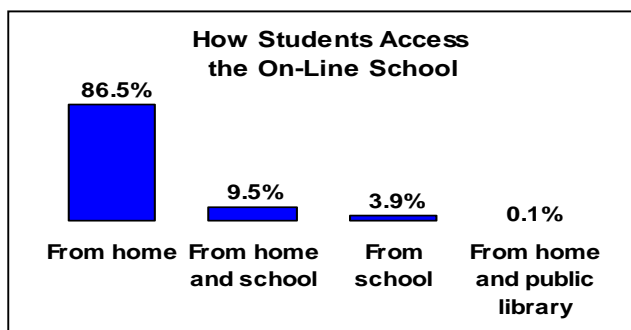
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[1] To earn high school credit, a public school student must live in an affiliated school district. All 67 districts are currently affiliated.

courses in addition to a full schedule at their schools. Other students are either released early from their schools to work on the on-line class or use on-line courses to augment home schooling. Students may take on-line courses as a part of their regular school schedule. Increasingly schools are making time available for on-line classes during regular class periods using computers in a school lab. As shown in Exhibit 2, the school offered 56 courses in 1999-2000.

Exhibit 1
Most Students Take On-Line Classes From Home

How Students Access the On-Line School

- 86.5% — From home
- 9.5% — From home and school
- 3.9% — From school
- 0.1% — From home and public library

Source: Florida On-Line High School.

Exhibit 2
The On-Line School Offers 56 Courses in 10 Academic Areas

Academic Area	Regular Courses	Honors and AP Courses
Business Computer Technology	6	
Computer Education	7	
Family and Consumer Sciences	1	
Foreign Language	2	
Language Arts	6	4
Mathematics	4	3
Physical Education	1	
Research and Critical Thinking	1	
Science	6	5
Social Studies	6	4

Source: Florida On-Line High School.

Students may take on-line classes for several reasons. As shown in Exhibit 3, students may use the on-line classes to make up courses needed for graduation, accelerate their graduation, or to take courses that are not available at their schools. Also, some students have found that they perform better in such self-study classes.

Exhibit 3
Students Take On-Line Courses for Several Reasons

- Make up credits to graduate on schedule
- Achieve better success in a different learning environment
- Accelerate academic progress
- Take courses when homebound
- Take courses when traveling or home-schooled
- Take courses not available due to scheduling conflicts
- Take courses not offered at their school

Source: Florida On-Line High School.

How do students enroll?

Students use the Internet to access the Florida On-Line High School website and register for courses. On-Line High School classes are open to public school students, home-schooled students' and those attending private schools. Once students register, the on-line school provides enrollment information to the students' districts, schools, and counselors. A student's parents and guidance counselor must approve enrollment.

Who are the students?

In 1999-2000, 1,669 students from 59 Florida counties enrolled in Florida On-Line High School courses (see Appendix A). As shown in Exhibit 4, 65% attended public schools while 35% were home-schooled or attend private schools. Home-schooled students have been more likely to take multiple courses than those attending traditional schools. In addition, seven out-of-state students were enrolled in an Advanced Placement calculus course, per an agreement with the Southern Regional Education Board.

As shown in Exhibit 5, the characteristics of students taking on-line classes are somewhat different from those of the statewide population of public school students. On-line students are more likely to be male and white than the overall population of Florida's high school students. Finally, 83% of on-line students enrolled in fall 1999 reported a grade point average higher than 3.0. [2]

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[2] Students self-reported their grade point averages.

Exhibit 4
Most On-Line School Students
Are From Public Schools
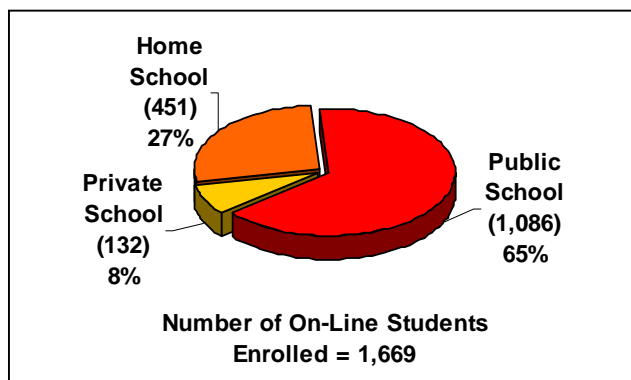
Source: Florida On-Line High School.

