

Virtual School

It's 10am on a normal Tuesday morning. Cassidy Brown is working on her math lesson. She is in fifth grade. She holds her pencil in one hand. She taps the pencil tip against her paper. Her other hand strokes the head of her new kitten, Asha. Asha is sitting curled up beside her on the couch.

"Mom!" Cassidy yells to her mother. Her mother is in another room. "What is the square root of 121?"

"Meet me at the kitchen table. We can figure it out together," Cassidy's mother says.

Just another math lesson at the virtual school.

Cassidy Brown has been attending an on-line school since August. She gets on the computer every morning. She checks in with her teacher. She gets her assignments. Cassidy's mom acts as a learning coach. They spend the day together at home. Cassidy spends about six hours a day working on her lessons. Her mom is there with her to help.

Cassidy attended kindergarten through fourth grade at a regular elementary school. "I liked school," she said. "But sometimes I would get bored."

"Cassidy learns things quickly," said her mom. "She would get frustrated sometimes. So much class time was spent on things she already knew. She wanted to learn something new every day."

The virtual school started several years ago. "We heard about it from Cassidy's fourth grade

teacher. The more I learned about it, the more it seemed like the right thing to do for Cassidy."

67 students around the state attend the school. They range from kindergarten to 12th grade. The virtual school is a public school. It's free. A student needs a computer with internet access. The computer is needed to be in contact with the teacher. It's needed to turn in assignments to be graded. If a student doesn't have a computer, then the school lets the student borrow one. The student keeps the computer for as long as he or she attends the school.

"We started with just twelve students the first year. But we've grown quickly," said Tamara Bacon. She is the program director for the virtual school. "Now, we have the 67 students who attend full-time. We also have 43 high school students who take just one or two classes each. A student may want to make room in their schedule for an elective. They might want to take drama or band. So they take a class like math on-line with us. We also have students from smaller districts using our school. They take advanced classes like astronomy or calculus. Their schools are too small to have these classes."

Cassidy loves the freedom of the virtual school. "I could wear pajamas all day. Except my mom won't let me," she joked. "It's really great to not have to catch a bus every morning. And the best part is that if a lesson is easy for me I can do it really fast. Then I can move on to something else. I don't have to wait."

"She takes it very seriously," said Cassidy's mom. "She works hard. She doesn't waste

much time. She doesn't sit on the couch watching TV all day. She works."

First thing each morning, Cassidy gets on the computer. She checks for messages from her teacher. She looks over the assignments she's gotten back. She makes sure there isn't anything she needs to fix. Then she prints a list of the assignments for the day. She has work in language arts, reading, math, science, and history.

When her assignments are done, she gets back on the computer. She sends them to the teacher to be graded. Sometimes the assignments are scanned in. Sometimes she types her answers into a form on-line.

If Cassidy has questions about the work, her mom helps her. She can also ask the teacher if she needs to.

Some days her assignments take an extra long time. She ends up working into the evening. "Just like when I'd have homework at the regular school," she explained.

Some days she finishes early. She has extra time to read a favorite book. Or she can play video games or watch a movie. "I really like those days," Cassidy said, smiling.

They don't spend every day at home. "We go on little field trips together," said Cassidy's mom. "We've been to the history museum and to the zoo. I look for things that go with what she's learning."

For Cassidy there is one bad thing about the virtual school. She doesn't have as much time with her friends. "It's a bummer to not get to eat lunch with them every day," Cassidy explained. "But I see them after school and on the weekends."

Cassidy also plays in a soccer league. She takes a drama class too. "She does get time to be social. She can just enjoy being around other people. I know that is very important for a girl her age," said Cassidy's mom.

"I'm really glad to be in the virtual school," said Cassidy. "It just seems like a really good fit for me."

Asha the kitten is curled up at Cassidy's side. She seems to agree.

