

Online classes could help relieve overcrowding

By Greg Pearson

STAFF WRITER

A partial solution to overcrowded classrooms in Chesterfield seems obvious: have students take more courses online from home. In fact, according to Dr. Lynda Gillespie, director of technology, that's already happening. Last school year, 2,709 students took online classes and 857 took them during summer school.

"It's increased tenfold in the last five years. If money and personnel were not an issue, we should take the leap [for more classes]. Our students are already there," reported Gillespie during the most recent School Growth Task Force meeting.

The task force is studying ways to alleviate overcrowding in county schools. Members will offer recommendations to the school board later this year.

There are several online programs for students to choose from, and Chesterfield County Public Schools is expanding its offerings with geometry, computer math, world literature, physics, government and American literature being added this year. Most of the teachers also teach in the traditional classroom, but some retired teachers teach online classes. The students taking online classes tend to need them for graduation, to repeat a class, are homebound or are involved with specialty center studies.

While some may question the rigor of the class work, Superintendent Marcus Newsome doesn't.

"For our teachers, it creates much more work," he said.

Online students ask many more questions, creating more communication with the teachers.

Only five students are taking all of their classes online. Tests for online courses are taken at the Fulghum Center to keep testing honest.

Another consideration to handle Chesterfield's overcrowding in bricks and mortar classrooms is year-round school. That option was also discussed briefly at the task force meeting. Prince William County and Wake County, N.C. turned that direction because of growth problems. The students attend classes for nine weeks and then have three weeks off. There are 20 common holidays, and everyone is off the week of July 4.

A survey earlier this year at Thomas Dale High School had teachers and students turning thumbs down on the year-round idea, though a slight majority of parents were surprisingly in favor. According to Newsome, a Hampton school study showed no difference in student performance between the traditional school year and year-round schools.

Mike Burriss, director of public schools in Wake County, briefed the task force on how his county handled overcrowding. Last year, Wake had 134,002 students, more than twice Chesterfield's student population, and though the policy is to have just 8 percent of students there taking classes in mobile trailers, 14 percent actually are. A 1999 school bond issue for \$600 million failed, but later passed at \$550 million. The overcrowding is eased somewhat by having 40,000 students at 49 elementary and middle school students attend year-round schools.

Like in some overcrowded schools in Chesterfield, students stand in long lines in the cafeteria and for bathrooms. For classroom trailers in Wake, energy costs are 30 percent higher than the permanent buildings, driven in part by teachers who control the thermostats in their classrooms. School officials have repeatedly stressed there is no difference in the quality of education given in trailers versus permanent buildings, but many parents seem to doubt that.