Exhibit 5
Characteristics of On-Line School Students Differ
Somewhat From Public School Students

	On-Line	Statewide
White, Non-Hispanic	84%	56%
Male	54%	51%
Female	46%	49%

Source: *The Florida High School Evaluation, 1998-1999 Year End Report*, Florida State University College of Education Center for the Study of Teaching and Learning, August 1999.

How is the school administered?

From its inception through 1998-99, the school boards of Orange and Alachua counties jointly administered the on-line school. In 1999-2000, Orange County assumed primary fiscal and administrative responsibility for the school.

During the 2000 legislative session the Legislature established a new governance structure for the on-line school.[3] A seven-member board of trustees appointed by the Governor will assume responsibility. The board is to annually submit a legislative budget request and be treated as a grant-in-aid appropriation in the Department of Education's legislative budget request.

The Florida On-Line High School is head-quartered in the Orange County School District Building. The primary administrative activities are conducted at this site, with the school's

principal and assistant principal, technical coordinators, testing coordinator, guidance counselor, and Orlando-based teachers all based at that location.

The school also has four regional directors who provide information and assistance to public school personnel and the public in their geographic areas. The regional directors make presentations to educational and civic groups and answer questions about the school and its programs. They direct public and private school staff and parents to on-line school resources and help resolve problems that participating schools and students may encounter. The regional directors also provide support to affiliated teachers and collect information from teachers, schools, and the public to help guide the On-Line High School's operations.

The on-line classes are taught by 33 teachers from 17 Florida school districts. The school will add 18 teachers for the 2000-01 school year, increasing capacity to approximately 5,000 course enrollments. The addition of teachers is important, since the school could not serve approximately 500 students who attempted to register for classes in 1999-2000.[4] The non-Orlando-based teachers live in their respective districts, work full-time for the on-line school, but are considered to be on special assignment from their home school districts.

How is the school funded?

Since 1997-98, the Legislature has annually appropriated funds for the On-Line High School (see Exhibit 6). The school's funding is not based on enrollment through the Florida Education Funding Program (FEFP), but is a direct line item determined by the Legislature. School districts with students enrolled at the On-Line High School as part of their 25 hours will receive the regular FEFP funding. However, school districts will receive no additional funding for students taking On-Line High School courses in addition to their required 25 hours. This is intended to avoid creating a financial disincentive to school

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[3] Section 228.082, *F.S.*

[4] The 500 students include students placed on a waiting list who did not register, students who chose not to be placed on the waiting list, and students who tried to register after the waiting list was closed.

districts that allow their students to take on-line classes. None of the Florida students pay tuition.

Exhibit 6
Florida On-Line High School Appropriations and Enrollments Have Grown
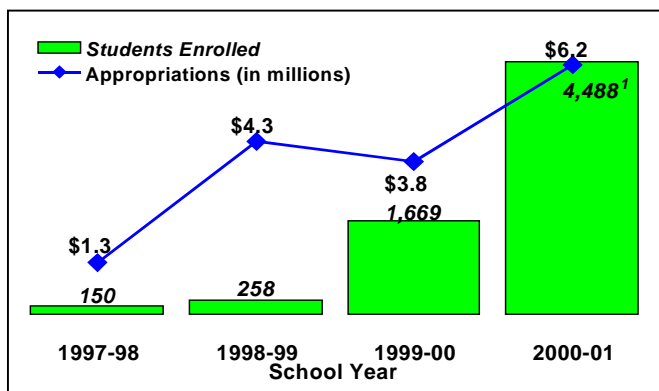
[1] Enrolled as of September 7, 2000.
Source: Florida On-Line High School.

How are students performing?

While there are limited data available on the performance of the on-line school, students generally seem to be making adequate academic progress, and satisfaction with the school is high. More than 80% of the On-Line High School's students received grades of "A" or "B" in the courses that they took from the On-Line High School (see Exhibit 7).   In addition, on-line students outperformed statewide students with respect to passing the Advanced Placement Test with 72% on-line students passing compared to 56% statewide. However, because of the small number (32) of on-line students tested, caution must be used when considering these results.

