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Virtual school clicks for teens

A family's 16-year-old twins and 13-year-old triplets have found academic success in flexible online classes.

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WINTER PARK -- About 7 a.m., Kelsey Tainsh urges her fellow triplets out of bed so they can get their online geometry lessons finished and she can practice for a wakeboarding competition.

In the bedroom next door, Laurel Tainsh instant messages her twin brother for help on an Internet class she's taking. He quickly messages her back from his room on the other side of the house.

Enter the Tainsh household. Nestled amid the manicured estates of Winter Park, the 1950s lakefront ranch house is filled with 16-year-old twins, 13-year-old triplets and computer terminals for all.

After years of toting books and enduring lectures at an array of public and private schools, teenagers in this genetic wonder family have discovered the joys of taking classes from their bedrooms.

"The good is definitely being able to do it whenever and wherever you want," said Rob Tainsh, 16, who plans to tackle honors physics during a medical mission trip to Mexico this week. "The bad is the lack of socializing."

They are part of a fast-growing group of students taking classes through Florida Virtual School. Since it started offering online classes to a handful of Orange and Alachua county high-schoolers eight years ago, the school has become a statewide, class-credit savior for 13,000 students in grades 7-12.

The school's enrollment and teaching staff doubled in the past year, due largely to a change in the way Florida pays for the program. The school went from having a set budget to being paid by the number of students and courses.

"I truly believe that, in five years, every student will take at least some of these classes," said Bob Tainsh, a pediatric anesthesiologist at Florida Hospital. "I don't know why everybody's not doing it."

Most students take a course or two at a time; their credits transfer to their high school, but the Tainsh triplets and one of the twins have taken all their classes from desktop

terminals during the past year.

Registered as home schoolers, their credits will transfer to Winter Park High if they enroll there. They've been on the crew team there for the past year.

Two years ago, the family was spending more than \$60,000 in tuition at Trinity Preparatory School. Like most of the schools the children have tried, including military and boarding schools, the prep school clicked with some of the siblings but not others.

Cindy Tainsh, their mother, said part of the challenge has been finding one place that would meet all of their needs.

Rob was the first to go online. In February 2003, his parents were displeased with the academics at his military school and pulled him out. Florida Virtual School looked like an interesting option but school counselors cautioned that disciplined students performed best and Rob's track record with homework was lacking.

But they took a chance. Four months later, he had finished his entire freshman year -- a feat that would have taken about nine months sitting in a classroom.

Florida Virtual students work at their own pace but are expected to finish half-credit courses in 18 weeks and full-credit courses in 36 weeks. About 20 percent of Florida Virtual's students finish sooner.

Students range from borderline dropouts to valedictorians. The Tainshes, whose parents are both physicians, are closer to the latter. In elementary school, several qualified for Orange County's program for select gifted students. All in high school now, the children have 4.0 grade averages.

Their father said several things helped them all achieve top grades at the virtual school: accessible teachers, parental oversight and a chance to resubmit assignments.

At Florida Hospital, Bob Tainsh's co-workers have watched him get on computers and check to see whether his kids finished their assignments.

"You know every single day what your kids' grades are in class," he said. "There are none of the surprises you can get at traditional schools."

Only once has Bob Tainsh met one of his children's "virtual" instructors. Still, he said his children have never before gotten so much attention from teachers. The triplets e-mail and instant-message teachers and other students throughout the day. Teachers call parents when there's a problem.

The school also allows students to resubmit assignments that need some work.

Bob Tainsh said he is not worried that his children are getting used to concessions they won't find elsewhere.

"I want them to master the material and then move on," he said.

Sitting about a foot apart at three computer terminals in their poster-covered bedroom, the triplets say they always work through lessons together -- sometimes as many as four in one morning. But, they added, they take tests separately.

The school watches for cheaters. When one of the Tainsh children lifted a sentence from an online essay program for an assignment, Florida Virtual's software picked up the plagiarism and notified the father. The assignment got an F and the clan got a lecture from dad.

Florida Virtual School once required face-to-face exams, but they became cumbersome as the school grew. The in-person exams are optional now. Teachers also check students' progress by assessing them over the phone, requiring projects, and assigning hands-on activities, said FVS executive director Bruce Friend.

"We can catch cheaters easier online," he said. "We can see how much time they spent on an assignment. Do kids cheat? Yes. Do they cheat at [traditional high school]? Yes."

Not all students are as successful as the Tainshes.

"We have more[children] start the program than actually complete it," said Osceola High School guidance director Barbara Wendland. "I think they get in, then they realize it's very time-consuming in addition to their regular course load. It's not an easy credit, that's for sure."

Even though the Tainsh children seem to have flourished academically, some may soon unplug from their computers now that they have all been accepted into Winter Park High School's International Baccalaureate program.

Two of the triplets, Valerie and Erica, say they are ready to find shopping buddies. The twins say they are ready for the full Winter Park High experience.

Kelsey, though, wants to stick to her routine: up and online by 7 a.m. so she can finish schoolwork around noon and practice wakeboarding. She said the virtual education works better for her anyway.

"It's easier to learn when I can read instead of having to listen," she said.

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