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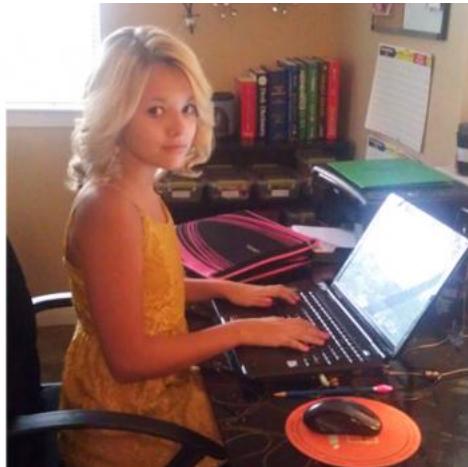
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This Tween's Classroom Is Her Computer

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A CHILD ACTRESS GETTING A FULL PUBLIC EDUCATION FOR FREE ONLINE.

by NATALIE HARMS

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Sterling Griffith, an actress, attends school from her home office.

NATALIE HARMS

In *Dear Dumb Diary*, a movie which premiered on the Hallmark Channel in September, 12-year-old Sterling Griffith plays a glamorous tween who is the envy of the nerdy students in the cafeteria. In real life, however, Sterling doesn't encounter any lunch lines.

On a typical weekday for Sterling—that is, when she's not auditioning or filming—she wakes up and goes to school, getting started just past 8 a.m., as kids do. But she has one of the shortest commutes. Sterling simply walks from the bedroom she shares with her mother, Melinda, in their two-bedroom Austin apartment to the dining nook-turned office, plops down—cross-legged, sans shoes—at her desk and powers up her laptop. The computer is

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her classroom. First period starts whenever she wants, so after enjoying a big breakfast, Sterling picks from her roster of virtual classes to begin her day: virtual science lab. With the click of a mouse, a pre-recorded professor enters her home: "From gemstones to iron ore, from the faces carved at Mount Rushmore..." And just like that, Sterling is learning about streaks and lusters.

Sterling is not homeschooled—that is to say, she is not taught by her mother. She is obtaining a full public education online. She completes virtual lessons daily, writes papers, and takes tests—even the state-mandated ones, like the STAAR. She attends Texas Connections Academy @ Houston, one of the state's three virtual schools that offer a full public school course load for students in third through twelfth grades. (Texas has three other virtual schools that serve a more limited range of grade levels.)

More than 8,000 students in Texas attended virtual schools full-time in 2012-2013. That's more than five times as many as four years ago, according to Raise Your Hand Texas, a public education advocacy group. Nationally, these numbers have grown from 50,000 in 2005 to almost 200,000 in 2012, according to a [report](#) from the National Education Policy Center, which recommended curbing continued expansion until "more, and better refined, data" was available on virtual schools.

Texas Connections Academy @ Houston (TCAH) has been around since 2006, when the Houston Independent School District partnered with Connections Academy, a national education company now owned by Pearson. Houston ISD pays Connections Academy per student—a total of \$9,705,972.99 for the 2013 fiscal year. As with any public school, however, it is free for students. The other two 3-12 virtual schools, one of which opened in 2006-2007 with 171 students (Texas Virtual Academy) and another which opened this year (Texas Virtual Academy), are operated by K12, the nation's largest for-profit online education company. Both Connections Academy and K12 hire the staff and design the curriculum for the students, an arrangement that has raised important questions about whether for-profit corporations are the best stewards of education.

Virtual schools first became a reality in Texas in 2003 when the Seventy-eighth Texas Legislature authorized their creation and tasked the Texas Education Agency with making sure they met state requirements (including overseeing student immunizations, physical activity hours, and state-mandated exams). Virtual schools are still very new and some have gotten off to a rocky start. The K12-run Texas Virtual Academy was named academically unacceptable—based on student test results—twice by the Texas Education Agency—in the 2008-09 and 2010-11 school years. But as Abby Rapoport [noted](#) in the *Texas Observer*, TVA found a loophole and avoided shutdown by contracting with a different charter school, thereby appearing to be a new school with a clean slate, from the state's point of view; though some parents may have been unaware of the reason for the switch.