The Department of Education, on the recommendation of the Florida On-Line High School's advisory council, hired Florida State University to conduct an evaluation of the on-line school for 1998-99. [5] The evaluation focused on six areas including customer satisfaction and student performance. [6] Researchers interviewed or surveyed students, parents, district contacts,

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[5] *The Florida High School Evaluation, 1998-1999 Year End Report*, Florida State University College of Education Center for the Study of Teaching and Learning, August 1999.

[6] The six areas are governance and administration, curriculum and instruction, student access and performance, delivery system (technology), fiscal resources, and customer satisfaction.

administrators, and guidance counselors about their experiences and satisfaction.   Exhibit 8 summarizes some of the customer satisfaction data. The report concluded that most of the stakeholders provided positive feedback and were satisfied with the school.

Exhibit 7
Grades Earned on FHS Courses Tend to Be A*s* and B*s*
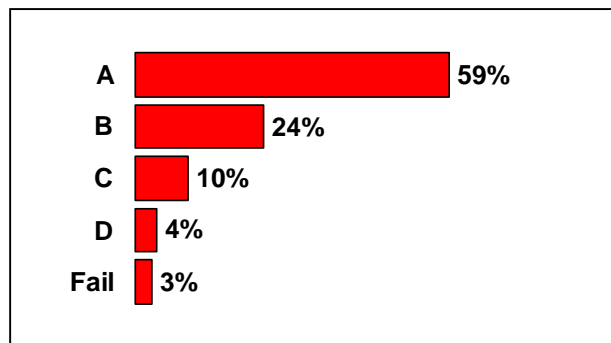
Note: Grades are for 410 students who had completed on-line courses as of July 1999.
Source: *The Florida High School Evaluation, 1998-1999 Year End Report*, Florida State University College of Education Center for the Study of Teaching and Learning, August 1999.

Exhibit 8
Stakeholders Seem Satisfied With the On-Line School

Summary of Customer Satisfaction	Percentage
Students who would recommend the on-line school to other students	79%
District respondents who indicated that the on-line school benefits their school district	100%
District respondents who indicated they had concerns related to on-line school courses	30%

Source: *The Florida High School Evaluation, 1998-1999 Year End Report*, Florida State University College of Education Center for the Study of Teaching and Learning, August 1999.
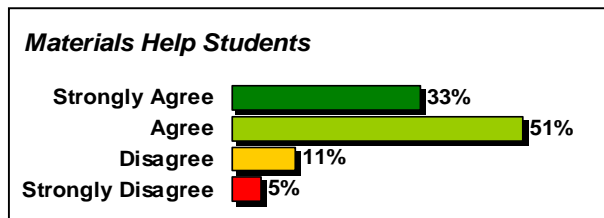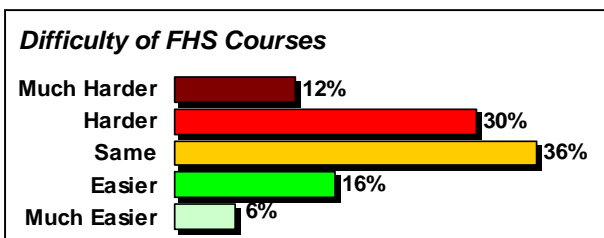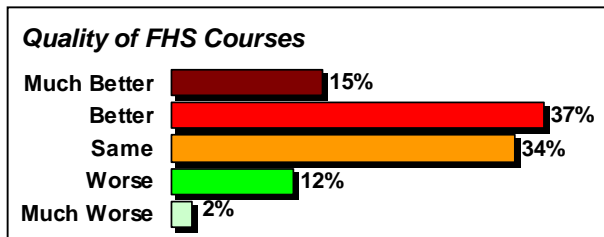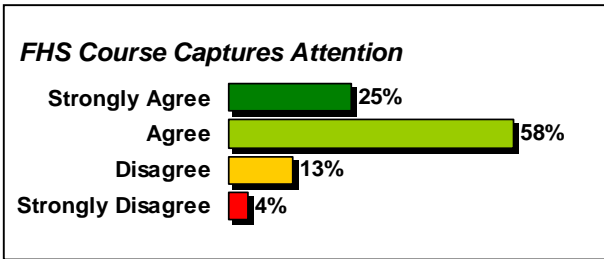
The students reported that the on-line courses capture their attention, that course materials provided by the on-line school help students to be successful, that the quality of on-line courses is the same or better than traditional high school classes, and that the courses were as difficult or more difficult than traditional high school classes (see Exhibit 9).
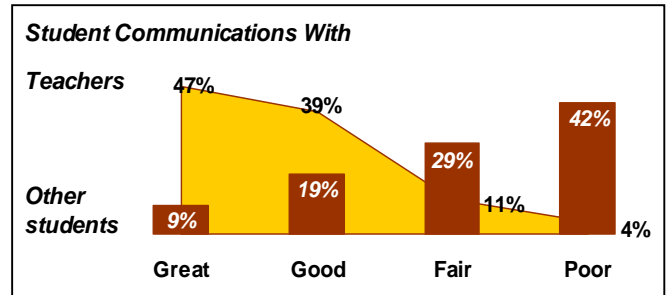
Exhibit 9
Quality and Level of Difficulty of On-Line Classes Compare Favorably With Traditional High Schools

