

## Virtual School

It's 10am on a typical Tuesday morning. Cassidy Brown is hard at work on her math lesson. The fifth grader is working on pre-algebra formulas. She holds her pencil in one hand, tapping the sharpened tip against her paper. Her other hand strokes the head of her new kitten, Asha, which is sitting curled up beside her on the couch.

"Mom!" Cassidy yells to her mother, who is in the other room. "What is the square root of 121?"

"Meet me at the kitchen table, and we can figure it out together," Cassidy's mother responds.

Just another math lesson at the virtual school.

Cassidy Brown has been enrolled in an on-line school since the beginning of this school year. She gets on the computer every morning to check in with her teacher and get 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 traditional elementary school. "I liked school," she said, "but sometimes I would get bored."

"Cassidy learns things quickly," explained her mom. "She would get frustrated sometimes because so much class time was spent going back over skills and concepts she already knew. She wanted to have a chance 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 are currently enrolled in the school. They range from kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The virtual school is a public school, so it's free. If a student doesn't have a computer with internet access, which is necessary to be in contact with the teacher and to submit assignments to be graded, then the school lets the student borrow one for as long as the student attends the virtual school.

"We started with just twelve students the first year, but we've grown quickly," said Tamara Bacon, program director for the virtual school.

"Now, in addition to the 67 students who attend full-time, we also have 43 high school students who are enrolled in just one or two classes each. A student may want to make room in their schedule for an elective like drama or band, so they take a required class like math on-line with us. We also have students from smaller districts around the state using our school to take specialized or advanced classes like astronomy or calculus which their schools are too small to provide."

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

“She takes it very seriously,” said Cassidy’s mom. “She works hard on her assignments and doesn’t waste much time. It’s not like she’s sitting on the couch watching TV all day. She works.”

First thing each morning, Cassidy gets on the computer and checks for messages from her teacher. She looks over the assignments that have been graded and returned to her, to make sure there isn’t anything she needs to redo or correct. Then she prints off a list of the assignments for the day. She has work in language arts, reading, math, science, and history.

When her assignments are completed, she gets back on the computer and 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 contact the teacher if she needs to.

There are days when her assignments take her an extra long time, and she ends up working into the evening. “Just like when I’d have homework at the regular school,” she explained.

And there are also some days when she finishes early and has extra time to read a favorite book, play video games or watch a movie. “I really like those days,” Cassidy said with a smile.

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 try to look for activities that relate to what she’s learning.”

For Cassidy the only downside of the virtual school is that she doesn’t have as much time with her friends. “It’s kind of 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 and takes a drama class at the local community theater. “She does get time to be social and to just enjoy being around other people, which I know 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, curled up at Cassidy’s side, seems to agree.

