



# Julie Young, president, Florida Virtual School

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle #920, Bloomington, MN 55437

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## Notes of the discussion

**Present:** Verne Johnson, chair (phone); Dan Loritz, vice chair; David Broden, Janis Clay, Pat Davies, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (phone), Curt Johnson (phone), Randy Johnson, Sallie Kemper, Ted Kolderie, Bruce Mooty, John Mooty, Jim Olson, Clarence Shallbetter (phone), and Justin Treptow (phone)

**Summary:** Today's guest, by conference call from Florida, was **Julie Young**, founder, president and CEO, Florida Virtual School (FLVS), a statewide online public school operated by the state of Florida. Traditional schools have failed to put the needs of individual students first, she says. "It is our organization's goal to remember we are shaping and teaching one-of-a-kind people, each with different needs, interests, learning styles, likes, values, and homes. No two are the same," Young says on the FLVS website. "At FLVS our goal has always been to *reinvent* education, not replicate it."

**A. Welcome and introductions** —Verne and Paul welcomed and introduced **Julie Young**, founder, president and CEO, Florida Virtual School (FLVS). Young earned a bachelor's degree in elementary education from the University of Kentucky and a master's in administration and supervision from the University of South Florida. She was an elementary classroom teacher from 1981 to 1989, a school technology specialist, 1989-1993, and an assistant elementary school principal from 1994-1996. While a school technology specialist, she worked closely with IBM. In 1996 she was asked by her employer, the Orange County school system, to head up a \$200,000 study, financed by the U. S. Department of Education, to develop a plan for an online high school for Florida. Young has lead the school since it opened in 1997. A seven-member board of trustees appointed by the Governor oversees the school's operations.

**B. Background on FLVS** —FLVS now serves students in Kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The computer is the primary delivery platform for learning. FLVS has approximately 122,000 students, of which only about 4,000 are full-time students taking a full course load. Most FLVS students take only one online course at a time. While FLVS is a state-wide public school, its students remain enrolled in their local school districts. Credits earned through FLVS courses count towards graduation in students' respective school districts.

FLVS is "open" seven days a week, 365 days a year. Teachers are available for consultation any day between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. A student may enroll at any time during the year. There is no set semester

or any other time frame for when a course begins or ends. Students move through the courses at their own pace. The motto of FLVS is "Any time, any place, any path, any pace."

About 70 percent of the enrollment are students enrolled in public school, about 25 percent are home schooled students, and 5 percent are private school students. Florida students attend tuition-free. The state of Florida provides aid to FLVS, just as it does for Florida's 67 Kindergarten -12<sup>th</sup> grade regular school districts. The state currently is making a payment of \$4,800 for each full-time equivalent student in FLVS. This payment is 22% less than the state's payment to regular school districts, which payment is now \$6,200 per full-time equivalent student.

FLVS is also providing online courses to about 3,000 non-resident, tuition-paying students. These students come from 48 states and 57 foreign countries. This year 12 Minnesota students are enrolled in FLVS, of whom four are home schooled, four (enrolled in Chinese language course) are from a south suburban school district in the Twin Cities metropolitan area, and four are from a suburban private school, also taking Chinese. Non-resident regular and honors courses cost \$375 per semester. Advance placement courses cost \$400 per semester. An additional \$25 charge is levied for students living outside the U.S.

FLVS has nearly 1,500 staff members, who reside throughout Florida and beyond. All FLVS teachers possess a valid Florida teaching certificate and are certified specifically in the subject they teach. Teachers have contracts with at-will status, meaning the employer is free to discharge individuals "for good cause, or bad cause, or no cause at all," and the employee is equally free to quit, strike, or otherwise cease work. About 11 percent of teachers are between ages 20 and 29, 47.5 percent are 30 to 39, 26.5 percent are 40 to 49 and 15 percent are 50 and above.

**C. Comments and discussion** —During Young's comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus, the following points were made:

**1. Traditional school structure tends to be rigid** . Traditional schools have failed to put needs of individual students first, Young said. Traditional schools assume the same amount of time (a quarter or a semester) is what is needed for all students, even though many students can master the content in far less time and many require far more time. Traditional schools provide learning opportunity between 7 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. (when athletic team practices start), Monday through Friday, as if such a schedule were appropriate for all students. Traditional schools offer very little one-on-one attention between student and teacher. Usually traditional schools offer the same type of course work for everyone in a class, even though some students would benefit from course work designed for their particular learning style.

**2. The goal of FLVS is to meet individual needs** . The school aims to provide an educational opportunity where each individual student's needs come first. In 1997, Young asked the team assembled to design FLVS to set aside all assumptions about how a school should run other than to put the needs of individual children first.

"It is our organization's goal to remember we are shaping and teaching one-of-a-kind people, each with different needs, interests, learning styles, likes, values, and homes. No two are the same," Young says on the FLVS website. "At FLVS our goal has always been to *reinvent* education, not replicate it."