FHS Course Captures Attention

Strongly Agree	25%
Agree	58%
Disagree	13%
Strongly Disagree	4%

Quality of FHS Courses

Much Better	15%
Better	37%
Same	34%
Worse	12%
Much Worse	2%

Difficulty of FHS Courses

Much Harder	12%
Harder	30%
Same	36%
Easier	16%
Much Easier	6%

Materials Help Students

Strongly Agree	33%
Agree	51%
Disagree	11%
Strongly Disagree	5%

Source: *The Florida High School Evaluation, 1998-1999 Year End Report*, Florida State University College of Education Center for the Study of Teaching and Learning, August 1999.

Finally, students were very satisfied with the level of communication between students and teachers, but were considerably less satisfied with the amount of communication between students (see Exhibit 10).

Exhibit 10
Satisfactory Communications with Teachers, Not With Students

Student Communications With

	Great	Good	Fair	Poor
Teachers	47%	39%	29%	42%
Other students	9%	19%	11%	4%

Source: *The Florida High School Evaluation, 1998-1999 Year End Report*, Florida State University College of Education Center for the Study of Teaching and Learning, August 1999.

Strategic Issues———

Florida is a leader in the application of technology in the K-12 educational setting. While this positions the state as a pioneer, it also poses challenges because the school has few models to follow in guiding its current and future operations. We identified three key areas—strategic planning, performance accountability, and accessibility—that the school needs to address. The school's proposals to address these challenges should be reported in the school's board of trustees' January 2001 report to the Governor, the Legislature, and the Education Reorganization Transition Commission (see Exhibit 11). [7]

Exhibit 11
Plan Due to Legislature on January 1, 2001

- Review of operations and accomplishments of FHS
- Marketing and Operational Plan
- Analysis of assets and liabilities
- Annual Finance and Compliance Audit of accounts and records
- Determination of the unit cost of providing services to students
- Mechanism to assess the effectiveness of the educational services provided

Source: Section 228.082, *F.S.*

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[7] Section 228.082, *F.S.*

Strategic planning needed

The On-Line High School must address several fundamental long-term questions about its future mission and operations, which are presented below and make recommendations on how to proceed to the Legislature.

What should be the school's primary mission? School administrators state that their goal is to provide core and selected elective courses. However, it is not clear whether the school should provide a full range of classes, or whether it should concentrate its efforts on specialized courses such as honors, advanced placement, technology, and foreign language.

Who should the school serve? The school needs to select what its primary student target markets are. There are many possibilities, including traditional public school students, rural public school students, private school students, juvenile justice program participants, home-schooled students, out-of-state students, and at-risk students. If the school is not currently able to serve all that apply, it may need to fine tune its target student populations to ensure that those students are served.

How should the school be funded? The On-Line High School historically has been funded through legislative appropriation. Section 228.082(3)(a), *F.S.*, provides that funds for operation of the school will be included in the Department of Education's legislative budget as a grant-in-aid appropriation.

