

Virtual Learning Part of the School Day at Fulton Schools

August 17, 2014

by Jennifer Klein

Any school system or for-profit venture can offer virtual learning. Fulton County Schools in Atlanta is going one better — an option to have virtual learning part of the school day itself. “We like to take hold and become part of the actual school day,” says Justin Castile, coordinator of virtual learning. Each of Fulton’s fifteen high schools has a virtual lab, staffed by a paraprofessional. Students can take virtual courses or credit recovery courses during the school day or at home — with no charge as long as it’s during the regular school day.



Fulton Virtual School now offers 20 courses, either as regular course completion, acceleration, or credit recovery, and more courses are in the works. The program currently uses adjunct teachers from across the school system, an administrator and coordinator, and is expanding this year into middle and elementary school. Through an online registration system, parents select the course from an online catalog, triggering an email to the student’s counselor seeking permission, which sends back approval, and automatically registers the student. Payment is also online, allowing high school counselors to track and tie payment directly to the student in same system.

Fulton Virtual’s credit recovery program also offers students chance to catch up or reinforce units from a class a student is currently taking. “We see the object as mastery, not just a grade or course completion. If a student has failed a course, they can take a pre-assessment with one of the teachers, then just redo the standards not mastered; it’s not necessary to re-take the entire course. We would like to get away from failure at all, giving access to this system during the actual course, recovering as they go along,” says Castile. Credit recovery can also happen at home over the summer, re-doing parts of the course and then having that grade recorded again.

Of the 1300 students taking Fulton virtual courses this past summer, 600 were rising 9th graders who chose to accelerate, taking courses such as health, personal fitness or American government, netting them high school credits. FVS also had students taking accelerated precalculus classes so that they can be eligible for distance learning opportunities with Georgia Tech later in high school. “Success in an online class depends on the student and their motivation and learning style,” says Castile. “Virtual learning is asynchronous learning, outside the constraints of time and place. Some kids excel in this format and some don’t. If a student is struggling with a concept, we make it easy to set up a conference call with the teacher, offering extra support.

Many courses are more demanding than the in-person courses, such as personal fitness, where we issue a heart rate monitor, and students upload the data after a workout on their own.”

Fulton students also have the option to take classes through Georgia Virtual School, which is run by the Georgia Department of Education. About 1500 Fulton students are enrolled there. “Our job is to create better options than the state does for our kids and save the school system money as well. We’re now offering American Sign Language, not available from the state, which is popular with special needs students who are having problems succeeding with other foreign language courses. Georgia legislation mandates high school counselors offer online options which include Fulton. Our competition is not just Georgia Virtual; there are several private for profit K-12 charter schools offering virtual learning, which currently have 900 Fulton students. We believe our virtual labs and opportunity for real time credit recovery and online courses will make Fulton Virtual the best option for Fulton students.”

Jennifer Klein, a principal in the PR firm JMK & Associates in Atlanta, Georgia, is a writer and media publicist focusing on education, sports, and the arts. She frequently writes about newsworthy educational programs for Fulton County Schools, where she has held leadership roles as a parent and community member for the past 20 years. Follow her at [@jrayklein](#).