**3. FLVS sells and licenses its courseware and training.** FLVS currently sells and licenses its courseware and professional development training in 49 states and 57 countries. Currently, it has 16 clients in Minnesota, including online schools, private and public schools, and charter schools. Florida state law requires that revenue from such sales is to be used for FLVS's own research and development.

**4. Nature of instruction in a typical online class is outlined.** Responding to a question, Young urged that individuals view the various videos that are available on the FLVS website, [www.flvs.net](http://www.flvs.net) . During a typical course of study, teachers and students interact regularly through email, voice mail, telephone conversations, and instant messaging. Students are encouraged to contact the teacher when there is a need of any kind. Teachers speak via telephone with students and their parents at least once per month. Upon entering a course, students have access to all assignments, but access to tests or quizzes may not be available until certain assignments have been completed. All graded assignments and current overall grade averages are available for viewing by students and parents. Each student is required to submit a specific amount of work each week to maintain the appropriate pace decided on by teacher and student. Charts of scheduled work assignments are embedded in all courses, allowing students to know exactly what they are expected to submit on a weekly basis, whether they choose a traditional, extended or accelerated pace. Teachers assist students in modifying the chart to reflect their chosen pace.

**5. About 110 courses are available** . A list of courses students may choose is available online: <http://bit.ly/k8oX4> .

**6. Expansion has been rapid.** FLVS opened in January 1998 with about 50 students; by 2008 the number of students had increased to about 77,000. Today there are more than 122,000 students.

**7. FLVS is recognized as a "disruptive innovation."** Young noted the FLVS was singled out by Clayton M. Christensen, Harvard business school professor, in his book "Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns". Successful innovations start small, hardly noticed by others, but then grow very fast, she said.

**8. Role of Florida school districts in virtual education is evolving** . Since FLVS has started, the Florida Legislature has given Florida's local school districts the right to offer online education themselves. Such a change has appeal to local districts, Young noted, because state aid for online students is channeled to the local district instead of to FLVS, thereby inserting an element of competition. However, to pursue providing online education on its own, each school district must develop its own online administrative and teaching structure and hire an online curriculum provider, she said, instead of relying on FLVS for that service.

**9. Online education in Minnesota and Florida is compared** . It was noted during the discussion that a few weeks ago the Civic Caucus conducted an interview with Justin Treptow, head of the Minnesota Virtual Academy, a public online school operated by the Houston, MN, school district. That school is one of some 20 virtual schools in Minnesota. See: <http://bit.ly/sDCdY0> . The Minnesota Virtual Academy is more of a school for fulltime students, with some emphasis on providing individual classes for students in other districts. By contrast, the vast majority of FLVS students continue to receive most of their education in regular classrooms in their own districts, and use FLVS courses for selective courses.

**10. Should online education be pursued because it's less expensive?** Responding to a question, Young said the main reason for moving to online education should be that it offers the chance to customize the program to the needs of every individual. Because no school buildings are involved, one can assume that online education has no capital or operating expense associated with buildings and no expense of busing children to school. However, she said online education has significant expenses of its own, including that of curriculum preparation. FLVS disagrees with the state's approach of providing less state aid for online education (\$4,800 per full-time-equivalent student) than regular school districts (\$6,200 per full-time-equivalent student).

**11. What about the quality of online education?** FLVS is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and by the Commission on International and Trans-Regional Accreditation. Its core course curriculum has been approved by the NCAA. FLVS doesn't currently grant a diploma. Credits are transferred back to the student's local school to count towards their graduation requirement.

According to Young, FLVS test scores outpace national averages on achievement in advance placement and international baccalaureate courses. She also added that parent surveys give very high rankings to FLVS, Young said. See survey results: <http://bit.ly/uMCUJe> .

The Florida TaxWatch Center for Educational Performance and Accountability (CEPA) examines the viability of FLVS as a credible alternative to traditional schooling as regards both student achievement outcomes and cost-effectiveness. FLVS earned high marks in both.

Young stressed that insuring the integrity of student work is a cornerstone of FLVS learning. An Internet tool compares students' work against other students' work and against work found on the Internet. FLVS maintains its own database of student integrity incidences or violations. In the course of periodic conversations with students, teachers extend the conversations to allow students to demonstrate mastery of the content and verify the authenticity of students' work.

**12. Require some online courses for all students, everywhere?** Because of widespread use of computers in all areas of human activity, it is important for students to be exposed to online learning, Young said. Florida is among four states that now require students in all schools to receive some online education before graduation.

**13. Local school district approval is required for students to enroll in FLVS .** The state of Florida requires that students who want to take courses at FLVS must meet with counselors in local school districts to receive approval. This requirement is intended to assure that requested courses are academically appropriate for students. For example, one concern is that a student might sign up for an advanced course without having taken prerequisites. Only about 1 percent of courses requests are denied, Young said.

**14. Terms are clarified.** Responding to a question, Young said that "virtual" education refers to any situation where student and teacher are physically separated; "online" education is that which is delivered via the Internet; "blended" education is that which is delivered partly in the traditional classroom and partly via the Internet.

**15. Thanks —** On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked Young for visiting with us today.