The board of trustees needs to determine if fees should be charged to any group of students. For instance, should out-of-state students pay fees since they are not Florida taxpayers? School administrators are in the process of analyzing the costs for course development and distribution, which must be done before realistic fee levels can be set. However, s. 228.082, *F.S.*, requires that by January 1, 2001, the newly created board must submit its calculation of the cost of educating a single student to the Legislature. With this information, the school should be able to determine how efficiently the school is providing its educational services, as well as to help determine the appropriate tuition to charge potential out-of-state students.

Accountability system needed

Once the school's board has identified its primary mission and goals, it needs to recommend to the Legislature a strong accountability system that includes performance measures to gauge whether these objectives are being met. Section 228.082, *F.S.*, requires the new board to recommend an accountability system to the Legislature by January 2001. The school needs to recommend clearly stated goals and measurable objectives with these goals and objectives tied to the student target markets that are decided upon. Examples of goals and objectives for the school to consider include

- increase the number of students served from rural districts and/or these students' access to advanced placement courses;
- increase students' scores on appropriate standardized tests;
- improve students' problem solving and critical thinking skills; and
- improve students' reading, writing, and math skills as measured by pre- and post-test scores.

In addition, the board should indicate the percentage increases it wishes to see achieved. For example, for the objective "increase students' scores on school administered pre- and post-tests," the board should specify the size of the increase desired and when the increase will be achieved (e.g., "an increase of x in pre- and post-test score differentials in 2001").

As the On-Line High School does not report to the residents of a county, as do other school boards, the board should annually report its performance to the parents of the students enrolled, the Commissioner of Education, the Governor, and the Legislature.

Access challenges need to be addressed

The On-Line High School also needs to address two issues that involve access to its classes,

- increasing awareness and use of its services among school districts and
- addressing access to courses for students who lack home computers.

Increasing awareness among students and districts. To date, the on-line school's administrators have allowed students to enroll on a first-come-first-served basis. The school was enrolled to capacity in 1999-2000 and turned away approximately 500 students during its registration period. School administrators plan to increase access by adding 18 teachers for the 2000-01 school year, increasing capacity to approximately 5,000 enrollments.

As shown in Appendix A, use of the on-line school has varied considerably among school districts. The school has been used most heavily in Orange County where 324 students enrolled for on-line classes.   However, no students enrolled in on-line classes in eight counties, and most counties had fewer than 10 public school students enrolled. This suggests that the school needs to broaden its marketing efforts, although carefully to avoid creating demand for services that it cannot meet. The school's board should consider establishing enrollment policies that provide a more balanced distribution of students statewide. These policies should be linked to the school's objectives and its target population.
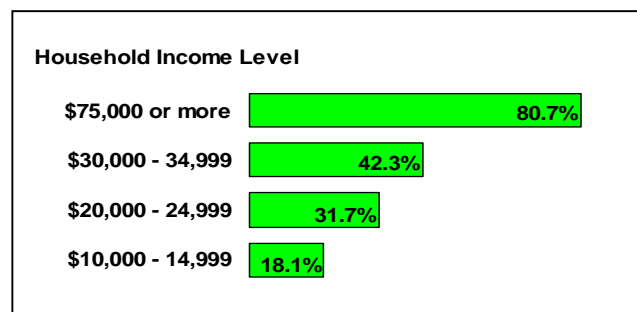
Improve Computer Access. As discussed earlier, most students access the school's on-line courses at home. While schools have computers available for students' use, these computers generally are used for several purposes and may not be available for students taking on-line courses.

For some students, access to the school's on-line courses may be limited because their families do not have home computers. If not addressed, this issue could result in unequal access to the school by less affluent students, who are disproportionately members of ethnic minority groups. Information from a nationwide survey indicates that white students are more likely to have home computers and thus be able to take on-line classes than other ethnic groups. The survey found that 61% of white students, 22% of Hispanic students, and 21% of African-American students have access to computers at home, and that students from more affluent households were more likely to use computers at home (see Exhibit 12).

The new board should develop strategies to ensure that students have equal access to the On-Line High School. These strategies could include

working with public schools and libraries to ensure that students wishing to take on-line classes have access to computers during the school day as well as after school hours.

