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Florida teens can take physical education on the Web

By RAY PARKER

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- Over the summer, 16-year-old Lina Ceron didn't have to change her clothes in a locker room or possibly humiliate herself on the playing field.

Instead, she sat in front of her computer and completed her physical education requirement.

All from the comfort of her Naples, Fla., home.

"I think it's pretty good because you can work on it anytime you have the time," said the upcoming high school junior.

Now, high school students can take PE online without ever stepping into a school gym. Florida Virtual School offers a plethora of high school classes via the computer, including Latin, physics or even advanced placement biology.

But one of the most popular courses involves the one that's haunted skinny nerds through the ages.

"It's one of our most popular courses (with) over 700 enrolled this summer," said Donna Weisman with the Virtual School.

For Lina Ceron, the online version offered convenience. Although she's athletic, she couldn't fit the requirement into her busy schedule, which will include advanced placement physics, psychology, Spanish and pre-calculus.

For 15-year-old Allison Walker, however, cyber PE meant convenience of a different sort. "I was amazed ... PE online, right," said the upcoming high school sophomore. "I thought it was pretty odd but I thought if I don't have to take it in school, then that's cool."

Teens take note: The online versions are no walk in the park. Allison, an A student, was a bit shocked when she got her final grade: B. "I thought it was going to be an easy A," she said.

Instead, she discovered extensive weekly reading assignments along with physical workouts, such as running and push-ups. In addition to monthly calls from her online instructor, her mother would have to sign off on her exercises and her heart rate.

"It's all about your integrity. That's very valuable," said Allison's mother, Pam Nickell. "She has a notebook that's probably 4 inches thick. It's very involved and self-disciplined."

Virtual PE instructor Jo Wagner scoffs at the idea of her and her peers putting more traditional PE teachers out of a job.

"There's no way we can put PE teachers out of business ... (online PE) is not for every kid," said Wagner of Fort Myers, Fla., who taught for 18 years in schools but for the past two years has taught via computer.

The PE course lasts 12 to 15 weeks and, in addition to weekly reading assignments, there are three workouts per week for at least 30 minutes each.

Last semester, Wagner oversaw 110 students from all over the state, comprising about 35 percent male and 65 percent female. "There are as many reasons why it's popular as there are kids," she said.

For Lina and Allison, it's all about convenience.

"I'm really not a PE kind of person," Allison said. "I think a lot of students would like it, especially if they don't really like PE that much."