This kind of shady workaround is what led Louis Malfaro, secretary-treasurer of the Texas chapter of the American Federation of Teachers, to be very outspoken in his skepticism of virtual education. "I think there's an inherent conflict between offering high quality education services to K through 12 students and trying to make money," he said.

Still, some argue that there are upsides to learning online. In addition to providing students with more flexibility, virtual classrooms allow rural students to put together a more rigorous schedule by supplementing the



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classes offered at their bricks-and-mortar school—which can be limited due to teacher shortage or simple unavailability—with additional classes.

Sterling, of course, enrolled in Texas Connections Academy in 2012 in order to pursue a career as a young actress. If it weren't for virtual school, her mother would have had to hire an expensive private tutor to work around Sterling's schedule. But with Texas Connections Academy, Sterling can have a totally flexible education for free, and she can dictate the schedule, to a certain degree. This means she is able to work ahead on her coursework so she can devote more spare time to the busy needs of her career, like filming audition tapes or to going on casting calls in Los Angeles.

Overall, Sterling is a solid A/B student, but she struggles with math. When I visited, during the first month of school, she was dreading a math test she had to take in two days. After her mother left for her job at the Travis County Probate Court at nine, Sterling moved to the couch and cozied up with her only "classmate," her Maltese pup, Lexi, and viewed her online schedule, which lists assignments and lessons that she must complete that day or in the near future. She passed over math and skipped ahead in her history assignments. But she wouldn't be able to avoid math for too long.

That's because her teachers can see which assignments are incomplete. "We can see when a student logged in, when they logged out, and how much time they spent on an assignment," Lea Ann Lockard, the executive director of Texas Connections Academy said. If Sterling has any questions, she can e-mail her teachers through the Connections Academy system, call them or she can ask them by webcam or instant message during the weekly streaming "Live Lessons." Each subject has one Live Lesson a week offered at various times by various teachers. And if none of the times are convenient for Sterling—say, if she is on set or traveling for an audition—a recorded version of the lesson is saved for her to view on her own schedule.

Malfaro of the Texas chapter of the American Federation of Teachers believes it takes a good, organized, and perhaps advanced student to do well on this learning platform. A student like Sterling, who is motivated by an extracurricular passion that also requires an abnormal about of discipline, might be considered an ideal candidate for this type of schooling. "What we're seeing, though," Malfaro said, "is these companies market themselves to students who do not fit that profile."

Both K12 Inc. and Connections Academy bill themselves as an alternative for accelerated students *and* challenged students. As the program guide for Connections Academy reads, "Some students are gifted; some learn at a different pace." And, Texas Virtual Academy's Head of School Sherri Remington told me "Our students come to us for a variety of reasons. Whether it's that they are struggling in their brick-and-mortar schools and they are looking for another opportunity or they are doing very well in their brick-and-mortar school and they want to progress a little faster." Remington said the school requires applications and conducts pre-enrollment conferences to make sure the families understand the obligations of the programs. But, she says, they accept everyone who meets their requirements.

According to Sterling's mom, Melinda, who serves as her daughter's "learning coach", Sterling is thriving. Most of the time she has all her work done by the time Melinda gets home. Sometimes she already has dinner planned. With a sequel to *Dear Dumb Diary* set to film early this year Melinda

says, "She'll be one busy little girl." That is, one likely to continue to learn online through high school. The only thing about that that disappoints Sterling is that she might not get a chance to go to a high school prom, and it's her not-so-secret wish to be prom queen. Fortunately Connections Academy hopes to organize a prom this year. If not, Sterling may have to seek out a role as prom queen in one of her scripts.

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