Exhibit 12
Wealthier Students Are More Likely to Use Computers at Home

Household Income Level

$75,000 or more	80.7%
$30,000 - 34,999	42.3%
$20,000 - 24,999	31.7%
$10,000 - 14,999	18.1%

Source: *Digest of Education Statistics*, 1998; Chapter 7: *Learning Resources and Technology*.

Recommendations

Based upon the preceding discussion, we recommend that the new board of trustees of the Florida On-Line High School provide recommendations to the Legislature in their planning document due January 1, 2001, in the areas noted below.

- The board should clearly recommend the school's mission, including the determination of its target student populations and the range of courses to offer.
- The board should suggest appropriate performance measures that reflect how well the school is providing its educational services.
- The board should determine the unit cost of providing education services and use that to suggest pricing strategies for out-of-state students.
- We recommend that the school improve its target student populations' awareness of the On-Line High School. Once these populations are selected, the On-Line High School should seek 100% awareness within these populations through targeted presentations and mailings directed to the students, their families, and school administrators.
- We recommend that the school ensure access for its target student populations.

Appendix A
Number of Students Active in Florida High School Courses 1999-2000
(Actual Students, Not Enrollments)

District	Home	Private	Public	Total
Alachua	13	1	43	57
Baker			6	6
Bay	6		1	7
Bradford			6	6
Brevard	16		92	108
Broward	31		9	40
Calhoun			1	1
Charlotte				
Citrus	9		5	14
Clay	12		22	34
Collier	11		34	45
Columbia	1		5	6
Dade	11	4	60	75
DeSoto				
Dixie				
Duval	17	1	8	26
Escambia	19		6	25
Flagler			1	1
Franklin			1	1
Gadsden	4	9	2	15
Gilchrist			1	1
Glades			3	3
Gulf			7	7
Hamilton			4	4
Hardee	2		1	3
Hendry	2		7	9
Hernando	10		8	18
Highlands	2		18	20
Hillsborough	26	1	4	31
Holmes				
Indian River	2	1		3
Jackson	1		41	42
Jefferson	2		18	20
Lafayette				

District	Home	Private	Public	Total
Lake		16	10	26
Lee	21		43	64
Leon	24	62	28	114
Levy	3		11	14
Liberty			4	4
Madison	1		27	28
Manatee	3		11	14
Marion	12		6	18
Martin	3		3	6
Monroe	1	1	6	8
Nassau	4		8	12
Okaloosa	5		23	28
Okeechobee				
Orange	48	31	245	324
Osceola	5		87	92
Palm Beach	27	2	3	32
Pasco	7		18	25
Pinellas	8		6	14
Polk	13	1	42	56
Putnam	1		15	16
Santa Rosa	8	1	7	16
Sarasota	8		4	12
Seminole	16	1	21	38
St. Johns	9		6	15
St. Lucie	2		5	7
Sumter	1			1
Suwannee	3		8	11
Taylor	3			3
Union				
Volusia	17		11	28
Wakulla				
Walton	1		6	7
Washington			1	1
Out-of-State			7	7
TOTAL	**451**	**132**	**1,086**	**1,669**

Source: Florida On-Line High School.

FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
TALLAHASSEE, FLORIDA 32399-0400

Tom Gallagher
Commissioner

September 5, 2000

Mr. John W. Turcotte, Director
Office of Program Policy Analysis
 and Government Accountability
111 West Madison Street, Room 312
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1475

Dear Mr. Turcotte:

Thank you for providing an opportunity to comment on your preliminary report on the
Florida On-Line High School. The report appears to be well balanced and contains
appropriate recommendations for establishing strategic goals and an accountability
system for the School.

The Florida On-Line High School is an exciting initiative, and we appreciate being kept
apprised of its successful development and statewide use.

Sincerely,

/s/
Tom Gallagher

TG/ng

Julie E. Young
Principal • youngj@fhs.net

Bruce Friend
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August 22, 2000

Mr. John W. Turcotte,
Director, Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability
111 West Madison Street, Room 312 Claude Pepper Building
Tallahassee FL 32399

Dear Mr. Turcotte,

We appreciate the opportunity to respond to the preliminary analysis of the legislative review of The Florida High School. I would first like to commend your staff on their professionalism throughout the process. Mr. Brand was very concise and easy to work with and we believe the report is well done and accurate.

