

From the ice to online classroom

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Date: Mar 7, 2010

Lancaster Eagle - Gazette - Lancaster, Ohio

LANCASTER -- On a typical weekday during the school year, one won't find sophomore Taylor Galonski in a high school classroom.

The Lancaster resident instead can be found on an ice-skating rink in Delaware, training with two Olympic coaches and preparing for various skating competitions. The 15-year-old competitive figure skater typically hits the ice for three to four hours a day and spends an additional two hours in ballet, pilates, conditioning and dance classes.

It's only on the weekends and in the evening hours, after a full morning and afternoon of training, that Taylor finds the time to focus on her academics -- via her computer.

Taylor is one of 2,200 Ohio high school students who attends a virtual public school through Ohio Connections Academy. OCA is a public, online, community school that serves students in grades K--12.

Students residing in Ohio are eligible to attend the school if, like Taylor, they meet the applicable enrollment requirements through the Ohio Council of Community Schools.

Taylor said all of her classes, homework and tests are done online. Her teacher's classroom instruction is recorded and can be viewed anytime during the day.

"There are specific times in which I can't always meet with the rest of the class," Taylor said. "The teacher's classroom recordings are like a slideshow and for classes like math class, I can see the problem being worked out on the board."

Taylor's mother, Shelley Galonski, said Taylor has access to a monthly calendar that consists of all her assignments. With the help of the calendar, Taylor can plan and work ahead of schedule if need be.

All communication with her teachers, whom Taylor never has met in person, is conducted through e-mail or chat rooms. She also uses e-mail to send in her homework assignments and tests.

"I've never had a problem with it," Taylor said. "The teachers always get back to me right away."

The virtual schooling has allowed Taylor to freely travel for training or participate in competitions. But not everything can be done online. Taylor, who splits her time between Delaware and Lancaster, will return to Columbus later this year to take her Ohio Graduation Test.

Galonski said a virtual public school was just what her daughter needed four years ago when she first began rigorously training for ice-skating competitions.

Before this school year, Taylor attended a different type of virtual public school, but later made the switch to the OCA program to take several advanced placement classes that weren't offered through her old virtual school.

"My only concern (with the other online schools) was of her not having those honors courses she needed," Galonski said. "I wanted her to take advanced placement classes that would give her a competitive edge when she went on to college."

Galonski added that with the variety of electives her daughter has had the opportunity to take have been beneficial for her education as well.

"She was able to take a journalism class and a sports psychology class," Galonski said. "It's nice that they get that opportunity to see if those subjects are something they want to study more."

Galonski said moving Taylor into a virtual school program wasn't difficult because her daughter never has attended a public school.

"I used to be a teacher, so I home-schooled her in the beginning," Galonski said. "But when she became an eighth-grader, we wanted to make sure she had everything she needed so she could effectively focus on both her skating and her schooling."

Taylor, who plans to attend college after graduation, said she did have reservations at first about how well virtual schooling would fit into her life.

"I was nervous about starting this school because (I) didn't know how it would work with my schedule or if they would be flexible," Taylor said. "But it turned out they were very professional about how they handled the schedule to ensure I could still follow my full training schedule."