

Success Story

Highlands County School District

SEBRING, FLORIDA

Grades: 6–12

Model: Virtual school

Time Period: 2016–2019

Reach: 1400 enrollments

Goal: Provide flexible solutions to district students

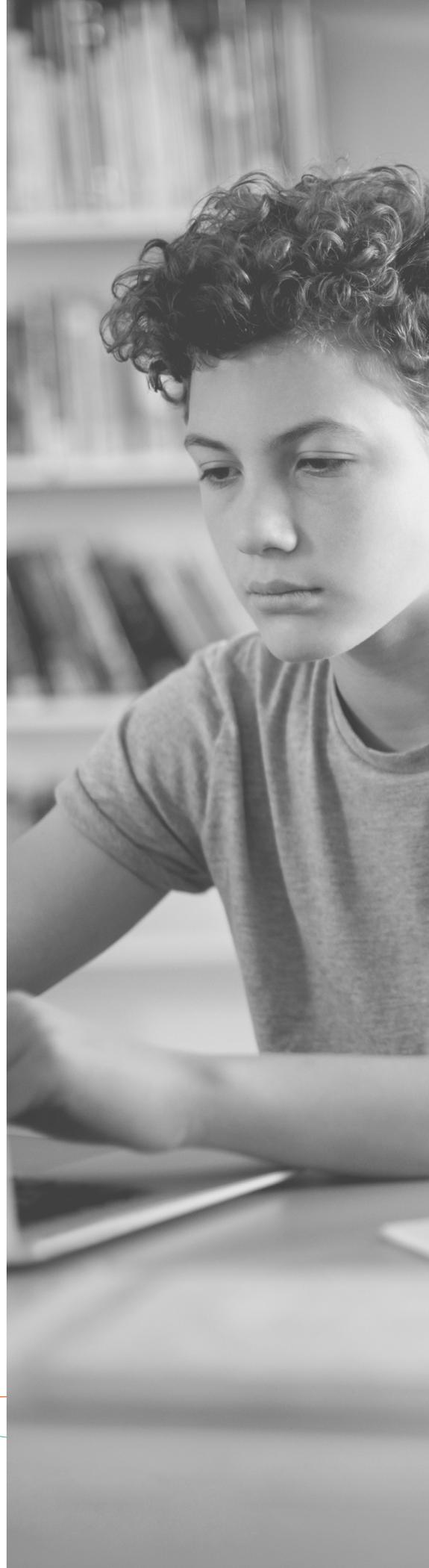
Impact: Allowed students to accelerate learning, satisfy their Florida online course requirement, recover credits, and an alternative track to graduation.

Opening a Virtual School within a District—Lessons Learned

After losing students to programs with more flexibility, Highlands County School District in Florida decided to open their own virtual school. Now, Highlands Virtual School (HVS) has 53 full-time students as well as over 1,400 enrollments, and those students are taking advantage of online courses to accelerate their learning, provide more flexibility in their schedule, satisfy their Florida online course requirement, or recover credits. The HVS staff of local educators fosters relationships between the students and their teachers because they both live in the same community and can meet at the local schools for one-on-one tutoring as needed. The ability to provide students with online options within their school district is not new, but HVS has learned a few lessons that may help others interested in opening a virtual school within a district.

1. COORDINATE WITH ADMINISTRATION

Program Administrator Lorie Layfield emphasizes the importance of coordinating with the administration and counselors at the schools that the virtual school is serving to establish a positive working relationship. It is important to note that opening a virtual school within a district will not steal students away from the local schools, but rather work with them to better serve the students and retain those who would have dropped out for more flexible options.



2. ENSURE STUDENTS ARE A GOOD FIT

To be successful in an online environment, students need to be self-motivated and independent learners. So for those desiring full-time enrollment, the administrators at HVS have an interview and application process in place to ensure that students are prepared for the rigors of online learning. They also provide a grace period where the teachers can reach out to students and parents if either party feels the student is not going to be successful in this environment. “Every day we work to improve the quality of education of the student, so it doesn’t do anyone any good if the student is not making progress,” says Layfield. And they are quick to communicate with parents, school counselors, and students when roadblocks arise.

“ Edgenuity allows our teachers to know exactly where a student is and to understand what they can and can’t do.

3. FIND THE RIGHT STAFF

Layfield says that her amazing staff is her biggest success at HVS. “We are fortunate to have teachers that have worked out perfectly,” she affirms. The dedicated staff wants to see their students succeed, so they work together in creative ways to get their students to the finish line. The flexibility of an online program allows the teachers to use “all sorts of strategies” to help students learn since they do not have to create lesson plans or deal with many of the discipline issues that plague traditional classrooms. “Edgenuity® allows our teachers to know exactly where a student is and to understand what they can and can’t do. So even though our teachers don’t see students face-to-face they actually know more about them than in a traditional setting,” Layfield says.

4. RECREATING THE PATH TO GRADUATION

Most of the students taking courses through HVS are only enrolled in a few classes to help augment their schedule at a traditional high school within the district. But in 2019, HVS will have their own graduation ceremony to honor the 10 seniors who will receive their high school diploma from the virtual school. As word of the more flexible options in the district spreads, school leaders hope to serve more students who need something different than the traditional school, but still want the benefit of staying within the Highlands County community.