The report identifies three key areas to be addressed:

1. Strategic Planning
2. Accountability System
3. Access Challenges

STRATEGIC PLANNING
The Florida High School is in the process of developing a strategic plan. This plan has been developed over the past 10 months with input from a variety of stakeholders, including parents, Department of Education staff, the Florida Home Education Association, Orange County Public Schools, Alachua County Schools, Business Partners, members of the FHS Advisory Board representing local Florida school districts, and Southern Regional Education Board.

The draft will be presented to The Florida High School Board of Trustees at the first official meeting for review and input.

What should be the school's primary mission?
The original mission of The Florida High School called for FHS to develop the select core and elective courses needed for a student to obtain a high school diploma.

Identified in that criteria were also Advanced Placement and Honors courses. Due to the natural tie into technology, FHS also geared its development of electives towards the computer science and business areas.

With the advent of One Florida, FHS is now providing considerable attention to the development and instruction of Advanced Placement courses for students throughout the state who might otherwise not have this learning opportunity, specifically students from Florida's rural and D and F schools. Future development will provide for expansion in this area.

FHS currently operates as a provider of on-line curriculum and instruction to the students in the state of Florida.

Who should the school serve?
Currently, FHS serves any public school student who has the permission of their guidance counselor or administrator, private school students from affiliated private schools, and home-educated students. FHS gives preference to students in the 31 rural counties as well as to the state's D and F schools by providing early registration opportunities, as well as preferential selection off the waiting list if the course becomes oversubscribed. A key component of the FHS mission is to serve students in Florida counties who otherwise may not have these learning opportunities available to them within their school.

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ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM NEEDED

The Florida High School views its level of accountability as one of its greatest assets. We believe the accountability far exceeds the accountability for instructional strategies, staff performance and student outcomes of a traditional school.

- FHS self-initiated an ongoing evaluation system during the 1998-99 school year, whereby students, parents, school district personnel, and administrators throughout the state are surveyed for customer satisfaction twice per year. This data is used to drive the goals and objectives for the school and the staff, which ultimately increase accountability.

- For the 2000-2001 school year, FHS targeted student enrollment from rural and D and F schools. ***FHS has increased participation from rural schools by 240% thus far.***

- FHS has a rigorous process to validate an FHS on-line course. All courses are reviewed by outside experts in the field to determine if Sunshine State Standards are met within the course, as well as the levels of Bloom's Taxonomy, Gagne's Events of Instruction, Multiple Intelligences, student to student and student to teacher interaction, and effective use of the technology as a tool.

- Progress reports are electronically sent to student and parents each month. Parent, guidance counselors and district personnel may view this data on-line at anytime.

- FHS uses a data driven means to assess student and teacher progress. Progress report data is aggregated and thoroughly reviewed by the administration with each teacher once per month.

- Each year a school-wide goal as well as an individual teacher goal is set for course completion. During the 1998-99 school year, FHS experienced a 50% completion rate, commensurate with the national average for distance learning schools. For the 1999-2000 school year, FHS set a lofty goal of a 70% completion rate as a school-wide goal. FHS exceeded that goal. For the 2000-2001 school year, FHS has set a goal of maintaining or exceeding a 70% completion rate, with each teacher meeting the criteria. Typically a final exam for a student in the state of Florida is weighted at 20% overall grade, thus a student could fail the final exam and still pass the course and receive the credit. As a mastery learning system, FHS requires that a student pass the final assessment to receive credit for the course. All final assessments are performance-based assessments developed to determine the extent to which students mastered the course objectives and Sunshine State Standards. This alignment between course objectives, Sunshine State Standards, and final exam is another part of the course review process. Thus, when a student passes the exam we have validated his "mastery" of the content. If a student does not pass the final assessment, the student is remediated and retested until he meets success.

- Internet-based, distance learning opportunities merged with mastery learning systems will provide an educational system that is about learning, not about credits but about learning, and only that kind of system is ultimately going to have a major impact on our economic system and the quality of life for all individuals. FHS's accountability system should, in fact, be a model for others because it truly ensures that students master course content.

