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Florida Virtual School has big benefits for homeschoolers Offers unique opportunities for driven public school students

By MATT CLARK

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While most home schooling moms avoid public schools altogether, Tammy Irwin embraces the state's Virtual School program for her two daughters Kaitie Irwin, 14, and Rachel Irwin, 15, where students can take any class and even get one on one help from teachers in the program. "They have a better relationship with their teachers than students in public schools," says Irwin.

NAPLES — Families that homeschool don't like to be pushed around.

That's why the Florida Virtual School is a perfect fit for them, says Tammy Irwin, whose four daughters learn at home in Naples.

"To be honest with you I don't think that a lot of the homeschoolers realize the benefits (of the virtual school) because they are afraid to connect with the public schools at all," Irwin said. "I don't think they understand. I don't think that they are supportive of it at all."

The Florida Virtual School offers 90 courses over the Internet. The courses are tailored to students in grades six through 12.

Aside from homeschool students, the virtual school is available for students enrolled in a public high school or middle school or an affiliated private school.

On a computer with Internet access, students have access to professionally-developed lessons that can be tailored to a family's wants for homeschool children. At the same time, the virtual school gives public school students a chance to get ahead, pump up their grades or free up time during their school day to take courses they wouldn't otherwise have a chance to take.

The public school students can take a diploma-required English course online through the school, for instance, which would free up time for pottery, physical training, music courses or whatever elective their school offers. It's like attending two schools at the same time.

"Students are using it for a variety of reasons, so it's there as another vehicle to help them successfully complete high school," said Marsha VanHook, assistant principal for curriculum at Estero High School. "It just provides a lot of flexibility for kids."

The virtual school is basically considered its own school district within the state. Last year, it had 943 Florida students enrolled full time, including some students in Lee and Collier counties.

“It seems to be more organized than just doing it at home,” said Dylan James-Gilbert, 16, a homeschooled Junior in Cape Coral who is taking nearly a half-dozen courses Online. “When you’re homeschooled you have to keep track of all your work. So, doing this is a lot easier, because they have a report card.”

James-Gilbert said his Florida Virtual School grades popped up on an Edison Community College computer when he was looking into applying for classes recently. No need to request transcripts.

Instead of having the family develop its own curriculum for each course and tracking their students’ progress, they can utilize the school’s resources. And it’s not just the school’s report card. James-Gilbert said he has teachers, too.

“I can call a teacher whenever I need them,” James-Gilbert said. “I can ask them any question I want, no bother to them at all.”

One of Irwin’s daughters, Trinity Irwin, 7, is too young yet to take classes through the virtual school. Her oldest daughter, Kaleigh Little, 18, recently completed her senior year with the school. Her other two daughters, Jennifer Straight, 14, and Rachel Irwin, 15, are still taking classes through the school.

Rachel, who is taking tenth grade English, Spanish, world history, chemistry and geometry classes, said working with teachers is better when they’re only on the phone. She likes to keep her distance.

“I’d rather just talk with them over the phone,” said Rachel. “I don’t know. I like just knowing them over the phone. Whatever we know about them, I think it’s kind of intimidating.”

Her mom says the virtual school offers another benefit as well, it bends somewhat to the needs of her instructional wants.

“We don’t want public schools to be involved in telling our kids what to do,” Tammy Irwin said. “There’s been some assignments that I didn’t approve of and they will work with me on that.”

Assignments, ah, there’s the rub. The virtual school is still school. It’s school over the computer, and demands hours in front of a screen. But Tammy Irwin’s daughters and James-Gilbert don’t mind the three to four hours they spend each day doing the work. That’s because it’s flexible.

Recently, James-Gilbert said he took a physical education course through the virtual school. He had to fill out charts to indicate the time he spent doing physical activity.

“I had to go swimming every day. I had to go running every day,” James–Gilbert said. “It’s not like I’m fat, so I don’t need to do it. I was really glad when that class was over.”

James–Gilbert said he is taking or has taken three courses of English, Chinese, comprehensive science, algebra and biology.

Each course in the school is divided into lessons, assignments, quizzes and tests, James–Gilbert said. He said the assignments can take from thirty minutes to four hours to complete.

But that assignment time can take place during any moment of the day or night, in any location that has a computer with Internet access, anywhere in the world.

“Since it’s anytime, anyplace, anywhere, I sometimes work late into the night,” James–Gilbert said.

You don’t even have to take classes every day.

“Sometimes I don’t even do it every day,” said Jennifer. Rachel said Jennifer does that a lot. She’ll just wake up and decide she isn’t going to school today.

“I want to take a break today,” Jennifer said she tells herself. “Or, sometimes I have plans that day.”

So where’s the accountability? It’s not FCATs, which homeschoolers aren’t required to take. It’s mom.

“If they’re not keeping up on their school, I’ll tell them that I’ll send you back to public school,” Tammy Irwin said. “That’s like their punishment. If you don’t do your work, I’ll send you back to public school.”

Parents get a special account with the school to log on to when they wish. Something not always available in regular public school classes. Rachel and Jennifer said they’ve tried to hide grades from their mom.

“We’ve tried, but I don’t know, there’s really not any way to hide the grades from her,” Rachel said.

Mom can stand over their shoulders. Watching their every move. Getting to know them. There likes and dislikes, all day long. The sisters are getting to know each other, too. They say the homeschooling lets them do that.

“I’ve become really close with my sister Rachel,” said Jennifer, who, like Rachel, left public school near the end of elementary school.

They say the virtual school gives them the time to pursue other activities, like soccer or bible school.

“You can pursue what your heart’s desire is. We like photography, so we take photography classes. We go to the Apple Store and look at the Macs. You get to do what your heart desires,” said Tammy Irwin. “When they go to college, they’re already self-taught. They already learned how to organize their time.”

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