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Online work put teen in position to soar; She's set to graduate with a 4.5 GPA and has been accepted to the Air Force Academy.

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Shannon Hart doesn't have to sit through long classes, navigate crowded hallways or deal with a busy commute every morning to get to school.

But she's planning to go to the prom, graduate from Osceola High School in May with a weighted grade-point average of 4.5 and head off to the U.S. Air Force Academy this summer.

How did she do it? By taking all her freshman, sophomore and junior classes online through Florida Virtual School -- the state's online public school. For her senior year, Hart is taking one class online and three at Valencia Community College.

The Kissimmee teen is among a handful of Florida Virtual School's 46,700 students statewide to have completed the majority of their high-school education online and be accepted to a prestigious school, said Pam Birtolo, the school's chief learning officer. It is accredited through the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and the Commission on International and Trans-Regional Accreditation.

And Hart wants you to understand what virtual learning is all about.

She doesn't get to surf the Internet all day. Mom Rachel Hart, who taught Shannon and her siblings at home when they were younger, blocked irrelevant Web sites -- including MySpace.

The 18-year-old took tough courses -- including three years of Latin, advanced-placement biology and pre-calculus -- and wrote the computer code for a Web page about Roman gods for a class project. She took exams and spoke with teachers by phone when she didn't understand something.

Her classroom was a computer tucked in the corner of the living room of the Hart family's red brick home near Brinson Park. The kitchen became the science lab when experiments were required.

"People think, 'Oh, online. That's easy.' But you really have to be self-motivated, because the academic challenges are very rigorous," said Hart, who wants to go to medical school after the Air Force Academy and become a flight surgeon. "And it's not like I don't have a social life."

She's on Osceola High's swimming and water-polo teams. She volunteers at Canoe Creek Christian Church in St. Cloud. After church on Sundays, she plays the piano for Nordstrom shoppers at Florida Mall. (Dad Howard Hart is the band director at Neptune Middle School, so Shannon, older sister Ashton and younger brother Spencer all play

the piano and a brass instrument. He taught them the brass instruments, and they took piano lessons from another teacher.)

Sue Shelton, Shannon Hart's online Latin teacher, called her an "amazing" student and wrote as much in a recommendation letter to the Air Force Academy.

"This environment allowed her to really reach out and to expand and to take more classes," Shelton said. "The academy wouldn't be taking her as a candidate if she wasn't an excellent student."

Because Florida Virtual School is a public school, classes cost nothing. Textbooks, required reading material, specialized notebooks such as geometry sketch books and science- experiment components are sent to students at no cost.

The 46,700 students enrolled in the virtual school take about 79,000 classes. Most attend a public or charter school and take one or two courses online to supplement their studies. About 25 percent are home-schooled and take additional Florida Virtual School classes. Some private-school students -- about 7 percent -- also take the online classes.

For ninth, 10th and 11th grades, Hart technically was listed as a home-schooled student but took all her classes online. For her senior year, she enrolled in Osceola High School so she could receive a diploma, something Florida Virtual School does not award because it is intended to be a supplemental program, Birtolo said.

Hart's decision to "go" to high school online seemed a natural fit after her years of home-schooling. Her older sister had followed a similar path with online courses, and Hart liked the range of choices she was offered and that she could tailor some assignments to fit her interests.

The project on the Roman gods, for example, combined what she learned in a Latin class and a class about Web site design.

This year, Hart is making the transition to classroom learning through her courses at Valencia's Osceola campus. She said it's easier to listen to lectures and take notes rather than learn everything on her own.

"It's different, but a good kind of different," she said. "I've always been able to adjust well, like a chameleon."

She'll get her first look at her home for the next four years in April, when she and her family head to Colorado Springs for a two-day orientation at the academy. Then it's back to Florida for a few months. On June 28, Hart reports to the academy for basic cadet training in the summer before classes begin in the fall semester.

She is confident Florida Virtual School has prepared her well.

"I don't have to be exposed to all the negatives that go on in high school and get in the way of learning," Hart said. "I can concentrate on my education."