ACCESS CHALLENGES NEED TO BE ADDRESSED

Increasing awareness of its services among school districts
In some of the districts where FHS may be needed the most, it has been requested that FHS not market directly to the students and parents of the district. There is still a fear factor that must be recognized and addressed by those other than FHS regarding the perceived and possible financial disincentive FHS would pose if students were funded purely on an FTE model. The FHS regional staff has held multiple presentations and informational meetings in all Florida school districts, yet there are still many students and parents unaware of this unique opportunity for learning. We are aware that in many cases the information is not filtering down to the students and parents, however we feel that our hands are somewhat tied in this area.

FHS has requested the support of the Governor's office to address access and increased awareness of services from a high level. The 2 agencies will work together during the 2000-2001 school year to significantly increase awareness of FHS opportunities at the teacher, student and parent level.

In the meantime, FHS intends to do a mass mailing to all schools, public service announcements will be made available and sent to the local broadcasting channels, publicity efforts in conjunction with the Governor's office will be executed and presentations will be targeted and scheduled to specifically reach teacher and parent groups.

Appendix C

Access to courses for students who lack home computers

Providing education to those who need it, regardless of their socio-economic status, is of great importance. However, if educators focus too narrowly on the technology issues in distance education, they can inadvertently widen the gap between the educational "haves" and "have nots."

Other issues impacting access are the ability to afford tuition, finding information about a course prior to registering, low perception of need, perceived effort, dislike of school, and situational barriers. A well-planned distance-learning course can overcome many barriers to learning, but the experts state that this takes a clearly organized learner-centered approach and ample technical and administrative support. In less generously supported settings, technology can become more of a hindrance than help—without technical assistance and properly trained instructors; even the best technology can prove almost worthless. FHS focuses on all of these components to the learning environment.

The Internet does have great potential for equalizing access to learning opportunity, particularly among low-income students and adults, disabled learners, under-skilled workers, rural and under-served populations, however that potential is not being met for several reasons, such as lack of home accessibility to the World Wide Web for many individuals in our country.

To combat the digital divide, the U.S. government has actively focused efforts to connect schools and libraries to the Internet and provide disadvantaged populations with the access that most do not have. While community access has provided more access to disadvantaged and rural populations, it is our experience that the community access approach may not be the final solution or the best approach for narrowing the digital divide.

The 1998-99 Florida High School Evaluation documented several findings with regard to student access. FHS student feedback provides some evidence that home access is a vital component to student success in on-line learning environments. The power of many distance learning courses lies in the fact that students can access their course and supplemental resources at any time, in any place, and, in some instances, using any pace. Such flexibility allows individuals to schedule their own learning at times most conducive to their lifestyle and learning preferences. Those students that can access their course only from school or libraries are at a clear disadvantage in that they cannot capitalize on the greatest asset of web-based learning, i.e., flexibility.

Additionally, studies related to dissemination of innovations indicate that a major factor in getting the masses to buy-in to a new idea, product, process, etc. relates to usability. (Rogers, 1983) Users must perceive the innovation as user-friendly and convenient. Community access is neither, especially for our most disadvantaged populations, many of who must rely on public transportation to get to libraries and other community facilities.

To bring home the point about the importance of usability and convenience, one can take a step back in time and think about when the telephone first came into use. One way to reach someone by phone was to call a place of business which had a phone, ask for the person and someone would be dispatched to go to the home and bring the person to the telephone. Needless to say, the telephone would not have become such an important part of our daily communication, had this practice continued. It was not until telephones were installed in people's homes that the technology was immersed into our daily lives and that all people could reap the benefits of enhanced communications and easy access to resources and information. The same is true with regard to the Internet; it has the potential of equalizing learning opportunities and expanding learning resources, but all individuals must have equal, convenient access or the digital divide will continue to increase.

Finally, The Florida High School's mission is to provide curriculum and instruction to students. We see the access issue as one of that involves the entire state working together for a better tomorrow. The efforts to provide safe, well equipped and supervised community centers in the state of Florida, such as the Governor's PowerUP Initiative is an awesome step forward to addressing the challenge. FHS intends to work closely with the Department of Education, the Governor's office and the business community to research and identify unique solutions to the lack of hardware and connectivity, with significant focus on getting the computers into the homes of students, where the entire family can benefit from the experience of public education.

Sincerely,

/s/ Julie E. Young
Principal, The Florida High School